



TELLING THE STORY OF ARCHAEOLOGY

ANNELI KALM

Tallinna Ülikool, Eesti Humanitaarinstituut (Tallinn University Estonian
Institute of Humanities, Narva mnt 25, 10120
Tallinn, Estonia; anneli.kalm@gmail.com

Martin Carver. Archaeological Investigation.
Routledge, 2009. Pp. XXXVIII + 424, figs. 267 +
color plates 19 (480 pages in all).
ISBN 978-0-415-48919-5 (pb),
978-0-415-48918-8 (hb).

Martin Carver's *Archaeological Investigation* is a well written, fluent and unique addition to literature about the process of archaeology. The main aim of this book is to introduce the fields that archaeology deals with. The author attempts to cover different stages of the learning process, starting from the more general and moving toward the particular, without going into too much detail. On the other hand, Carver's book is an insight into what archaeology practically is. As Carver himself states, this book is a sketch of what worked during his three decades of fieldwork experience. That experience is the core of *Archaeological Investigation* and it is very visible throughout the book.

The author of the book, professor emeritus of York University is best known in archaeology for his extensive writing on field methodology. Before the time in the academic world he has been a free-lance archaeologist for years. He has also gathered a lot of experience in the field of commercial archeology. He is specialized in early medieval archeology in Europe. One of his most known excavation sites was at the seventh century burial ground in Sutton Hoo, where excavations and survey was carried out during 1983–2005 and where Carver was the research director (Carver 2005). He is currently the editor of *Antiquity* and he is continuously an active researcher.

Let us now turn back to the book. Starting from the title, the author emphasizes investigation as the main activity in archaeology. Investigation for him is an active process of analyzing based on previous knowledge and experience. It is also a constant process of negotiation between different interest groups. Carver uses the term investigation in its widest sense. The book mainly deals with practical, methodological and fieldwork driven issues, because the author sees them as the backbone of archaeology.

Archaeological Investigation is a novelistic account of archaeological process providing us with a quite unique example among books dealing with archaeological methods. The style chosen by the author helps to achieve a deeper understanding of the core problems of archaeology. Therefore it is a very personal book, since the author has used his firsthand knowledge and addressed the problems he has struggled with. But those problems are not individual – the process of archaeology has underlying

questions that are haunting all archaeologists. Those issues are the main thing that makes this book also relevant in the context of Estonia.

The main issue Carver struggles with is the destructive nature of archaeological research and how to deal with it in the field. This problem is emphasized in every chapter. But there are also many ways to overcome those issues and Carver offers his solution. The plausible solution for him is the evaluative approach that arises from his main idea of using appropriate methods instead of right or wrong methods. This idea lies on the assumption that every site is unique and needs to be evaluated in its context. In my opinion it is a strong idea with its pros and cons. The main pro as well as the main con is the fact that this method makes the process flexible and creative, which pending on the context can be positive or negative. Since values are subjective and in constant changing throughout time and space and it is difficult to reach a compromise which will suit all parties involved.

The book is divided into four parts, all of which concentrate on a part of archaeological process in different chapters. The chapters end with a conclusion and commented ideas for further reading on issues touched upon. Therefore the book is well suited for the purposes of teaching. All ideas described in every chapter are quite easily accessible from the reference list. I found it a bit problematic, that chapters themselves provided little reference to other authors and sometimes it is hard to distinguish between Carver's original ideas, general ideas and other archaeologists' ideas. Especially since the book is firstly designed for students who have little experience in the theory of archaeology and its development. It can occasionally become confusing, but since it serves the purpose of style and makes the text more easily readable, therefore this choice is justified.

