Conclusion

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Abstract and Keywords

The Conclusion draws together arguments made across this work to place John Aubrey within a tradition of northern European antiquarianism, one exemplified elsewhere by scholars such as the Dane Ole Worm, the Dutchman Marcus Zuerius van Boxhorn, the Swede Olof Rudbeck, and the Frenchman Jean Mabillon. Rooted in the classical world, Aubrey nonetheless devoted the greater part of his life to studying ancient Britain, a near-textless, non-classical ancient past which led him to sources as widely divergent as megaliths, folk customs, and Roman poets. In his polymathy, his fascination with origins, and his concerns over the fleeting nature of historical evidence he can be seen as a case study in the antiquarianism of the seventeenth century.

Keywords: antiquarianism, John Aubrey, northern European antiquarianism, Ole Worm, Olof Rudbeck
In the polymathic variety of Aubrey’s antiquarian writings two desires stand out: to recover the links which bound seventeenth-century England to its ancient past, and to preserve present knowledge which would otherwise fade away. That first impulse, to recover and restore, had an illustrious pedigree dating back to—and before—William Camden’s resolution in the preface to his *Britannia* that ‘I would restore antiquity to Britaine, and Britain to his antiquity.’¹ Aubrey, who had at times conceived of his work as complementing or even supplementing the great restoration project undertaken by Camden, was participating in the same tradition: mapping, sketching, measuring, describing, collecting, and theorizing the forgotten past into being. In his determination to find connections to the ancient world in sources as diverse as standing stones, hill forts, burial mounds, folk customs, place names, and the landscape itself, he was recovering occluded links which he knew were there, links which would tie the quotidian society of the Restoration back to an almost mythical time of Druids, Homeric warriors, and Roman legions.

That urge to recover what was forgotten, the impulse behind texts such as the *Monumenta Britannica* and *Remaines of Gentilisme*, was one product of a volition which also resulted in Aubrey becoming acutely aware of what was being lost, every day and all around him. As a member of the Royal Society he sought out the papers of deceased scholars and attempted to rescue what he could before the pie-makers claimed them. As a biographer and practitioner of *historia literaria* he preserved the specificities of his contemporaries’ lives, holding in his mind the dictum that ‘Men thinke, because every body remembers a memorable Accident shortly after ‘tis done, ’twill never be forgotten, which for want of writing ... at last is drowned in Oblivion.’² Even strolling through the crowded London streets he could suddenly and painfully be struck by the evanescence of things, such as when he came across a remnant of the (p.155) sumptuous monument erected by Sir Kenelm Digby to his wife Venetia Stanley and later, or so Aubrey had believed, ‘utterly destroyed by the great conflagration’:
About 1676, or 5, as I was walking through Newgate street, I sawe Dame Venetia’s Bust standing at a Stall at the golden Crosse, a Brasiers shop; I perfectly remembred it; but the fire had gott-off the Guilding: but taking notice of it to one that was with me, I could never see it afterwards exposed to the street. They melted it downe. How these curiosities would be quite forgott, did not such idle fellowes as I am putt them downe!  

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Despite his self-deprecation, Aubrey passionately believed in the value of what he was doing. He ‘perfectly remembred’ much that was lost and more that soon would be; the violent discontinuity of the Civil Wars had ensured that, if nothing else. Moreover, he was convinced that while some people—people like his erstwhile collaborator Richard Blackburne—might find his records of seemingly trivial things unnecessary or unpleasant, ‘a hundred yeere hence that minutenesse will be gratefull’.  

