

Conference Report Objects and Landscape: Understanding the Medieval period through finds recorded by the Portable Antiquities Scheme.

The Portable Antiquities Scheme
and the Medieval Settlement Research Group
London, British Museum, Monday 22 October 2012

Suzie Thomas, University of Glasgow (Suzie.Thomas@glasgow.ac.uk)

In most years the Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS – <http://finds.org.uk>) has organized a conference at London's British Museum (where its central office is also based), which in previous years has covered various themes, including marking ten years of PAS in 2007, and a conference comparing management of portable antiquities in other European jurisdictions in 2009. PAS operates across England and Wales, and through its network of Finds Liaison Officers (FLOs) allows finders of archaeological material, primarily metal-detector users, to report and record their discoveries. It was established in 1997, initially as a pilot scheme, to complement the Treasure Act 1996, which also came into force that year in England and Wales (in Scotland the legislation is different).

The screenshot shows the homepage of the Portable Antiquities Scheme website. At the top is a navigation menu with links: Home, Contact, Get involved, Conservation, Database, News & reports, Treasure, Research, Photo, Blog, Events. Below the menu is a header section with the title "Welcome to the Portable Antiquities Scheme website". The main content area is divided into several sections: "The Treasure Act" with a sub-section "The Staffordshire Moorlands torii" featuring a photograph of a large, ornate metal torii; "Latest news" with a list of recent events and discoveries; "Britain's Secret Treasures" with a sub-section "The Staffordshire Moorlands torii" featuring a photograph of a large, ornate metal torii; and a quote from Dave Walton, a Hampshire detectorist, praising the PAS. On the left side, there are several sidebar widgets: "Portable Antiquities Scheme" with a logo and the website URL; "Log in / Register"; "Staffordshire Hoard papers" with a link to the hoard's records; and "DAY OF ARCHAEOLOGY 2012 PAS EXPLORERS" with a logo.

The PAS website: <http://finds.org.uk>

This year was the first of what is planned to be a series of conferences organized by period, and, due to the focus on the Middle Ages this time, was organized in partnership with the Medieval Settlement Research Group (<http://www.archaeologyuk.org/msrg>), a multi-disciplinary network of researchers. This partnership was explained in the brief introduction to the day by Roger Bland, the Keeper of Prehistory and Europe at the British Museum. The next PAS conference in 2013 will focus on post-medieval finds.

The themes of the day focussed primarily on the impact of the data collected through PAS (namely the Finds Database – <http://finds.org.uk/database>) on the understanding of the medieval period, both through artefact studies and landscape-level research. However, and perhaps reflecting the themes and nature of much of this current research (certainly that which was presented at the conference), the focus seemed almost entirely to be on archaeology in England with, as one person observed in the final discussions, only relatively rare mentions of Wales, despite PAS' presence there as well.

The opening session, chaired by the Director of PAS, Michael Lewis, started with a presentation from Eleanor Standley from the Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford, on 'PAS and the Personal Possessions and Experiences of the Past', particularly the reuse of metal artefacts, for example the reuse of coins as jewellery. Tim Pestell from Norwich Castle Museum then talked about medieval Papal bullae, and outlined his research which focussed primarily on the county of Norfolk.

Following a coffee break, Kevin Leahy of PAS and North Lincolnshire Museum chaired a session of five shorter papers described as a 'PAS medley'. This showcased current research utilising the data of PAS, as carried out by both FLOs (the regional staff of PAS) and by PhD candidates (mostly current or past FLOs themselves) making use of PAS data. David Williams, the FLO for Surrey and East Berkshire, started the session with an overview of his research into Tudor purses, blending PAS data from England and Wales with data from Scotland and examples as illustrated in contemporary literature. Next Theresa Gilmore, FLO for Staffordshire and the West Midlands, talked about her research interests in late medieval decorative folding strap clasps, which vary in style from animal and human decoration to more abstract patterns. Much of this research to date has been supported by a Headley Trust internship. Third to speak in the session was Laura Burnett, the Somerset FLO, who presented her ongoing research into cloisonné brooches. With several types identified, she also noted that geographical biases in where certain types have been found may be to do with the amount of time that PAS has been active in certain areas, with the scheme not becoming nationwide in its coverage until several years after its inception. Rob Webley then outlined his planned PhD research at the University of York through a Collaborative Doctoral Award that will be supervised jointly with PAS through the Arts and Humanities Research Council. Webley is formerly a FLO himself, and will be focussing on PAS data and other sources to enhance our knowledge of medieval jettons. He also pointed out how important it is that metal-detector users record artefacts such as jettons, since the different types and their different distribution patterns shed important light. The fifth and final speaker of this multiple-paper session was Adam Daubney, the FLO for Lincolnshire, who explained his recently-commenced part time PhD research with the University of Leicester. This will involve looking at using PAS data in Lincolnshire from a landscape perspective, utilising also data from sources such as the Historic Landscape Characterisation information produced by English Heritage and local authority Historic Environment Records (see www.english-heritage.org.uk/characterisation).

