

Comics, Narrative and the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East

By John Swogger

Archaeologists have always embraced new ways of visually recording and representing the past and the work that they do. In the nineteenth and early-twentieth century, photography was enthusiastically adopted by archaeologists not only as a way of recording excavations and documenting sites, but also as a way of giving public audiences a better idea of what their work entailed.



Sir Flinders Petrie with his camera. (Petrie Museum archive PMF/WFP1/115/5/2)

In the middle of the twentieth-century, greater access to x-rays, aerial photography and microscopic photography changed once again the way in which archaeological work and the past was represented. Developments in scientific and statistical analysis of artefacts, soil samples and radiocarbon dates similarly resulted in new ways of viewing the past: through charts, graphs and histograms.

A 'battleship curve' of frequency distribution. (<http://www.histarch.illinois.edu/plymouth/deathshheadfg1.html>)

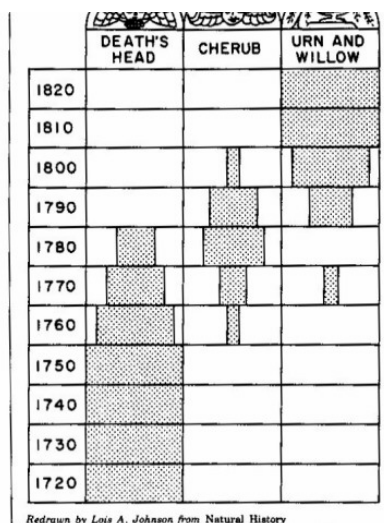


FIGURE 1. Stylistic Sequence from a Cemetery in Stoneham, Massachusetts.

Throughout the history of the discipline, various forms of representational media have given greater visibility to the archaeological profession as well as to archaeological research.

A new medium now also being used for the same reasons are comics. For most people, the term “comics” conjures up images of talking animals or superheroes in capes. But “comics” simply describes a very specific form of illustration in which image and text are closely inter-related. Comics and other forms of graphic narrative have been used for decades to tell non-fiction stories, too. In archaeology, this stretches back, arguably, to nineteenth-century reporting in the Illustrated London News.



RECEPTION OF NINEVEH SCULPTURES AT THE BRITISH MUSEUM.

Amongst the recent arrivals from Nineveh, the most striking and important is a colossal Lion, the weight of which is upwards of ten tons. This Lion was seen a fortnight at the side of a door, and it will be housed in a similar position in the British Museum, in the hall dedicated to the Nineveh Sculptures.

The subject of our engraving represents the Lion in its transit from the courtyard in front of the Museum into the building, and shows the intricate plans by which it was drawn, and the workmen busily engaged at their labour. The piece of sculpture itself was brought from the docks on a truck drawn by eleven horses, and when it had reached the courtyard was placed on a massive framework of wood, being shored up on either side, as in our engraving, to keep it from swaying over whilst it was being dragged to its place. This operation was skilfully performed, and the process of dragging up the incline into the hall, and the process of dragging up the incline

PARIS FASHIONS FOR MARCH.

Chassepote's announcement, it is a matter of difficulty to recommend the month as unending tulle, all the attention being centred on ball-dresses. The Carnival absorbs public attention, and dancing reigns supreme. Nothing new has appeared for one of doors. We must, therefore, be content with the ball-dress as a guide for the London season about to begin. A few costume balls have also diverted the attention; but there was no costume of particular note. The most remarkable, and also of the best taste, are the exact costumes of those countries which you possess one, and are not overwhelmed by the admirable dress-out. The soldiers of artists who have had the good luck to visit those fortunate countries generally furnish authorities for these balls. The Oriental costumes are the most ostentatious. The ladies of a ball at which we were present were nearly all dressed in this fashion, and not many

