



2010 VIA Workshop Report

**Creation, Communication, Circulation, Consumption:
Reflections on the Third VIA Workshop
at the University of Southampton,
21-22 October 2010**

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March 2011



ENGLISH HERITAGE

Visualisation in Archaeology

funded by

English Heritage
under the HEEP scheme.

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Organising Committee: Garry Gibbons, Professor Stephanie Moser and Sara Perry.
Session Chairs: Professor Stephanie Moser, Dr Simon James, Professor Sam Smiles and Dr Graeme Earl.

Sara Perry

Based on commentary from Workshop chairs and participants

The 21st to 22nd of October 2010 marked the culmination of the Visualisation in Archaeology (VIA) project's annual workshops at the University of Southampton. This event -- the third and most experimental of the VIA workshops -- drew together more than 25 scholars and practitioners from around the UK, USA, Canada, South Africa, Holland and Greece. Based on the detailed feedback of more than 15 contributors to the proceedings, the following report reviews the technical and theoretical successes and challenges of the workshop. It speaks to many of those areas of study that have been meaningfully probed by VIA's participants, as well as to some of those areas that still demand further attention. Ultimately, it anticipates a variety of the intellectual issues that are due to be examined at the upcoming VIA International Conference in April 2011, and it makes a case for continuing to invest in the long-term sustenance of this line of enquiry as it relates to both public and academic archaeology.

Planning, Timing, Location, Audience: Technicalities of the Workshop

The 2010 workshop was organised around a series of brief, five-to seven minute position papers spread across four sessions, followed by extended periods of chaired discussion (upwards of 1.5 hours per session). Unlike previous years, participants were specifically invited to contribute to the event, and to target their presentations to the topical interests of the session chairs. The goal here was to assemble a representative body of emerging and established experts (from both within and beyond archaeology) to add conceptual rigour to the proceedings. Thematically, the workshop aimed to interrogate the life-cycle of the archaeological imaging process in four stages -- from Creation to Communication to Circulation to Consumption -- although there was never an intention to view such topics as discrete or mutually-exclusive. Indeed, the objective of the gathering was to move away from the idiosyncratic presentation of individualised case studies, which has been so prevalent at preceding workshops (e.g., see Perry 2009, 2010), in order to purposefully converge

thinking on key areas of disciplinary concern. Moreover, the conference was lived-streamed in an effort to push the conversation beyond the walls of the University of Southampton alone.

Overall, this arrangement evolved in reflexive response to the critical input of past contributors to VIA. Whilst there were hesitations over, for instance, the potential weaknesses and insubstantialities of organising the event around short, fleeting position statements, the final response to the format was overwhelmingly positive. The vast majority of participants appreciated not only the brevity and the attendant sharpness of argument that the five-minute presentation method demanded of speakers, but also the VIA team's willingness to challenge and experiment with the standardised -- usually inflexible -- model of the conference presentation. As one contributor, Wintjes, put it, the workshop "required a substantial shift in how to structure a presentation -- always a good exercise -- and...it was successful in encouraging audience participation to become more prominent." Others referred to the unique enthusiasm and intensity of the event; its "honesty" and focus; and the surge of intellectual and emotional connections made possible by two full days of close engagement between a small group of dedicated thinkers. Beyond critique of a certain number of presentations that extended past the five-minute time limit, the most substantial concern over the position-statement format was whether its success could be replicated in larger venues with greater numbers of attendees (e.g., the 2011 conference).

Where feedback was less aligned and affirmative about the workshop's organisation was in relation to both its live-streaming and the demographic of its presenters. With regards to the former, although some felt that online access to the event provided a significant intellectual advantage to contributors (in the sense of ultimately leading to new contacts and consequential input on content for various speakers); others felt that they had little (or no) advanced knowledge of the intention to film the proceedings. It was suggested that, ethically, it was imperative that future VIA events clearly and repeatedly advertise any live streams, and that organisers be prepared for the possibility that such streams might fundamentally alter and limit the overall dialogue. As one contributor, Russell, noted, a variety of best practice guidelines exist to support and manage web-streaming, and participants should be given the opportunity to opt-out should they so choose. However, interestingly, still other contributors to the 2010 workshop indicated that they would have preferred the streams to be *more* visible -- for example, via posting of the final filmed versions of the sessions on the VIA website for posterity (to facilitate analysis and reflection) -- as well as to be *more* interactive -- for example, via enabling live question and comment feeds into the event.

