PROFESSOR LESLIE ALCOCK – MEMORIES OF CADBURY CASTLE

Professor Leslie Alcock died on June 6 2006, 40 years after he started the first three exploratory trenches on Cadbury Castle, the Somerset hillfort with which his reputation is inextricably linked. Born on April 24 1925, he was educated at Manchester Grammar School and Brasenose College, Oxford. On completion of his degree his linguistic skills – he was fluent in Urdu and Punjabi from army service with the Ghurkas in India – gave him the opportunity to work as Sir Mortimer Wheeler's deputy in the Indus Valley.

In 1953 Leslie Alcock began a 20 year association with University College Wales, Cardiff, as an assistant lecturer. There he helped foster a rigorous attitude to fieldwork training which bore fruit in excavations at the multiperiod hillfort at Dinas Powys. It proved a defining period in his career, shifting his focus of interest from prehistory to the Early Medieval and the evolution of 'Celtic' culture. With this background it was entirely appropriate that after the excavator of Tintagel, C.A. Ralegh Radford, identified 5th to 6th-century AD imported pottery from Cadbury Castle's ploughsoil in the 1950s, Leslie Alcock should be chosen to head a campaign there. The Camelot Research Committee was formed to help garner funds (despite the name it included luminaries such as Mortimer Wheeler, Radford himself, and Arthurian specialist Geoffrey Ashe) but Leslie and the talented group of Cardiff University students he had gathered around him were determined to give due weight to all periods of activity.

Through his great energy and enterprise the Cadbury excavations eventually received more national and international media attention than any other British archaeological project during the 20th century, with film crews arriving from as far afield as Argentina and Australia and with daily visitors often numbering well into the hundreds, queuing for guided tours provided by members of the Pendragon Society! The money flowed in (in the Camelot Research committee's final newsletter Leslie noted that over £2000 remained in the bank after the 1970 dig). As a ten-year-old boy I was among those attracted during the first weeks, visiting day after day until I was invited to have a go.

The first season, sponsored by *The Observer*, was in effect a trial excavation during which Leslie was under pressure to find evidence enticing enough to expand and prolong the project. Small trenches sampling the inner north bank, a probable holloway leading from the north-east entrance to the plateau, and the plateau itself, revealed substantial evidence for Neolithic, Late Bronze Age, Iron Age, post-Roman and Late Saxon activity.

Over the following four years Leslie proved to be an inspirational figure to between 120 to 250 students, volunteers and professional archaeologists who participated each season. He would hurry between the various trenches, constantly available to his supervisors, seemingly always fully up-to-date with the latest developments in each trench and never afraid to get his hands dirty with a little 'diggle' when a volunteer or student was struggling with a particular patch, or when a braver, more radical approach was needed for a particular problem!

Geophysical survey of the plateau at Easter in 1967 prepared the ground for the first large trenches across the interior whilst a single trench on the south of the hill cut through all four banks. In 1968, the post-Roman period came into focus, when a 13-year-old local boy, Paul Kent, found the first of two imported amphora sherds securely stratified in a timber slot which, after further work in the 1969 season, Leslie was able to suggest was part of a hall of the 5th or 6th century AD. During the same season he tackled site K at the south-west gate where a remarkable sequence of entrances to the hillfort extended from its Middle Iron Age construction to the fortification of a Late Saxon mint, sandwiching a post-Roman gate whose metalled track sealed evidence for a series of violent episodes following the Roman invasion.

Leslie believed in having an informed labour force. The last hour of every Friday was devoted to a tour of all the trenches. After the trench supervisor would give his or her account of the week's progress, Leslie

would ask questions or elaborate on the finer points which had eluded the mass of volunteers! The principle went beyond the dig. Even the most junior regular volunteers received off-prints from annual summaries which appeared in the *Antiquaries Journal* (I still have my four copies covering the years 1967–70).

He had a quick sense of humour but his passion for the project was never in doubt. When representatives from the Cadbury Trust left only a very large box of their produce after Leslie had devoted a couple of hours of his time to them, he took the chocolates round the trenches while fiercely berating Cadburys for the their meanness. Later he found that they had made the donation he was after! His own generosity was exemplary. When many of us had been drenched on a cold summer's day he ensured that a tot of rum was circulated to everyone – children included! Less enticing were the salt tablets that he made available to everyone on very hot days.

Leslie's move to Glasgow University to become its first Professor of Archaeology three years after the last full excavation season came at the end of a very productive period of publication associated with his work at Cadbury Castle. The previous year his excellent popular account of the dig *By South Cadbury ... is that Camelot* (a title first used for a summary of the 1966 programme published in *Antiquity* in 1967) appeared from Thames and Hudson, and in 1971 his scholarly but approachable *Arthur's Britain* synthesised the mythological, historical and archaeological evidence for Arthur. Although Leslie himself eventually moved away from viewing Arthur as a historical figure the book has been through many revisions and several reprints and still provides valuable insights into the post-Roman period.

Only two significant publications dealing with Cadbury appeared during Leslie's tenure at Glasgow. His paper on the pottery of the 1st millennium BC in the *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies* (1980) has been an important reference work for researchers into Late Bronze Age and Iron Age pottery in Somerset. A paper given at the British Academy in 1982 (*Proceedings of the British Academy* 68)provided an erudite exposition on Cadbury's place in historical archaeology.

The vast Cadbury archive proved a heavy burden which restricted his fieldwork in Scotland to a series of reconnaissance digs on Early Medieval sites, most notably at Alt Clut, seat of the early Scottish kings. His own ill-health and that of his wife and frequent collaborator, Elizabeth, slowed the final publication. Finally the task was given to Niall Sharples, then to John Barrett. Sadly, Leslie was only able to write the volume interpreting the Early Medieval evidence (University of Wales, 1995). The huge bulk of the remaining data received very uneven treatment in an English Heritage volume (*Cadbury Castle, Somerset*, J. Barrett *et al*. 2000), leaving by far the greater part of the material archive untouched and in storage.

Nonetheless Leslie Alcock's legacy to British and Somerset archaeology is very significant. Whilst other doyens of the county, such as Arthur Bulleid and Harold St George Gray made careers using conservative techniques on remarkable sites, Alcock repeatedly broke new ground. In five seasons at Cadbury he excavated the then largest area of the interior of a hillfort using large open plan trenches, influencing the early stages of Barry Cunliffe's massive campaign at Danebury, Hampshire. His approach has sometimes been criticised for not adopting the more detailed recording practices used in the contemporary excavations by Peter Fowler and Philip Rahtz at Cadbury Congresbury in north Somerset, but those methods would not have been feasible in the face of the sheer volume of data from Cadbury Castle. It is the volume and scale which was so important and it is doubtful that the precision employed at Congresbury would have enhanced the project.

Just as significant was Leslie's decision to engage a team from the Oxford Research Laboratory to conduct the most extensive and most effective archaeological geophysical programme undertaken up to that time. Although some of the results were converted to punch-card format it is the hand-created dot-density plot from the plateau (by his deputy Chris Musson) which still appears in at least three different archaeological text books.

Leslie's influence will live on through generations of students from the Universities of Wales and Glasgow who hold key posts in British archaeology. In Somerset it is manifested in the continuing South Cadbury Environs Project, of which he was patron. But what was lost with the end of the great excavations like South Cadbury is what his contemporary, Philip Rahtz, has called the 'heroic age' of archaeology, and Leslie Alcock was one of the greatest heroic figures in it.

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