the second of net had seeds, edged with rings, lined one with the other; they were alternately of gold and white silk, that of the middle larger than the others, which diminished as they reached the upper part of the tulle. The lower tulle body was trimmed in the same manner with beads, retained by rings of gold and silk. The head-dresses were composed of bunches of gold ribbon and gold grapes. This style, without being overcharged with gold, may be considered as the type of the style of this kind. We should observe, we possess that hat styles are not tolerated; they are longer this year than last, and are more covered with ornaments. Antique styles have not been made with large stripes, and coloured; and the richness of these splendid stuffs could hardly be improved. A few days since dresses appeared with patterns of fowers woven with gold. Unless they be covered with pearls and diamonds, as of yore, we do not think that their splendour could be increased.

The dresses ornamented with gold require head-dresses of the

Reception of Nineveh sculptures at the British Museum, Illustrated London News, 1852. (http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details/collection_image_gallery.aspx?assetId=1285510001&objectId=3498943&partId=1)

In the United States, non-fiction newspaper comic strips were used as early as 1926 to tell the history of the state of Texas. In Europe, factual comics were used from the 1960s to teach younger audiences about history and archaeology, through popular educational publications like the Look and Learn magazine.

The ability of comics to closely interrelate image and text within a coherent narrative makes them ideal for introducing an audience to an unfamiliar subject. The combination of explanation and visual context can convey significant amounts of information in an easy-to-digest format, meaning a comic can unpick a complex subject without “dumbing it down”.

As an archaeological illustrator, I have used informational – or “applied” – comics for the past ten years to explain a wide range of aspects of archaeology: from excavations to landscape surveys, from site preservation to radiocarbon dating, from museum repatriations to community heritage. Comics speak to audiences unfamiliar with archaeology in an engaging and accessible way that makes them ideal for public outreach in a wide range of contexts.

CERAMICS & POLITY

IN THE CASAS GRANDES AREA, CHIHUAHUA, MEXICO

Michael E. Whalen, Department of Anthropology, University of Tulsa
Paul E. Minnis, Department of Anthropology, University of Oklahoma
Illustrated by John G. Swogger

The Casas Grandes area of northwestern Chihuahua, Mexico lies in the southern part of the ancient Pueblo world.

There, Casas Grandes - or Paquimé - long has been known to be the largest and most elaborate community of the Medio Period.

Equally famous are the community's painted ceramics.

The classic type of the Chihuahuan series, in which forms, designs, and treatment were all carried to their highest development in excellence of execution and in variety. 1950-56

... the signature ware of Casas Grandes. 2008-2010

... the hallmark type and the primary focus for Casas Grandes stylistic complexity. (Minnis 2007:3)

Ramos Polychrome is the finest and most complexly decorated of all this pottery. One of the few ceramic traditions of the US Southwest and northern Mexico to use anthropomorphic and zoomorphic imagery in addition to geometric designs. The origins of the pottery, however, always have been obscure. The present study reviews current knowledge of the histories of the area's ceramic types and their design motifs. It presents new data to answer some long-standing questions, and it shows how ceramics helped to structure the Casas Grandes polity.

This painted pottery has attracted much scholarly attention from early days -

- Beck, 1939, The Historical Geography of Northwestern Chihuahua
- Carey 1941, An analysis of North-western Chihuahuan culture.
- Chapman, 1923, Casas Grandes Pottery
- Kiddler, 1916, The Pottery of the Casas Grandes district, Chihuahua.
- Sayles 1936, Some Southwestern pottery types.

to modern times:

- Díffoo, et al. 1974, Casas Grandes, a fallen trading center of the Great Chaco.
- Lukson 2006, The Archaeology of communities: a New World perspective.
- Townsend 2005, Casas Grandes in the art of the ancient Southwest.
- VanPool 2003, The symbolism of Casas Grandes

ARCHAEOLOGY ON CARRIACOU 2014

WEEK TWO

MONDAY 28 JULY

TODAY, EXCAVATION CONTINUES ON THE SKELETON AT POINT BAY. WE'VE REVEALED ENOUGH OF THE BONES TO GET AN IDEA OF THE POSITION OF THE BODY WHEN IT WAS ORIGINALLY BURIED. AT THIS POINT, WE DON'T YET KNOW IF THIS WAS A MAN OR A WOMAN, BUT IT DOES APPEAR TO HAVE BEEN AN ADULT.