With regards to demographics, although some felt that the workshop achieved an important balance of perspective between working professionals and university-based scholars, between new and long-standing practitioners, as well as between theory and method; others felt that it did not fully represent the archaeological community -- that it did not achieve a true diversity of viewpoints, and that, instead, it privileged a more progressivist, constructivist philosophy on visualisation in archaeology. One could posit, however, that as the VIA project has ensued, and as general theoretical currents in the discipline have shifted over the past two decades, the number of practitioners who view visualisation as an unmediated affair -- or as a singular descriptive/analytical endeavour disconnected from broader epistemological matters -- has similarly shifted. More likely, as highlighted here, it is clear that the workshop *did* elicit a range of opinions, and that whilst some of these presented themselves briefly at the event, many exposed themselves, in particular, through critical commentary solicited during the assessment phase of the proceedings. Importantly, VIA has aimed not only to take a snapshot of current attitudes towards visualisation in the discipline, but also to intentionally push at the boundaries of those attitudes -- to consider what is and is not possible, and to open up a space of engagement for those who might not typically have an opportunity to contribute to agenda-

setting and intellectual consolidation in the field. It is notable, then, that some of the most passionate and engaged contributors to the workshops have been professional illustrators who have indicated that VIA is the only forum available to them for proactively attempting to negotiate and reshape their practice.

In a similar vein, commentators on the 2010 workshop repeatedly remarked on the international visibility and solidarity that the gathering offered to their work -- pulling them into a world-wide network of knowledge-making and method-sharing. Indeed, multiple speakers went as far as to say that, in their intimacy and mix, the VIA workshops meaningfully impacted on the trajectory of their scholarship and could be explicitly linked to their personal intellectual maturation and career development. Various contributors suggested that a critical next step for the VIA project was to now take its findings and approach beyond the bounds of Southampton and into the broader archaeological/scientific/arts community, for instance through presentations and sessions at professional and academic conferences and related events.

Thematic Trends and Tensions

The topical organisation of the 2010 VIA workshop around the 'life-cycle' of the visualisation process was expressly intended to keep the contributions and ensuing conversation fluid and open, yet still attentive to crucial dimensions of the imaging process. Reaction to such an approach was varied, with most commentators valuing the non-restrictive and overlapping nature of the event, and a handful of others expressing some confusion over its intent and seeming unboundedness. One speaker, Swogger, perhaps captured the overarching sentiment best in writing that the workshop was right in *not* submitting to "any pressure to be more cohesive: leave that for the conferences." In fact, as per various contributors, what has distinguished the VIA workshops from many other professional engagements in archaeology is their commitment to close-knit exchange and debate, *not* stifling conformity to a series of pre-determined subjects. According to both Frankland and Webmoor among others, such collegiality and dynamism is not only increasingly rare in the archaeological sector, but refreshing and galvanising. To lose this energy, then, would be to destroy the essence of VIA itself.

Despite minor concerns over the coherence of the 2010 workshop, it is not the case that the event was so disparate as to avoid recurrent themes. Indeed, two major thematic threads emerged early in the workshop and became recurrent focuses of discussion and debate.

