FIELD METHODS AND POST EXCAVATION TECHNIQUES
IN LATE ANTIQUE ARCHAEOLOGY:
ANYONE FOR DISCUSSION?

Luke Lavan

BARRENERS TO DEBATE

Our knowledge of Late Antiquity has been entirely transformed by insights gained from field archaeology. Every year its discoveries achieve more and more prominence in synthetic works on the period. However, it is not possible to evaluate the historical significance of archaeological evidence without some basic knowledge of field methodology. It is thus surprising that the subject has been neglected within late antique archaeology. One might be tempted to blame this situation on the predominant incarnation of field archaeology as leisure: it is ‘how we spend our summers’ undertaking physical exercise in warm climates with scenic settings, surrounded by enthusiastic young people, uncovering a vivid material past. Mediterranean fieldwork sometimes thus becomes a sensual pursuit, of discovery and excitement, where engagement with the outdoors is just as important, or more important, than engagement with the technicalities of field method. Many of those who excavate feel their enthusiasm fading after their director’s annual illustrated lecture, and would not trouble themselves to study an archaeological report, before returning to dig. Unsurprisingly, quite a few directors admit to aesthetic or emotive, rather than scientific, motivations for beginning work—“I fell in love with the site” being a common answer to the question as to their choice of project. Thus with archaeology being sometimes pursued as a lifestyle rather than as an academic subject, one might understand that discussion over field methodology rarely reaches the forefront of our subdiscipline.

Yet, even amongst more serious-minded academics of Late Antiquity, field method has still been less popular than it is in other periods. We work in a discipline which is highly focused on specific cultural topics and on evidence. It is practised by scholars who prefer to describe the materiality of what they excavate, rather than spout abstractions about what it might mean, or how it might be seen differently. If they have
thought about method at all it is in terms of meeting local cultural norms for research behaviour, perhaps as defined by a generic training in classical archaeology, which they feel is adequate for the investigation of late antique remains. Thus, there are practitioners within late antique archaeology who would prefer to dig more and be led by what they find, rather than participate in abstract debates about why we do what we do. This is especially true of scholars in France, Germany and Austria, some in Italy and (occasionally) a few in the UK. It can be seen in the varied contributions to the first book in the Late Antique Archaeology series “Theory and Practice”. For that volume, very few theoretical papers were actually submitted: even J.-P. Sodini preferred to write an evidential synthesis on social archaeology in Late Antiquity, rather than explore theoretical issues behind it.¹ Unlike for the Early Imperial period, we do not have a significant number of scholars interested in methodology, let alone theory.²

A third barrier to a debate on field methods is more prosaic. Excavation projects on Mediterranean classical sites are not democracies. Some are little tyrannies, in which the excavation strategy depends on the whim of one ill-informed professor, who studied philology, art history or classical architecture many decades earlier. Criticism of a site hypothesis might seem like an essential part of academic culture, in Anglo-Nordic universities. This can be taken to extreme lengths: with the students of I. Hodder running around Çatal Hüyük with video cameras recording discrepant experiences of the excavation process.³ Yet in some Mediterranean field projects any criticism of site hypotheses can be seen as treason, and essential patronage may be withdrawn from a junior scholar if they are seen to openly question interpretations, even those of other projects, as this is seen as upsetting professional networks. My claims here might seem absurd, were it not for the fact that some of the authors / intended authors of this volume had been warned by colleagues not to submit their papers for this very reason. I would go so far as to suggest that in much of continental Europe and the East Mediterranean this is the status quo.

¹ Sodini (2003), and other papers in the same volume.
² Papers for the Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference series tend to include only one paper per volume focusing fully on Late Antiquity: http://trac.org.uk (last accessed July 2013), the exception being the meeting in Leicester in 1998: Baker et al. (1999). The Critical Roman Archaeological Conference shows a similar under-representation for Late Antiquity: Fenwick et al. (2012).
³ Reflexive archaeology, with recording of alternative excavation experiences: see Hodder (1997); (2000) and p. 40, n. 67, in this volume.