UNDERSTANDING THE POSITION OF THE BODY IN AN AMERICAN BURIAL CAN HELP US RECONSTRUCT IDEAS THESE ANCIENT ISLAND PEOPLES HAD ABOUT THINGS LIKE RELIGION, STATUS AND KINSHIP.

TUESDAY 29 JULY

TODAY AT THE GRAND BAY SITE, WE'RE EXCAVATING PORTABLE FEATURES THAT HAVE BEEN REVEALED IN THE WESTERN HALF OF OUR NEW FIVE-METER SQUARE TRENCH.

THESE FEATURES ARE THE REMAINS OF BUILT-UP DUES TO HOLD THE POLES WHICH SUPPORTED CIRCULAR AMBULATORY STRUCTURES.

WEDNESDAY 30 JULY

TODAY'S LECTURE WAS FROM THE PINE ISLES. A VISITING ANTHROPOLOGIST WHOSE RESEARCH LOOKS AT THE IMPACT OF GLOBALIZATION ON TOURISM AND HERITAGE ACROSS THE CARIBBEAN.

EUROPEAN SETTLEMENT IN THE CARIBBEAN DIDN'T END COLONIALISM IN PLACES LIKE NORTH AMERICA. NEEDS TO BEING GREAT MANY SUBJECTS TO LIVE. ALMOST ALL SETTLEMENTS WERE LOCATED ON THE NEW AMERICAS FOR ECONOMIC REASONS. BUT THE CARIBBEAN ISLANDS WERE A FACTORY PROCESS AIMED ONLY AT PROFIT.

THE IMPACT OF NEOLIBERAL ECONOMICS HAS MEANT THAT CARIBBEAN NATIONS CAN NO LONGER NEARLY CONTROL THESE MARKETS - HERITAGE AND TOURISM ARE BEING PURSUED BY ALIENATORS, BUT THIS IS PROMPTING MANY UNEXPECTED CULTURAL AND SOCIAL CHANGES.

Ceramics, Polity and Comics – Page from the 2015 article in *Advances in Archaeological Practice* illustrating the “translation” of an article from *American Antiquity* into a comic. Image courtesy of John Swogger.

Archaeology on Carriacou – Page from 2011-2014 comic series, published as a set of posters distributed on the island of Carriacou, WI. Image courtesy of John Swogger.

The University of Michigan had in its museum collections Native American ancestral remains and cultural items.

In the late 1990s, the University - as required by NAGPRA - made an inventory of their collections...

... and sent a letter to the Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe of Michigan that this inventory and summary process had been completed.

My job was to prepare a statement based on my research, outlining the evidence for cultural affiliation between the tribes represented by NAGPRA and the ancestral remains and cultural items held in the collection.

But I had already determined in 1995 that this material was "culturally unidentifiable" and therefore not legally available for repatriation.

John O'Shea - Archaeologist at the University of Michigan, responsible for NAGPRA compliance.

I'm responsible for these objects and human remains - if we get the process of determining cultural affiliation wrong, then they might get returned to the "wrong" tribe.⁶

