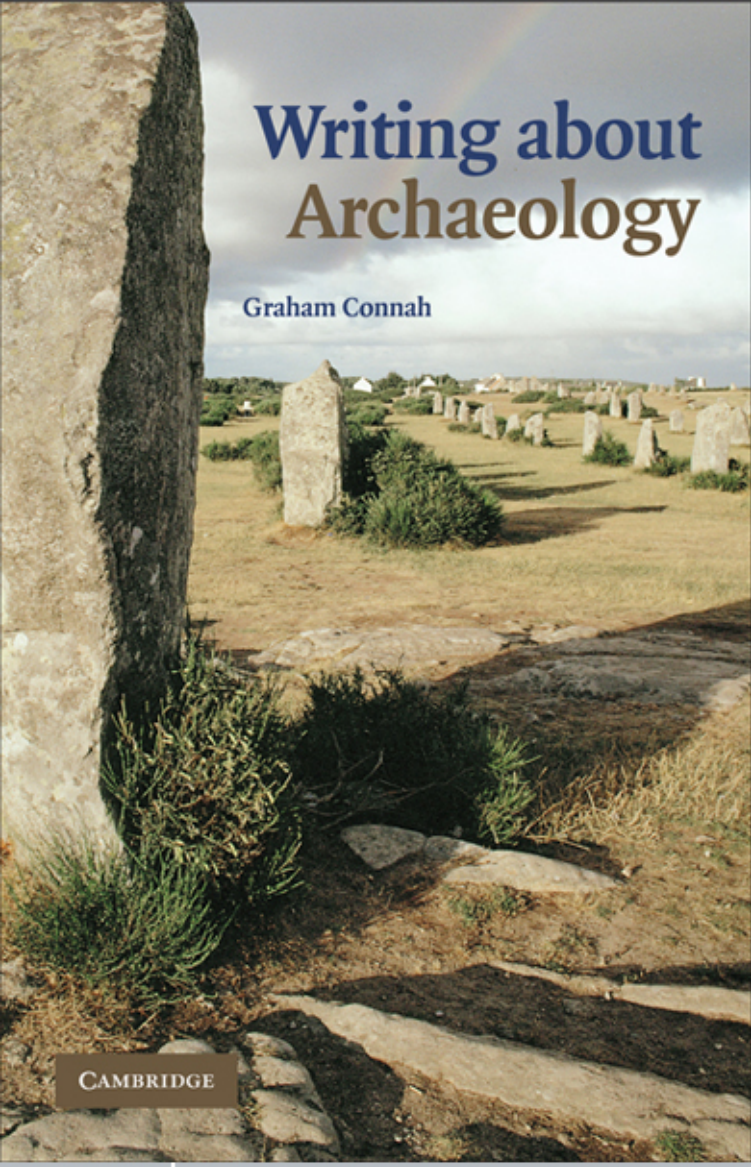

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Writing about Archaeology

In this book, Graham Connah offers an overview of archaeological authorship: its diversity, its challenges and its methodology. Based on his own experiences, he presents his personal views about the task of writing about archaeology. The book is not intended to be a technical manual. Instead, Connah aims to encourage archaeologists who write about their subject to think about the process of writing. He writes with the beginning author in mind, but the book will be of interest to all archaeologists who plan to publish their work. Connah's overall premise is that those who write about archaeology need to be less concerned with content and more concerned with how they present it. It is not enough to be a good archaeologist. One must also become a good writer and be able to communicate effectively. Archaeology, he argues, is above all a literary discipline.

Graham Connah is a Visiting Fellow in the School of Archaeology and Anthropology at the Australian National University in Canberra. A scholar of the archaeology of Africa and Australia, he is the author of eight books and founded the journal *Australasian Historical Archaeology*.