The Intersections of Art and Archaeology

The first of these threads, revolving around art/archaeology intersections, had been raised at VIA at each of the earlier workshops. At the 2010 event, however, it became a dominant element of the conversation, with at least five presentations specifically engaging the theme (Hodgson, Russell, Tully, Wickstead, Wilson). Whilst previous workshops featured isolated examples of artistic responses to archaeological processes or sites, or collaborative projects between archaeologists and artists, the 2010 workshop explored in greater detail the larger issues of control and censorship involved with such interactions (amongst other related topics). Despite the evident relevance of such discussions to future art/archaeology collaborations, it was felt by several participants that undue attention had been placed on this avenue of debate, ultimately privileging contemporary art above the actual practice of archaeology. In fact, various commentators were concerned that 'art' had become confused with the meaning of the term 'visual' at the workshop -- and that its overemphasis here

underscored the apparent lack of diversity among participants (or alternatively, one might postulate, a lack of vocality among non-artists during these conversations).

Furthermore, it was proposed that the art/archaeology conversation exposed an evident bias in intellectual collaborations in the field, wherein *artworks became responses to archaeology*, as opposed to *reciprocal* engagements with, and elaborations of, archaeological practice and theory. There was a predominant sense that this conversation tended to inform art theory far more than archaeological understanding. As such, the privileging of this debate at the workshop was seen to come at the expense of the primary goal of VIA -- i.e., the articulation and negotiation of internal archaeological (rather than extra-disciplinary) discourse around visualisation. Given the seeming lack of reciprocity here, various commentators were concerned that contemporary art/archaeology collaborations were, as yet, not rigorous enough to meaningfully impact on archaeological thinking.

However, such critique was arguably partially assuaged by feedback submitted post-workshop by disconcerted -- but still supportive -- commentators who proposed assorted avenues through which archaeologists and archaeological illustrators might ultimately benefit from contemporary art interactions. As one example, Frankland suggested that in the face of increasingly rigid and realistic ('hyper-real') digital image generation, traditional illustrators might consider exploring highly experimental art-illustrative hybrid work -- as well as more expressive, artistic engagements with their subjects -- as an outlet for imagination and narrative-building in archaeology. Additionally, Swogger put forth the argument that perhaps fine art (as opposed to illustration) might actually *better serve* audiences seeking (and expecting) interactive, immersive, novel, mobile, and graphically rich visual-archaeological productions.

Image as Research

In spite of any potential academic and disciplinary advantages that might eventually be proffered by experimental fusions between art and archaeology, it was pointed out by some contributors to the 2010 workshop (e.g., James, Watterson) that there still seems to be little sense of -- and perhaps even a lack of interest in -- understanding how exactly such engagements might actually feed back into the interpretative discourses of archaeologists themselves. This issue of the relationship between image production (whether artistic, photographic, illustrative, technical, digital, etc.) and the articulation of new research questions and analytical frameworks arguably formed the basis of the second major theme to present itself at the workshop: the promise of images as tools of enquiry.

What is clear from various case studies presented across VIA's workshops and related forums is that the application of visual media can actually help archaeologists to rethink the archaeological record and the constitution of the discipline itself. Such rethinking, however, depends upon *mutual*, reciprocal collaborations between both fieldworkers and visual practitioners. Such has been the recommendation of multiple commentators on the 2010 VIA workshop: that the critical next step in the trajectory of visual studies in archaeology is for archaeologists to actively sponsor experimental visual production in their research agendas. By necessitating visual innovation as part of the process of enquiry -- i.e. by institutionalising it in our departments and grant proposals -- both archaeological research and graphic technique/competency could be reconceptualised to positively feed back upon one another.

Previous VIA workshops (especially 2009) have seen expressions of frustration from practicing archaeological illustrators (and archaeologists themselves) about the lack of freedom available to them as far as image-creation is concerned. As suggested by workshop contributors James and Kirkpatrick, the sources of such angst seem to be manifold -- originating on the one hand from academics who provide strict briefs for their illustrators and

as such allow for no experimentation or artistic interpretation -- and on the other hand from publishers who are inflexible and highly conservative with regards to the types of visuals they reproduce.

