RICHARD III FOUND? – WHY IT MATTERS

It’s all over the news today – the claim that the 500 year old body found by archaeologists under a parking lot in Leicester UK is that of Richard III, the last Plantagenet King of England who fell at Bosworth Field in 1485, losing his throne to Henry Tudor.

For much of the popular press in the US this is another great story of the royals!

BBC – [Link]

The Guardian – as it happened today – [Link].

The Guardian – the controversy – [Link]

Is it really Richard of York? The academics at Leicester who have studied the remains say “yes – beyond all reasonable doubt”.

Is that because of genetic proof? The genetic evidence is actually quite shaky. It is the combination of evidence, including injuries and what is known of the

circumstances of the disposal of the body, that warrant the notion that this may indeed be Richard.

Is the discovery historically important? Does this change our understanding of history? A good number of academic historians are critical of the attention the discovery is getting (Mary Beard, the infamous TV historian tweets – "Gt fun & a mystery solved that we've found Richard 3. But does it have any HISTORICAL significance? (Uni of Leics overpromoting itself?)"

It is extremely rare for archaeologists to be able to attempt identification of an individual. So this is quite an occasion.

But have Leicester University treated this as the media opportunity of a lifetime? Completely.

So goes the controversy – the business of academics.

Does it matter? Genetics? Forensic science? Historical significance? A University touting its wares on a world stage? No.

All the reporting and discussion I've read, though I haven't strayed far from the mainstream media, misses the point.

Here's why it matters.

This could be that figure so well known from literature and history. *Even if it isn't*, and we should all have our doubts, the physical remains, and from a spot so deliciously ordinary as a car park, connect us intimately to great events in a story of back-then which still resonates now. It happened here, and there is what remains in the ruin of history. This is the electro-cultural attraction of the body. Witnessing the remains, even at that existential distance of digital media, connects the anonymity and mundanity of our everyday lives today with possible escape into what might be talked about, into what is enduring – material presences, and how we just might make a difference to others that matters.

This is my old argument that archaeology is really less about the past than it is about our fascinating relationships with haunting pasts-that-somehow-endure, pasts-in-the-present, projected into the future.

Add to this the royal connection and you have a story that goes global.

Image above – the body in situ.

Image at top – Laurence Olivier as Richard III in 1955

Great video clips – exactly the right treatment – [Link]