Writing about Archaeology

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Dedicated to the memory of

George Burr Perrett
Fellow of Selwyn College, Cambridge,
from 1920 to 1964

'O! that mine enemy would write a book! has been a well known prayer against an enemy. I had written a book, and it has furnished matter for abuse for want of something better.'

Thomas Jefferson, third president of the United States, in a letter to Dr Samuel Brown, 25 March 1798 (Peden 1955: xxiv).

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Preface and Acknowledgements

I wrote this book in 2007 and 2008 following a suggestion in 2005 by Simon Whitmore, formerly an editor at Cambridge University Press. I am grateful to him and to Beatrice Rehl, the present Humanities and Social Sciences editor at Cambridge University Press, New York, for their advice and patience during its gestation. It has been a great pleasure to continue my long and fruitful association with the Press.

It seemed arrogant and patronizing to write a book telling other archaeologists how to write, and I have remained acutely aware of this throughout my work on it. However, in no way should this book be thought of as a manual of instructions. This is certainly not intended. Rather the book consists of my own reflections on the task after more than a half-century of attempting to write about archaeology. My intention has been to encourage archaeological authors to think more critically about what they do and how they do it. I suggest that in order to write well about archaeology it is not enough to be an archaeologist; one must also learn how to write and each of us might achieve

this in our own way. This opinion has been shaped by my contact with many other members of the archaeological profession over the years, too many to acknowledge here but all owed a debt of gratitude; to an extent each one of us is the sum of those we have known. With this in mind the book is dedicated not to an archaeologist but to the memory of an historian, remembered for his insistence on rigour in writing.

I would like to thank no less than five anonymous publisher's 'readers' who commented on my proposal for the book and whose opinions influenced the way that it was subsequently written. I am also particularly grateful to David Pearson of the National Library of Australia, Canberra, and to Michael Westaway of the Queensland Museum, Brisbane, who both commented on an earlier version of the book and whose suggestions have influenced its final form.

The illustrations included in Chapter 6 need some explanation. With such a limited number, it was clearly impossible to provide comprehensive examples of the great diversity of visual material used in archaeological publications. I spent many days making a selection that can only be representative in the most general way, but the images that I chose were all ones that caught my attention and *told* me something, as I think archaeological illustrations should.

The increasingly complex matter of copyright also limited the choice of illustrations, and it will be observed that they are drawn from only a few publications. In particular, it seemed inappropriate to use my own material, and in general I avoided doing so. The sources of the illustrations I have used are acknowledged in their captions, and I am grateful to all those individuals, publications and institutions that allowed me to reproduce their material. Particular thanks are due to the editors of *Antiquity*, *The Antiquaries Journal* and the *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society*, from which the majority of the illustrations came. Specific acknowledgements are also due to Malcolm Thurlby, for permission to use his photograph reproduced in Figure 12, and to John Crook for permission to use his photograph reproduced in Figure 14. Although every effort has been made to obtain permission to reproduce copyright items, in some cases, because of the passage of time or other circumstances, this has not been possible. The author and publishers would be glad to hear from any

copyright holders who have not been acknowledged. I would also like to thank Neal McCracken and Stuart Hay, photographers at the Australian National University, Canberra, for digital work on the illustrations, continuing the skilled assistance that they have given me for so many other publications. Similarly I am grateful to Douglas Elford, of the National Library of Australia, for technical assistance with Figure 8.

In addition, I wish to thank the School of Archaeology and Anthropology at the Australian National University, in Canberra, at which I have been a Visiting Fellow for some years. While writing this book I was also grateful for Kevin MacDonald's help, when he arranged my access to the library of the Institute of Archaeology at University College London.

Finally, I must once more thank Beryl Connah, my partner for almost five decades, for reading chapters, compiling the index and tolerating a husband who simply refuses to stop writing.