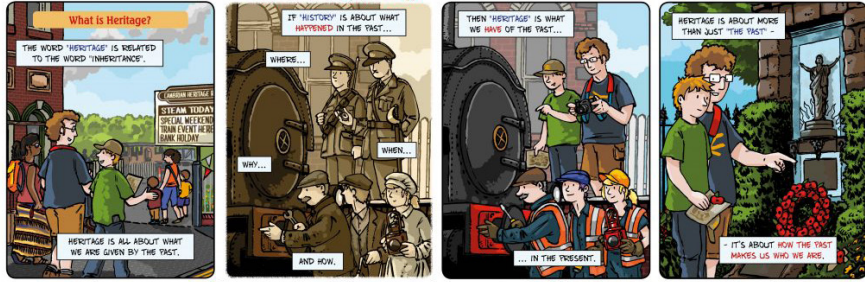
Besides, there's always more that research can tell scientists like myself about this material - particularly as new technologies are developed.⁷

I believe the museum does a good job of caring for the human remains in our collection.⁸

Journeys to Complete the Work – Page from an informational comic about NAGPRA (the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act) aimed at both museums and Native communities explaining how the law works – or, sometimes, doesn't. Image courtesy of John Swogger.

Oswestry HERITAGE

written and illustrated by John G. Swogger

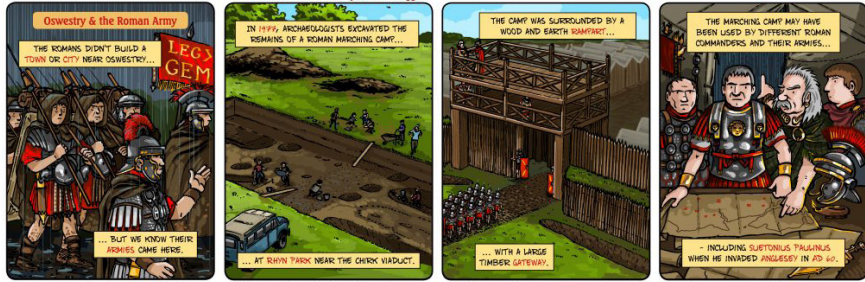


Want to know more? Every week there's information and links to upcoming heritage events and activities on the [Oswestry Heritage Comics Facebook Page](#)

2017/2

Oswestry HERITAGE

written and illustrated by John G. Swogger



National archaeology fortnight starts this Saturday! Find out about the Romans and Rhyn Park excavations on the [Oswestry Heritage Comics Facebook Page](#)

2017/2

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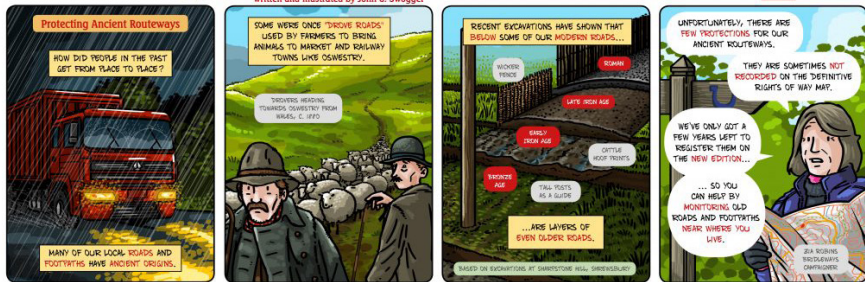


Want to know more? There's more information about the Oswestry Castle Research Project and this year's excavations on the [Oswestry Heritage Comics Facebook Page](#).

2017/4

Oswestry HERITAGE

written and illustrated by John G. Swogger



There's detailed information on how you can help record and preserve our ancient routeways on the [Oswestry Heritage Comics Facebook Page](#).

2017/4

What is Heritage?, Oswestry and the Romans, Oswestry Castle Excavations, Ancient Routeways – Four strips from the series “Oswestry Heritage Comics”, published in the Oswestry & Border Counties Advertiser and on Facebook, Sept. 2016 – June 2018. Project supported by the UK Heritage Lottery Fund. Images courtesy of John Swogger.



Aehtwelighu – Example of a graphic abstract illustrating discussion of cross-border relationships around Offa's Dyke during the Anglo-Saxon period. Image courtesy of John Swogger.