A theme that emerged in this second session in particular, returned to and discussed in more detail later in this review, was the fact that much current published literature has not yet taken into account the additional data from recorded finds with PAS, and so the potential for this additional data to augment existing research was emphasized. This session, like all the others, worked especially well due to careful time-keeping by the Chair. This has the advantage of making speakers remain concise, and with only an hour for lunch and none provided (hence delegates had to find their own food within the museum or outside in central London), it was important that people had enough time for this.

Following lunch, John Naylor of the Medieval Settlement Research Group chaired a session of three papers. The first came from Letty ten Harkel of the University of Oxford, who talked about an England-wide research project utilising PAS data alongside other sources for European Research Council-funded project 'Landscape and Identities: the case of the English landscape c. 1500 BC - 1986 AD' (www.arch.ox.ac.uk/englishlandscapes-introduction.html), with particular focus on her own research within this project on Anglo-Scandinavian material. Next Kevin Leahy was in front of the audience again, this time presenting Middle Saxon finds in the landscape. Perhaps aware of the metal-detector users

in the audience, he made a point of praising the changing attitudes among the metal detecting community. This had led to the vast improvement in the quality of find spot information now disclosed to archaeologists as compared to earlier years, with some previously-recorded find spots even being revisited and updated with more detailed information. The third speaker was Anni Byard, FLO for West Berkshire and Oxfordshire, who described her intentions to use data from two metal detecting rallies in the same part of Oxfordshire as the basis for a dissertation as part of her part time MSc at the University of Oxford. As this work was yet to commence, she is likely to be able to present again in the coming years on her actual findings and conclusions.

After another well-planned coffee break, the final session of speakers began with Andrew Rogerson of Norfolk County Council. He spoke on the theme of 'Buckles, Brooches, Fields and Farms: settlement and land-use in medieval Norfolk', and was careful to reinforce the current positive trend of making use of PAS and other datasets, which he characterized as the movement from "data" to "information". The final talk of the day presented research from Martin Locker (a PhD candidate at University College London) and Michael Lewis (of PAS and the British Museum), looking at pilgrim signs, including again utilizing the data collated through PAS. The paper was presented on behalf of both authors by Martin Locker. Among other things, the presentation focused on the nature of pilgrimage souvenirs, suggesting that the apparent paucity of surviving artefacts at certain sites known to have been foci for pilgrimage may be due to at least some pilgrimage souvenirs coming from nature (particular plants for example), which would not have survived in the archaeological record.

The overall structure of the day conference worked well. Allowing long coffee breaks (averaging at forty minutes for each break) was also a well thought out strategy, allowing delegates plenty of time to talk and network (a key function of conferences that is sometimes forgotten by organizers).