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These twin goals of recording and preserving informed Aubrey’s characteristic methodologies: minuteness and analogy. By minuteness Aubrey meant the recording of detail. That detail could be the physical and mental peculiarities of his biographical subjects, circumstantial accounts of the practice of folk traditions, or surveys and sketches of Roman camps. This, Aubrey believed, was the kind of data most easily lost and most worth preserving. Minuteness led to mensurability and to the naturalization of data into a framework where it could be examined and compared, as in the case of Gothic window styles in the Chronologia Architectonica: recording their minute variations led to the ability to distinguish one style from another and so, ultimately, to securely date hitherto undateable structures.
The dating of windows only became possible, however, because Aubrey adhered to the principles not just of minuteness but also analogy. This could be as simple as saying ‘x is similar to y’ or, more subtly, ‘x is similar to y except in z’, but Aubrey was well aware of the power inherent in what he described as ‘comparative antiquitie’. In the context of megaliths he described his comparative method in mathematical terms: he would ‘restore a kind of Algebraical method, by comparing [those monuments] that I have seen one with another; and reducing them to a kind of \( \mathbb{AE} \) (p.156) equation’. In other words, comparatism had the potential to generate new information simply from the examination of two things in tandem; when presented with a series of ancient monuments, some already well understood, others not, one could make sense of the obscure monuments through the lens of those already explicated. Aubrey was not alone in using comparative methods for antiquarian purposes, but where his contemporaries tended to apply such methods to issues of culture and religion, he was unusual in focusing them principally on physical artefacts and sites. This focus in turn led him to realize the power of placing objects in a chronological series. His *Chronologiae*, especially the *Architectonica* and the *Graphica*, represent pioneering ways of thinking about objects in history, ways which utilized both minuteness and comparatism to develop a diachronic framework against which new discoveries could be compared and into which they could be slotted. Aubrey’s awareness of difference and change, exemplified in his pained recollection of Venetia Stanley’s bust, could be harnessed as a series of powerful tools for understanding the past.
These desires and methods both informed and were informed by what we might call Aubrey’s ‘worldview’, the particular vision of history and cultural development which gradually emerges from a reading of his works. Building upon Robert Hooke’s lectures on earthquakes, Athanasius Kircher’s *Mundus Subterraneaus*, and other works of natural philosophy, Aubrey had no compunctions stating that ‘the world is much older, than is commonly supposed’. An ancient earth did not necessarily mean pre-diluvian civilizations, much less pre-Adamites, however, and his human history began with the Ark and Babel. In this latter view he was neither radical nor unduly conservative, but rather represented the main line of contemporary thought. Following on from this, he was a syncretist in ancient history, seeing links between Rome and Egypt, Greece and Britain, as all cultures had had a relatively recent origin in post-Babelic humanity. This comes through most clearly in texts like ‘Of Mausolea’, where a history of architecture could begin with Babel, and the *Remaines of Gentilisme*, where parallels to almost any religious custom or tradition could be found sometime or somewhere else, be it in ancient Egypt or rural Yorkshire.