I have created comics about research projects and excavations that have been put up as posters on community noticeboards and local businesses; I have created comics about prehistoric sites that have been used as educational hand-outs for school visits; and I have created comic strips about local heritage, history and archaeology that have been published in local newspapers. Significantly, in all these cases, I have been able to use comics to talk about archaeology in places like shops and supermarkets, schools and local papers – not just museums, visitor centres and archaeological sites. In other words, using comics for public outreach has genuinely allowed me to “reach out” to audiences that might not otherwise engage with archaeological research at all.

But public audiences are only half of the story. I have also used comics to talk to academic audiences and other archaeologists. The principles that make comics so useful for public outreach also make them useful for talking to audiences of one's own peers. They can be used to quickly explain background concepts that guide research, communicate effectively with staff and students on fieldwork projects, and engage with interdisci-

plinary scholars. And I have used such comics to create graphic abstracts for academic papers, to report on the results of research projects, to de-complicate highly technical statistical and analytical approaches, and to illustrate multi-layered social and cultural interpretations. They can supply a much-needed narrative and contextual framework to data provided by excavation, lab analysis, and remote sensing – and even technological visualisation techniques such as 3D scanning and LIDAR. I made this argument in an article in the Society for American Archaeology's journal *Advances in Archaeological Practice* a few years ago – in the form of a comic, of course!

Critical response to my argument has been positive, but still cautious. “Narrative” still suggests “fiction” to many; “comics” suggest something for children. But modern comics are a sophisticated, mature medium, capable of talking seriously about complex and even contentious issues. Authors like Joe Sacco and Art Spiegelman have used comics to talk about the war in Bosnia and the Holocaust; graphic autobiographers such as Peter Dunlap-Shohl have used comics to recount his diagnosis of Parkinson's disease. Such narratives are not aimed at children – nor are they dependent upon gratuitous use of “drama” to make their point.

The growing realisation among archaeologists and anthropologists that comics are a sophisticated and nuanced medium for communicating complex information has resulted in a diverse range of follow-on projects and commissions undertaken for academic clients: comics about heritage and immigration in Scandinavia, comics about the repatriation of ancestral remains to Native American nations, comics used to recruit students to university research projects, and comics as graphical abstracts for academic papers. These are comics designed to meet the communication needs of archaeological scholars, demonstrating that – at least in some quarters – the medium's unique potential for communication beyond public outreach is starting to be recognised.

Although I have worked as an archaeological illustrator all over the world, my background is in the archaeology of the ancient Near East: I was site illustrator for over a decade for the Çatalhöyük Research Project in Anatolia, and have worked on material from Göbekli Tepe, Jericho and have excavated in the Sudan. I am familiar with the issues that make communicating information about the ancient near east to both public and local audiences difficult: the complexity and great time-depth of the archaeology, the convoluted historical, contemporary and political contexts of sites, and the sometimes remote and unfamiliar nature of the way in which archaeological work is carried out.

But it seems to me, too, that the archaeology of the ancient Near East suffers from an additional problem in its public outreach: that of “representational fatigue”. Audiences are perhaps now so used to seeing photographs, paintings, cutaway drawings and 3D models – even filmed reconstructions – of the ancient Near East that I wonder if they have stopped really “seeing” the information they contain. These ways of representing have become so familiar to people that they may think they already know all there is to know about the subject, making it harder to communicate the importance or impact of new research.

Perhaps those who work with this material – whether in the field, in the lab, in the academy or in the museum – could benefit from a new way of taking about their results, process and research? An unexpected way – a way that prompts audiences (both public and academic) to think again about what they think they know about the archaeology of the ancient Near East?

John Swogger is a freelance archaeological illustrator, specialising in finds and reconstruction illustrations for excavation projects, museums and for publication. He was site illustrator for the Çatalhöyük Research Project in Turkey for almost ten years, and now works on sites in the Caribbean, the Pacific, and in Serbia.