One

Creating the canon

The integral role of writing in archaeology

Writing about archaeology is the archaeologist's most lasting contribution to society. In less than two hundred years, archaeology has fundamentally changed most people's understanding of the human past and the way in which many of us view ourselves. It has made vital contributions to our consciousness of who we are and where we are. In the long term, however, this has been accomplished not merely by the excavations, field surveys and variety of analyses that are usually thought of as the core of archaeological endeavour but by the presentation of such work and its results in one or another published form. As Joyce et al. (2002: 6–7), citing Walter Taylor (1948: 34–35) and James Deetz (1988: 15–20), have pointed out, the very word 'archaeology' covers two different activities, in which 'the writing of archaeology [is] as integral to the production of archaeological knowledge as encounters in the field'. Indeed, the discipline of archaeology consists of the body of published material that has been built up by many thousands of writers, many of whom are now dead, creating a massive data base from which we can

retrieve information and which we constantly augment, correct and revise. This data base constitutes the archaeological 'canon', meaning neither a misspelled antiquated weapon nor a member of the Christian clergy but a generally recognized body of publications that are central to research and teaching in our discipline and that form a material expression of its scholarship.

Therefore it is the creation and continual expansion of this archaeological canon that should be the major objectives for practitioners of the discipline. For this reason, the necessity for archaeologists to publish their work has long been widely accepted. An early exponent of this view was the exemplary publicist Pitt Rivers (1898: 28), who famously stated, 'A discovery dates only from the time of the record of it, and not from the time of its being found in the soil'. More recently, White (1983: 171) trenchantly insisted, 'Research which is not available for others to use does not exist. . . . If you do not write it down it does not exist. The converse is also true: what you report and publish is all that exists'. Consequently, it is hardly surprising that publication has become an essential element in career building for professional archaeologists, particularly those working in the academic sector. As with other disciplines, the 'publish or perish' syndrome is widespread, sometimes resulting in more haste than care and the risk of an outcome that might be described as 'publish *and* perish'!

As an academic archaeologist with a long career in research and teaching, I have been writing about my subject for more than fifty years, although regrettably only in English – though sometimes translated by others, into Japanese (1993a), German (2006), and French (2008). My first published item was in 1954, at the age of nineteen, although the obscurity of the outlet has long protected me from subsequent embarrassment (Connah 1954). Since then I have been the author of research monographs (Connah 1975, 1981a, 1996a, 2007, 2009); and general syntheses (1987, 1988, 1993b, 2001a), an editor or collaborating author of specific site studies (1997, Connah, Rowland and Oppenheimer 1978) and the author of an introductory 'popular' text (2004a, 2006, 2008). In addition, I have written some hundreds of journal papers, notes, book reviews and other minor items, some of the journal papers in collaboration with other writers. Furthermore,

I have edited two monographs (1983, 1998), founded a journal that I edited for seven issues (1983–1988, 1996b), been an assistant editor of another journal for three issues (1971–1973) and refereed many papers for a variety of journals in a number of countries. This review of my own writing career is not mere egotism. Rather, it is provided as evidence that by now I should have learnt a little about archaeological writing, but in fact it has been a long and hard road, at times steep, rough and beset with accident black spots. Many contemporaries, including some more productive and more distinguished than me, would I suspect admit to a similar experience.

For most of us, these problems were particularly severe during the earliest part of our careers, and when talking to younger colleagues, engaged in postgraduate research or in their first posts, I constantly hear remarks about how difficult they find the writing process. As many editors would concede, there are also some archaeologists who are further advanced in their careers who nevertheless have similar problems, although they often refuse to admit them. As for the real beginners, such as undergraduates engaged in third- or fourth-year studies, there are even those who seem to think that 'the archaeology is fun [frankly, I have never found it so] if only one did not have to write about it as well'.