(p.157) Ancient Britain was a part of this post-Babelic civilization. In ‘Of Mausolea’ Aubrey compared the artificial mound at Silbury Hill in Wiltshire to the ruins of Babel and Chinese burial mounds, just as he compared megaliths to the tomb of Lars Porsenna. This ancient British culture was defined for him by its Druids and what he took to be their temples: the stone circles at Stonehenge, Avebury, and in many locations across Britain. In line with his comparatism elsewhere, Aubrey seems to have imagined this culture as being not unlike that of Homeric Greece, with its hierarchical society of priests and warriors ruled over by ‘several Reguli, which often made wars upon one another’. It could be known only through the traces it left in the landscape—ditches, mounds, standing stones, and other human interventions—and existed in a misty, timeless era after Babel but before the arrival of the Romans.
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The incoming of the Romans represented a turning point for British antiquaries, not just because of the cultural capital they brought to remote Britannia, but because of the composition of what were some of the earliest textual accounts of Britain and its inhabitants. For early modern Scots their paradigmatic text was Tacitus’s *Agricola* and much ink was spilt over the locations of places, the identities of tribes, and the success or lack thereof of Gnaeus Julius Agricola’s invasion of the northerly parts of the island.\(^\text{11}\) For English antiquaries of the same period, the text to study was Julius Caesar’s *Commentaries*: Camden had put great emphasis on Caesar as a source for ancient Britain and early in his career Aubrey followed suit, happily identifying all manner of camps, hill forts, and burial mounds as places associated with the Roman leader’s progress through southern England. As Aubrey’s ideas developed, however, this gave way to a more historically aware sense of Roman Britain on his part, as later references to rebuilding projects by Theodosius in the fourth century CE show.\(^\text{12}\) The Romans were not simply invaders, but ‘settled here, & mixt with the Britons’.\(^\text{13}\) Aubrey was echoing the genetic language of Camden, who had rhapsodized that the Romans, ‘both planted themselves, and also begat children here ... [a]nd meet it is we should beleev, that the Britans and Romans in so many ages, by a blessed and joyfull mutuall ingrassing, as it were, have growen into one stocke and nation’.\(^\text{14}\) For both men the Romans mattered because they were Romans, but also because they were the ancestors of modern Britons.
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Or were they? Aubrey was all too acutely aware of the great chasm between the ancient world and the modern, a chasm he knew with absolute conviction had been caused by barbarians like the Goths and the Saxons. The ‘inundation of the Goths’ was to Aubrey more a natural disaster than a human event, one which ‘seemed to come to hasten time and precipitate the end of the world’. Taste, architecture, even writing were destroyed or under threat and civilization was pushed to the verge of collapse. What followed, in Aubrey’s eyes, was little better: the occupation of Britain by the Saxons. With them came ignorance, barbarism, and a breakdown of all social distinctions: ‘their very Kings were but a sort of Farmers’. Partly because of his self-identification with the Welsh, who he believed were descended from Romanized Britons, Aubrey had little patience for the Saxon interlopers and was particularly unimpressed by their alleged inability to build proper stone buildings. He went against the antiquarian fashion of the times, did not learn Anglo-Saxon (though he had at least some knowledge of Welsh, a far more unusual language to have), and resisted giving any role in the development of English civilization to what he believed was a culture of dim-witted, ale-soaked farmers.
For many seventeenth-century English antiquaries the period from the Norman Conquest to the Reformation lay at the centre of their research, but Aubrey touched upon the later Middle Ages only lightly, using its architecture in the *Chronologia Architectonica* and collecting medieval charters and monumental inscriptions in his county histories of Wiltshire and Surrey.\(^{17}\) He was far more interested in the recent past, when humanism had spread into England from the continent, bringing with it new inventions, neo-classical architecture, the advancement of mathematics and natural philosophy, and a host of other topics which he addressed in the *Stromata*, the *Lives*, and elsewhere. This was the ‘Old Time’ of Aubrey’s *Remaines*, when England existed between two worlds, the ancient, half-pagan vision of the folk customs he had collected, and the scintillating possibilities developed by scholars like the Elizabethan magus John Dee or his contemporary the mathematician Leonard Digges.\(^{18}\) It was the rural Wiltshire world of his grandfather Isaac Lyte, \((p.159)\) which reappears over and over again in his writings, tinged with the melancholy of childhood loss, and which Aubrey knew had been cast beyond reach by the cultural discontinuity of the Civil Wars. Since then, ‘the old Roman fashion is become the common Mode’ and the modern world, Aubrey’s world, had flowered fully into being: a neo-classical age of progress when coffee houses allowed men to be properly sociable for the first time and ‘ingeniose’ persons could pursue natural philosophy and antiquities in a (mostly) congenial environment.\(^{19}\)
This grand historical narrative is, of course, an eccentric one and it is doubtful if Aubrey would have expressed himself quite so strongly had he been set the task of writing a general history of mankind. These were not the parts of a fully articulated theory, but rather assumptions, prejudices, and preconceptions which reappeared throughout his works, informing them almost without Aubrey himself being aware that they did so. These preconceptions defined his scholarship, ensuring that he focused on ancient Britons and Romans at the expense of Anglo-Saxons for example, but were also themselves defined by the nature of his work. His fascination with physical artefacts and sites led him to the poorly understood ancient landscape of England. Meanwhile his ear for, and sympathy with, a vanishing system of folk knowledge, combined with his steeping in classical literature, laid the foundations for the *Remaines*. Aubrey was a humanist scholar who experienced the world through phrases from Ovid and Horace, Cicero and Homer; living in a country only lightly touched by that culture, he mentally reshaped it through classical lenses until not only were the English descendants of the Romans but his own dreamt-of Wiltshire villa looked out upon Italian vistas.
Aubrey is often portrayed as being somehow unusual, though whether that is presented as innovation or eccentricity depends upon the critic. He certainly did not fit neatly into that English antiquarian tradition which focused on local history in the Camdenian style. Although he attempted two county histories in the tradition of William Dugdale, William Burton, and Sampson Erdeswick, he found the gathering of old documents and the copying of texts not to his taste; ‘I am tyred with transcribing’, he wrote of reproducing a passage from Walter Charleton’s *Chorea Gigantum*, ‘[in] this hot weather’. Nor was he a grammar-making, text-editing philologist like the antiquaries who flourished in Oxford and Cambridge during the salad days of Restoration scholarship. His disdain for the Anglo-Saxons could hardly lead him into the arms of George Hickes and his Septentrionalists, but nor did his interests—or linguistic abilities—extend to the esoteric deeps of Arabic and Hellenistic scholarship then being plumbed by men such as Edward Pococke and Edward Bernard. While he shared certain prejudices with Welsh antiquaries from the school of Robert Vaughan of Hengwrt, he was no more like them than like Hickes or Dugdale; he did not collect manuscripts, draw pedigrees, or focus on the medieval Welsh world.

