

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

20 May 1998

Dear Sir

43

As an Advisor of the LBFNM, I was glad to receive *National Museum News*, 7 (spring 1998), and encouraged to hear what is in progress.

What particularly interested me was Chris Cumberpatch's article on the conflict of different approaches to the excavation of what remains of downtown Beirut.

When I was asked to address the Lebanese British Association some years ago, when there was even doubt that any excavations at all would be allowed, I advocated what I thought would be a sensible and pragmatic approach. This was the division of the available area into a grid - say 100 m squares - and the international teams and local archaeologists encouraged to put down deep sondages. These should be immediately collated, thus providing a general idea of what areas were of interest for particular chronological periods.

Detailed excavation should then proceed, again according to available sites, in those areas best able to provide more specific information. This would naturally have to be coordinated by someone - UNESCO, I do not know who - who could control the overall activity.

I can only conclude that what has happened is the excavation and recording of areas according to the interests of the factions concerned, irrespective of the total picture.

I take Mr Cumberpatch's point that if the data is recorded properly and stored appropriately, then what happens to the physical remains is of less consequence. But would we remove Stonehenge, or Salisbury Cathedral, if we thought that we had properly recorded both and that there was further history underneath?

I can only cite my own experience excavating an extremely difficult site, a trading emporium (a bit like Beirut in its way) on the northern tip of Sri Lanka, in the early 80's. Again, political factions (in this case, Sinhalese and Tamil) both wanted a "correct" interpretation of the past. In fact, it was a multi-national site and over 1,400 years belonged to everyone, again like Beirut.

We did grid the site, as suggested above. We found a great deal of important and also enigmatic evidence. And then in 1984 we had to abandon it because of a bloody (and continuing) civil war. Unlike Beirut, however, our site is now overgrown with scrub jungle, and can await investigation in a more peaceful future.

What worries me about Beirut is that such a future opportunity does not exist. And what worries me even more, that having been given the opportunity to excavate at all (for which many of us had to fight) that that chance should be lost, due to different opinions about aims and methodology by the archaeologists themselves.

Of course there is room for a plurality of approaches, which should be an added plus. But someone needs to exercise a firm hand. Who?

Yours sincerely,
Professor John Carswell.