Yet, as already indicated, writing about archaeology is an inseparable and central part of the archaeologist's task. As Anthony Sinclair has put it, 'Archaeologists, like anthropologists, write; we create our subject' (Sinclair 1989: 161). To be able to do this successfully, it is not enough for us to understand the often highly complex archaeological data and be able to present, analyse and interpret it in an orderly manner; we must also learn how to write; specifically, we must learn how to write about archaeology. The immediate difficulty is that there are so many ways of doing this. Not only will individual approaches to the task often differ but the task itself will also vary depending on the character of the subject matter and on the purpose and intended readership of what is being written. Furthermore, the ways that archaeologists have written about their subject have changed over time and will continue to change. There are distinct genres of archaeological writing that constitute more than variations in

literary style, reflecting as they do the cultural background and theoretical stance of the writers, as well as the character of the content.

However, the central problems of archaeological writing are also familiar to writers of history and probably to writers in other disciplines. As long ago as the sixteenth century Girolamo Cardano, natural philosopher, medical man and astrologer, as well as a practising historian, wrote,

> It is very hard to write history, and it is therefore rare. First of all, because of the need for skill and style and practice; second, because of that for diligence and effort in chasing down the smallest points; third, because of that for judgement. (Translated by Grafton 2007: 183 from the Latin original.)

Cardano's perceptive remarks would apply equally to modern archaeological writing as to historical writing. He correctly identified the conflicting requirements of such writing: the need to write well, the need to include all the relevant data (of which too much will bore the reader but too little will leave the reader in ignorance) and the need to analyse and interpret the data. It is the task of balancing these obligations that often makes writing about archaeology so problematic. The need to provide both detailed technical information or theoretical content, and extended discussion of alternative interpretations, can make it extremely difficult to write prose that is understandable, readable and interesting to the reader. A slight familiarity with archaeological literature will suggest that some writers do not bother to try. The result can be publications that even students of the discipline find incomprehensible, except for some who mistakenly conclude that this must be the required way to do things and attempt to imitate it in their own work.

Closely associated with other social sciences, archaeology is one of the principal means of investigating changes in human societies through time, particularly for pre-literate societies and undocumented aspects of literate ones. It provides a time-depth and an orientation largely denied to cultural or social anthropology and sociology. However, unlike historians, whose task in explaining the recorded past is to turn written documents or oral tradition into text, archaeologists have to turn physical evidence consisting of things and their contexts into text (although

sometimes aided by documentary sources for later periods). Furthermore, except in the most specialized technical writing, that physical evidence has to be translated into text that is informative about people in the past and relevant to people in the present. This means that archaeological writing has to address special problems that arise from the character of its data, in addition to explaining its interpretations within the general context of the social sciences. Binford (1988: 19–20) suggested that we 'think of archaeological facts as a sort of untranslated language, something that we need to "decode" in order to move from simple statements about matter and its arrangement to statements of behavioral interest about the past'. The varied and frequently complex contributions of the natural sciences to archaeological investigations can make this task especially difficult, but the process of decryption involves not only interpretation of the evidence but also the presentation of the outcome in clearly written prose. Illustrations of many types, as well as tables, can contribute to this writing, providing visual explanation and relieving the text of some of the more burdensome details. However, illustrations and tables need to be closely integrated with that text, rather than merely used as cosmetic additions as is sometimes the case. Their photographic or graphic quality, their comprehensibility, their content, their sizes, their location within the text and their captions will all need very careful attention if they are to assist effectively in the task of writing.

Writing archaeology for publication is a skill that has to be learned. Acquiring proficiency is not a magical outcome of writing a doctoral thesis as some people seem to think, although the discipline of producing such a large formal text can certainly provide an initial apprenticeship. Basically, learning to write is rather like learning to ride a bicycle; one has to maintain a delicate balance whilst still moving forward, but at first one will frequently fall off, sometimes with painful results. When this happens, it is essential to try again immediately, even though writing, like riding a bicycle, can often result in little more than a sore bum. In short, one way to learn how to write is to write. Writing has to become a habit, with a strictly disciplined routine. Repeated attempts, in as wide a variety of formats as possible, will in time make the task easier for most people and, it is hoped, improve the quality of the product. In the process, one has to