In response to this predicament, the 2010 workshop saw an open call for the sponsorship of new imaging methods and objectives in archaeology -- especially their engagement in research contexts wherein visuals might be enabled to operate on par (or at least in tandem) with other academic investigations/methods/tools. In freeing visualisations from their typical subservience to other aspects of the investigative process, workshop commentators (e.g., Smiles) hoped that they might then more fully expose what imaging processes could uniquely offer to archaeology. Moreover, it was suggested that, in some cases, visuals might actually be privileged as the *main focus* of professional archaeological projects. In the same breath, however, others (e.g., Swogger) cautioned that archaeological illustrators often have a tendency towards conservative, traditional modes of representation, hence there was a pressing need to look at the inventions and expertise of the wider visualisation community before venturing forward with such work. Still others (e.g., Webmoor) suggested that the discipline itself *already* had sufficient intellectual and technical capital to pioneer its own novel and distinctive (i.e., unborrowed) forms of (visual) practice/theory, and thus priority should be given to providing archaeologists with the infrastructure and the license to make such innovation possible.

Preparing for 2011 and Beyond

Ultimately, the 2010 workshop has continued to demonstrate that the conceptual concerns of the VIA project are weighty and volatile, and thus *deserve* further enquiry and investment from the professional and academic communities, not the least because they are poised to reshape the boundaries of our practice. Indeed, they already *do* alter our practice on a day-to-day basis, and VIA arguably has a disciplinary obligation to make known this work via a series of scholarly and generally-accessibly publications. What makes VIA unique is its deliberate effort to break down divides (whether real or imagined) between technicians, fieldworkers and researchers; between emerging and established professionals; between theoreticians and technological experts -- in other words, to give all practitioners an equal platform on which to speak and influence the course of the project. This suggests an even broader relevance for VIA's publications/outputs, as they push past the exclusivity of traditional modes of dissemination, into the greater, cross-specialist literature.

Beyond publication, and as per above, there are various directions that future research on visualisation in archaeology could take, including the active and self-conscious integration of visual production into the investigative phase of archaeological enquiry. Following the feedback of Frankland, James, Kirkpatrick, Smiles, Watterson, Webmoor and Wilson, the opportunity is ripe for practitioners to study precisely how archaeologists are actually working with visual materials, and precisely how audiences (both specialist and non-specialist) are seeing and responding to such materials. VIA itself could sponsor a travelling or web-based exhibition of examples of *specific* problems encountered in navigating the visualisation process. It could support a long-term (online, moderated) forum within which practitioners might initiate their own conversations and build their own communities and research agendas. Or more specifically, it could aim to continue to convene dedicated workshops on underexplored topics, for example, the challenges, crafts, and theoretical futures of digital archaeological visualisation. Alongside such efforts, participants felt it imperative to support the more widespread, direct communication of the results of VIA both within and beyond the archaeological community. This might include -- but is not limited to -- presentations or the organisation of sessions at professional conferences in archaeology, the history of science, art history, visual studies, and/or anthropology.

The upcoming April 2011 international conference is poised to grapple in more depth with some of the critical subject areas that have simmered at the 2010 workshop. It remains to be seen whether the intimacy and intellectual invigoration of VIA's workshops can be carried into a larger-scale venue. Nevertheless, VIA has clearly hit a nerve, as the conference's calls for contributions have attracted upwards of 100 responses. With the final programme set to feature more than 50 presenters from 18 countries involved in all aspects of the visualisation process (from computer programming to fine art production to non-specialist image circulation) the project continues to devote itself to inclusivity, variety and discipline-leading experimentation with format and concept.

Acknowledgements

This report is indebted to the contributions made by all delegates to the 2010 VIA workshop: Martyn Barber, Steve Cheshire, Graeme Earl, Tom Frankland, Garry Gibbons, Sudeshna Guha, Janet Hodgson, Simon James, Nessa Leibhammer, Kate Giles, Ian Kirkpatrick, Stephanie Moser, Konstantinos Papadopoulos, Angela Piccini, Jason Quinlan, Rob Read, Ian Russell, Sam Smiles, John Swogger, Gemma Tully, Alice Watterson, Timothy Webmoor, Helen Wickstead, Kelvin Wilson, and Justine Wintjes. But particular thanks are extended to those who took the time to provide detailed feedback on the successes and challenges of the event.