HOW TO TRAIN ARCHAEOLOGISTS?

Glasgow TAG

Saturday afternoon.

I walked out of the the tedious plenary session. It was a debate about archaeology, the university and training professional archaeologists. Some professional from one of the archaeology units in the UK had published a deliberately hyperbolic comment to the effect that universities are failing the profession – graduates come out with a degree and not able to draw a section, whatever. So the TAG authorities decided to air the matter at the annual meeting.

Aegina 1978

There were various speakers arguing this or that and asking questions like – do you think there should be more practical training in universities? – should there be masters programs in archaeological practice? The audience were answering the questions – electronically, pressing buttons on little machines – with the results displayed on a big screen.

It seemed to me there was little to debate. And the votes usually simply reflected the wording of the questions which were meant to further particular arguments and agendas. Some old codger remembering his days in university when he learned everything from the grand old renaiisance men of archaeology, some radical academic wanting students to see a bigger picture than the bottom of a muddy trench.

Should a BA in archaeology include filling in a context sheet, glueing together a pot or operating a total station?

Undergraduate degrees cannot and should not prepare for a profession, other than developing broad transferable skills. And the most important of these should be BS detection, constructing good arguments (listen to Lew Binford on this), thinking fast in debate and conversation, listening.

And what should we academics be doing for undergrads, apart from setting some standards for all these? Forget about delivering a body of knowledge or a professional skill set.

Inspire them to think outside the box.