Part 1, titled *Principles*, deals with theoretical aspects: formation and reformation of archaeological sites; interpreting material remains and structure dirt archaeologically; understanding the purpose of archaeological investigation etc. Carver's main aim in this part is to explain the way he understands the relationship between human action, archaeological deposit, interpretations and stories that are being told about the past. As one aspect of that relationship, Carver explores the link between archaeology and geology (and soil science). He also draws attention to the importance of vocabulary – concepts are not facts, but a way to make the underground world comprehensible and therefore it is crucial to redefine important terms. Carver also discusses different approaches to archaeological investigation and to ethics. He gives a personal overview of ways of doing and thinking about archaeology, emphasizing the influence of ethics in this process – especially the responsibility towards the future. The issue of social value/contract is one of the core ideas Carver has designed and advocates for. This evaluative approach includes three types of values: research (what we want to know), social (social constrains and ideas), and surviving strata (what is available for study). The main aim of this approach is to balance those values. Through those three types of values the decision-making is more democratic and therefore also more justified. To achieve this aim Carver offers a field research procedure (first developed by him in the 1970s), consisting of six stages (reconnaissance, evaluation, project design, implementation, analysis, publication). His case study is the Sutton Hoo burial ground, which demonstrates that even though the procedure in question was developed for urban scene, it also works well on rural sites.

In Part 2, titled *In the field*, Carver outlines different methods that archaeologists use in fieldwork. He deals with ways to investigate a site starting from landscape survey, moving on to site survey and finally to method and procedure used in excavation. He discusses the methods that are widely used by all archaeologists, but which hardly ever are explained in detail so that student can also understand the reasons behind using them. Carver is strongly advocating for non-invasive techniques. He gives an overview of the main techniques like using maps and documents; topographical mapping, surface collection; sample excavations etc. The overall picture of outlining methods' pros and cons to achieve a better understanding where one method is more appropriate than the other is an important value of this part. He also emphasizes that there is no single correct technique, but rather appropriate methods for individual sites, which make archaeology a very creative process. Another important point connected to creativity is ethical. Every detail of the excavation process has to be recorded and studied carefully and analytically, since every decision has an effect on the outcome – artifacts found, layers defined etc. Excavators work in a world where the boundary between fact and interpretation is continually redefined. The statement is illustrated by various examples. Introducing the uniqueness of every site and encouraging independent thinking is, in my opinion, one of the most valuable lessons in Carver's book.

Part 3, titled *Writing it up*, is dedicated to the issue of post-excavation analysis and publishing the results of research. Carver describes the process of analysis and how to make a leap from site recording to synthesis and finally to a publication. He identifies three main interest groups to whom archaeological investigation is vital – current researcher, future excavator and the public. The idea of informing and listening to the public, whose values should be included from the very beginning of archaeological research, is Carver's main focal point which should be considered in every phase of investigation. Therefore he draws attention to different types of publications, which have to take into account what readers want, none of which should be given priority since all are important.

Part 4, titled *Design*, should logically be at the beginning of the book, since archaeological investigation starts with project design. But since one of the important interest groups of Carver's book are students of archaeology, then the designing of an archaeological project is the last step in becoming an archaeologist. According to him, in order to understand the designing of projects a general understanding of archaeological research process is needed. Design, for the author, combines theory, methods and values, being therefore an act of reasoning and balancing. Carver also sees project design as a rite of passage from student to researcher. Therefore it is logically the last part of a study process. In this part, he also emphasizes the need to acknowledge different interest groups beforehand, to seek the approval of the community and to be open to compromise when necessary. Carver is reminding that archaeologists are there to serve the public by increasing knowledge and understanding.

To conclude, Martin Carver's *Archaeological Investigation* is an interesting book, which offers mind tools and ideas for all of those who are or are planning to be involved in archaeological investigation. It could be an essential addition to mandatory literature in archaeology lectures in Estonian universities, since it offers a preliminary vision of how archaeology takes place. Of course there are some flaws and sometimes too

many generalizations and simplifications in this book, but still it is well worth reading. Though experience and moments lived can never be exactly expressed in writing, still Carver's book is a good example of experience molded into a lively book format for teaching purposes as well as for other practitioners to learn and reflect upon. He has managed to elegantly melt theory, ethics and methodology to form the unified creative archaeological experience/process – archaeological investigation. As Carver himself states – who best to tell the story than the one who has lived it.

REFERENCES

Carver, M. 2005. Sutton Hoo: a seventh-century princely burial ground and its context. London.