

Introduction

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The meeting at which the papers of this volume were presented was one of several jointly organised by the Royal Society and the British Academy, the first being ‘*The Impact of the Natural Sciences on Archaeology*’ in 1969. The emphasis at that meeting was on the unique way in which dating techniques based in the natural sciences was providing the chronological framework for prehistoric archaeology—the trains were being provided with timetables, using the allegory of Sir Mortimer Wheeler. With that process now well established, but nonetheless still of vital importance and with dating techniques ever more refined and ingenious, the organisers of this 1991 meeting felt it appropriate to give priority to the views through the semi-opaque train windows which the natural sciences were revealing, as it were. So it was decided that dating techniques should be represented by posters—of which a list is given in the Appendix to this volume—and these did indeed stimulate substantial interest and discussion. Even so there was an *embarras du choix* and the programme represented only a selection of what might have been included; also, the focus was primarily on developments that had already borne archaeological fruit rather than those no further advanced than holding potential for the future.

The wealth of possible material for the meeting is in large part due to a revolution in the funding of archaeological science that began in the seventies. Following the 1969 meeting a report was prepared by Derek Allen and Martyn Jope, both of the British Academy, making the case for the infusion of science money into this hybrid field. In due course this was accepted by the Science Research Council, then under the chairmanship of Sir Sam Edwards, and research council funding, large to us in this field but small by comparison with the needs of big science, continues to the present despite economic vicissitudes. We should be grateful to those named above, and others, for their initial efforts as well as to successive research council chairmen who

have looked upon us with a kindly eye. I say 'we' meaning those of other countries too because I believe that the funding initiatives in the United Kingdom were a trigger for similar action in many of the major countries of the world.

Finally I would like to recall an earlier volume on archaeological science that was placed on my desk by Christopher Hawkes when I took up my post at the Oxford University Research Laboratory for Archaeology some 34 years ago. *La Découverte du Passé*, published in 1952 by Picard (Paris) under the editorship of A. Laming, gave a remarkable foretaste of the richness and diversity of the archaeological science field as it now is. When the history of our subject comes to be written it will surely be recognised as an early, if not the earliest, milestone.