

## Politics and values

In the June issue of *Antiquity* appears a sad commentary on the current tendency for powerful nations to take no interest in their ancestors and heritage when it comes to undertaking political operations where economically valuable resources are at stake. In an editorial, Professor Martin Carver, of York, reviews some of the recent events in Iraq that have horrified archaeologists throughout the civilised world. Iraq is the site of the legendary garden of Eden, of Noah's flood, and the birthplace of Abraham, and it has long yielded up treasures beyond price in the form of statues, inscribed pottery and papyri.

When conflict arose between the West and Iraq, there were grave concerns that irreplaceable human records and artefacts would be endangered. Lord Renfrew, a prominent figure in the British world of archaeology, published a warning in *The Times* in April that military action was likely to be accompanied by wholesale looting of museums and libraries, and other archaeological organisations made their anxiety clear to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, apparently without response. What measures, if any, were taken to alert the authorities in the United States of this likely event remain unknown. An earlier communication from another expert, Dr Harriet Crawford, pointing out that 25,000 sites of archaeological importance in Iraq, together with historic mosques, churches, forts and museum collections, were at risk of looting or destruction, went without response. This attitude was incompatible with the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property.

In the event, the looting of the Iraq Museum started even before military operations became severe. A number of objects were considered to have been stolen to order, locked vaults were broken into and indiscriminate damage was committed, including the destruction of registers and photographs. There were protests in the US that the invading forces made no effort to protect cultural sites, although a few tanks could have achieved this, just as they did protect oil wells. The truth seems to be that economically valuable resources take precedence over evidence of ancient culture, when it comes to offering protection.

## The open mind

Several expressions routinely used by the police are rather irritating, to my mind. For example, they refer to a suspect or a victim as "a male" or "a female". What, I wonder, is the objection to "a man", "a woman", "a boy" or "a girl", all good English descriptions devoid of the mild tone of contempt inherent in the other terms? Then there is that strange expression "keeping an open mind" greatly loved by police spokespersons. What they mean is that they

do not know. Perhaps these expressions are a relic of ancient law, which delights in obscurity and fights shy of anything that might be quoted to someone's disadvantage. It goes with the other saying "one-track mind". This means, presumably, that no amount of evidence will persuade the owner from a rooted opinion once it is adopted.

Politicians, however, are brilliant exponents of the one-track, as contrasted with the open, mind. They are always prepared to insist that black is white and wet is dry if the declaration suits their purpose. Perhaps the fact that many practised law in one or more of its aspects before deciding that their country needed their wisdom explains this habit. When some of them, solely to justify their actions on our behalf, declare unequivocally that there are weapons of mass destruction hidden in Iraq, despite a complete lack of evidence even after much searching, we have every reason to wonder at their mental processes.

Logical thinking assembles the evidence for a belief, then criticises it and arrives at a decision that it means one thing or another. It can never discount contrary evidence against which the main thrust of the argument rests, and if doubt appears this must be taken into consideration, and embodied in any verdict reached. Such is the method of science and philosophy. We see it in our handling of therapeutic agents. To hold an open mind is the only way of ensuring some reasonable degree of precaution in the face of real perils.

## Exclusion principle

It is a physical law that two quantities of matter cannot occupy the same space at the same time. This, I would argue, is true of thoughts and ideas. To pursue one's daily life with a mental load of good ideas will automatically exclude evil ideas, and vice versa. This theme, which might well be dubbed "the exclusion principle", has an important bearing on our attempts to reduce yobbish and criminal behaviour.

A mind unoccupied is vulnerable to evil ideas. Youngsters with creative hobbies do not fancy mischief, and when they become adults do not indulge in antisocial activities. They have a further advantage, demonstrated in a study of leisure activities and the risk of dementia in old age, published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* for 19 June. The results suggest that participation in cognitively demanding leisure activities in late life protects against various dementias, particularly Alzheimer's disease. Protection was restricted to those individuals indulging in activities requiring mental effort, such as

board games, reading and playing a musical instrument; mere physical activity had no such benefit. On such evidence, persuading youngsters to take up mentally demanding leisure pursuits promises a rich dividend for them and society towards the end of life.

## Derbyshire discovery

The reported discovery, in April, of the first example of Palaeolithic cave art in our islands, is a highlight for British archaeologists. According to the June issue of *Antiquity*, the search of the walls of a cavern at Creswell Crags in Derbyshire has revealed two examples of primitive cave art, described by three archaeologists in a preliminary report, and now undergoing critical appraisal by experts.



The supposed image of an ibex at Creswell Crags

One feature of the discovery is that the site in question is some 450km north of the previously most northern site of cave art of the period known, which is at Rouen in Normandy. Human occupation of the Church Hole cavern, which contains Pleistocene and Holocene deposits reaching almost to the roof, has been estimated on the strength of radiocarbon determinations as between 12,000 and 12,500 years before present. Recent exploration of the site was prompted by the discovery of an engraved bone fragment.

Caution against accepting the find too readily has been prompted by two previously claimed examples of Palaeolithic art, one in 1912 east of Paviland on the Wales coast, the other in 1981 at Symonds Yat in the Wye valley, both of them later discounted as examples of natural weathering. So far, the two figures identified in Church Hole have been of a supposed ibex, 57cm x 40cm, at 3.5m above the present cave floor, and a pair of birds, resembling cranes or swans, 30cm x 32cm, deeper in the cavern.

If the interpretation of these artefacts is correct, it raises the question of the significance of the ibex, unknown in Britain but recognised as having existed in south-west Europe during the Magdalenian period of prehistory.