As well as scope at the end of each individual segment of the day for questions to speakers, a healthy amount of time was planned in at the end of the conference for more general discussion, which generated a number of questions and observations following an *ad hoc* summary of the day from Andrew Reynolds (University College London). One observer asked whether the study of metal-detected objects, by definition made of metal, was a sufficiently broad enough scope from which to make observations about any period, without, for example, collecting data through other methods such as fieldwalking. However, a number of the speakers were quick to point out that for some specific artefact studies this was appropriate if the artefact type under scrutiny was metallic, while other studies, such as of landscape, are more holistic anyway in the range of data that they consider. As mentioned earlier in this review, the issue of the apparent England-only focus of the day was also flagged as a potential issue. Responses to this observation pointed out that this was simply the nature of some of the research parameters, such as the prevalence of certain artefact types primarily in England, or the remit of such as ten Harkel's project, which was intended to cover England only. A significant barrier to much research that was discussed was the nature of many counties' Historic Environment Records (HERs), the system through which, at county or local authority level, historic and archaeological sites and monuments are recorded. Unfortunately, the software and databases are not always compatible across areas, which has evidently led to some difficulties in the first year of this project in terms of obtaining data.

The papers were all interesting and kept to time, with the PAS medley session before the lunch break working particularly well perhaps due to the variety of research seen through the collection of shorter papers. These briefer papers, lasting around fifteen minutes each, were particularly well suited to presenting the nature of the research projects being discussed in this section; all of which were either still in progress or in early stages of development.

The conference was fully booked, and perhaps its low cost (£10 per attendee) had much to do with this. It was nonetheless based in London again, which can logistically be limiting to those outside of the UK's capital due to the cost of transport, especially of domestic trains from further afield. The British Museum location in many ways makes sense, especially with the Central Unit Team based on site. However, given the coverage of PAS across all of

England and Wales, it has to be asked perhaps whether there is scope for holding the main annual conference in other locations from time to time to increase opportunities for different people to attend.

One thing to note as an observation of the conference was the repeated mention by many of the speakers of the ways in which utilising PAS data was enhancing their research. It was clear that previous research and literature available had not always incorporated this ever-growing dataset. This raises an important issue in terms of whether archaeological research, in the UK or elsewhere, always takes advantage of all of the available information. Similar observations have in the past been made about the Archaeology Data Service (ADS – <http://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk>) and in particular the Grey Literature Library – a vast resource of unpublished fieldwork reports. There are so many sources of information in different places within the UK (with England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland often using different systems and resources), it is presumably difficult for archaeological researchers to know where to find relevant information, not to mention knowing necessarily where to deposit or disseminate their own results (especially if active in the voluntary sector). This is perhaps the case for other European countries as well, and is an issue to address.

Another thing that was striking about the research presented was the extent to which this was dominated by either current or former FLOs, even in the case of postgraduate research underway. This is perhaps understandable, since they are the ones most familiar with the PAS database as a resource, but it is also potentially worrying if use outside this group of individuals is still limited.

Within the context of Europe generally, PAS is interesting due to its uniqueness as a framework for engaging with voluntary and hobbyist uses of heritage, something that I have seen flagged as a point for discussion at a number of EAA conference sessions. Therefore, while the conference was specifically about archaeological research in the UK (and primarily England), in terms of the processes and research methods involved, conferences such as this are potentially significant for practitioners in other countries looking to consider whether a PAS-type framework would work in their own context. Many probably suspect that it would not work exactly as it does in England and Wales in other European jurisdictions, for cultural and legislative reasons, but it is perhaps still a useful exercise to envisage this model in other settings, even if only to rule it out or to consider modifications.

Finally, an observation that perhaps is unfair, given that the conference was period-specific and intended to present the research being developed through use of PAS data. Given that most of the data recorded and stored by PAS comes from the metal detecting hobby (regardless of how one feels about this group and their impact on archaeological heritage), it might have been appropriate to hear from one or more representatives of the British metal detecting community through more than just questions and discussion. Whether this could be achieved in the future through encouraging a paper or two from metal-detector users, or even inviting a representative to chair a session, it might have given more of an impression of cooperation and inclusivity, rather than ownership of the information residing with the archaeologists. However, this is a minor issue (if one at all, as far as the organizers were concerned), and it may be that the metal-detector users were content to listen to the archaeologists on this occasion.

Suzie Thomas is a Research Associate with Trafficking Culture (<http://traffickingculture.org>), a project funded by the European Research Council to gather evidence-based data on the global trafficking in looted cultural objects. This is an interdisciplinary research project based at The Scottish Centre for Crime and Justice Research, University of Glasgow, UK.