develop an objective critical approach to what has been written, attempting to read it as if someone else wrote it. Nevertheless, it is important not to be too critical. Many years ago, when an architectural historian friend of mine had laboured for several days writing a paper, I asked him how he was getting on. 'Nearly finished' was the reply, to which I remarked that he had done well to write a paper so quickly. 'No', he exclaimed, 'I have not nearly finished the paper; I have nearly finished the first paragraph'! Self-criticism is all very well, providing that it does not become self-destructive perfectionism. To quote a favourite maxim of Thurstan Shaw's: 'The better is often the enemy of the good'.

Another way to learn how to write about archaeology is to read what others have written, and to read as widely as possible amongst both archaeological and non-archaeological literature. Such reading should also range through time, certainly over the last two centuries and perhaps earlier. The important thing to observe is not only the content but also the manner in which it has been presented: the structure and style, particularly the way the prose flows or fails to do so, the way that descriptive material has been handled, the choice of words, the presence or absence of clarity. If you can understand what some authors have done that made them successful and what others have done or not done that detracted from the quality of their writing, then you can more readily appreciate the strengths and weaknesses of your own writing. This is not to suggest that you should imitate the way in which others have written, but you should certainly be prepared to learn from them. As Leonardo da Vinci stated in his view of science, 'Experience has been the mistress of whoever has written well' (Richter 1952: 2).

This book was written at the suggestion of Simon Whitmore, formerly a commissioning editor with Cambridge University Press. It resulted from an informal discussion that the two of us had at the 2005 York conference of the (American) Society for Historical Archaeology. I had stated that, unlike many archaeologists, I actually enjoyed writing, mainly because it is so difficult to do well and because the attempt to meet that challenge is stimulating in itself. I think that we both agonized about what Brian Fagan (2006a: 17), with enviable directness, has subsequently called 'the generally appalling standards of writing in

archaeology'. In any event, the outcome was that I found myself trying to write a book that tells other people how to write about archaeology. This I regard as a virtually impossible task, as well as being conceptually arrogant. I also felt poorly qualified to write anything that looked like a methodological manual. Instead, I have written a book that reflects my own experiences of writing about archaeology (on related themes see Connah 2001b, 2004b, 2004c). It presents a personal view intended to be read, rather than a reference work intended to be consulted.

On the overall craft of writing there are, of course, many books, but compared to the large literature on the writing of history (Berger, Feldner and Passmore 2003 is an example), there appears to have been little written about the writing of archaeology. Indeed, in his admirable recent book, *Writing archaeology: Telling stories about the past*, Brian Fagan comments, 'There is almost no directly relevant literature' on this subject (Fagan 2006a: 168). Fagan does, in fact, provide a 'how to do it' book, but he concentrates on the writing of commercial general interest books, what he calls 'trade books', an area of publication in which he has been remarkably successful. My intention has been to cast my net very much wider, to encompass as much of the spectrum of archaeological writing as possible.

I have been aided in this task by the opinions of other archaeologists. Hodder (1989), for instance, has rightly argued that a more critical attention should be given to archaeological writing and has suggested that rhetoric, narrative and dialogue need more emphasis in such writing. Taking up these ideas, Joyce et al. (2002) have delved deeply into the theoretical aspects of archaeological writing, stressing what they perceive to be a need for innovation and experimentation. In addition, Joyce (2006) has written specifically about the writing of historical archaeology, and several papers on the theme of writing archaeology occupy most of an issue of the *Archaeological Review from Cambridge* (Writing archaeology 1989). Amongst other contributions on the subject of archaeological writing is that of Chippindale (1996), who has provided an interesting analysis of a paper of his own, identifying different 'moods' of writing that reflect different kinds of knowledge that it was hoped to convey. There is also a paper by Pluciennik (1999), with comments by others, that examines the role of narrative in archaeological writing. Furthermore, Betty