This inability to pigeonhole Aubrey and his activities within a comfortably parochial English landscape has lain behind many of the claims that he was an outlier of one sort or another. But in antiquarianism, as in other branches of humanist scholarship, it is dangerous to limit the field of enquiry to a single modern nation. If we are in search of a model which Aubrey could have looked to, we need look no further than the Danish polymath Ole Worm, whose *Danicorum monumentorum libri sex* (1643) inspired the title of the *Monumenta Britannica*. Worm’s influence on Aubrey is traceable through the regular citations which appear in the latter’s manuscripts and his methodological inheritance is writ large across Aubrey’s approach to sites and artefacts. The two scholars shared practices of surveying, comparitism, attention to minuteness, and a willingness to go beyond the written word as well as both turning their attention to the ancient landscapes of their respective countries. The place which Camden occupied in the intellectual genealogies of so many English antiquaries was occupied in Aubrey’s case by Worm.
Seeking parallels amongst Aubrey’s continental contemporaries is equally fruitful. His philological interests echo those of the Dutch scholar Marcus Zuerius van Boxhorn, who was also well received by Welsh antiquaries of Aubrey’s acquaintance. His biographical writings partook of a number of continental traditions: historia literaria, collections of sayings by famous men, and intimate biography along the lines of Gassendi’s Life of Peiresc. His Chronologia Graphica was composed almost simultaneously with Jean Mabillon’s better-known De re diplomatica. More than anyone, though, Aubrey resembles Olof Rudbeck. The comparison is a strange one to modern eyes, given that Aubrey has been consistently identified as a ‘pioneer’ or ‘precursor’ of modern archaeology, while Rudbeck is seen simply as an interesting, but mad, curiosity, a scholarly dead end and cautionary tale. The two scholars had much in common, however. Each wrote his magnum opus on the prehistory of their respective countries, each developed radical new methods for understanding non-textual artefacts and sites, each drew upon a mixture of archaeological, oral, and textual sources, and each built towering scholarly frameworks to justify essentially nationalist assumptions about the past. Aubrey becomes less an eccentric and more a participant in the mainstream of northern European scholarship once he is situated alongside the likes of Worm and Boxhorn, Mabillon and Rudbeck.
A better understanding of Aubrey and his continental contemporaries sheds a different light on the stories told about antiquarianism’s evolution. In 1950 Arnaldo Momigliano drew a memorable pen-portrait of the changes which came about during the eighteenth century, when antiquarianism ‘was fostered by gentlemen rather than by schoolmasters’, men who ‘preferred travel to the emendation of texts and altogether subordinated literary texts to coins, statues, vases and inscriptions’. This and subsequent expansions on the same theme have articulated a gradual shift from text-based to artefact-based antiquarianism, one that ended with the development of modern history and archaeology. But there are good reasons for questioning the universal validity of such a narrative, firmly located as it is in classical antiquarianism, especially as practised in Italy and elsewhere in southern Europe. Aubrey and the Danish, Swedish, Dutch, and French scholars working on what Peter Burke has described as the ‘third antiquity’, that of the barbarians, were forced by necessity to approach their topic differently. As Alain Schnapp has shown, even before the Reformation German scholars such as Nicolaus Marschalk were excavating burial mounds and sketching megaliths. Aubrey was doing something novel by attempting a systematic national survey of sites, but the idea of recovering history from non-textual materials was not new in northern European antiquarianism. If anything, Aubrey was more innovative in his late turn towards philology, inaugurating a tradition combining it with the study of sites which Edward Lhuyd would go on to develop further. Aubrey’s antiquarian scholarship serves as a case study in the many varieties of antiquarianism possible in early modern Europe and of the different ways in which their foci and methodologies evolved. By questioning the idea of any single antiquarian tradition across Europe, it is possible to recover a multitude of traditions, and to identify the particular one in which Aubrey took part. This was, above all, an attempt to make sense of a near-textless, non-classical ancient past through a variety of artefacts and sites, while nonetheless inevitably returning to the classical world as inspiration, analogy, and ideal, all the time feverishly working to preserve an ephemeral and fast-disappearing present.

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(2) Bodleian MS Aubrey 9, fol. 29r (= Aubrey, ‘Hobbes’, i. 18).


(4) Bodleian MS Wood F 39, fol. 340r.


(10) Bodleian MS Aubrey 3, fol. 10r.


(13) Bodleian MS Aubrey 5, fol. 19ar.


(16) Bodleian MS Aubrey 3, fol. 10v.

(17) See Bodleian MSS Aubrey 3–4 and Chapter 3.


(19) Bodleian MS Top. Gen. c. 25, fol. 169r. For the beneficial effects of coffee houses p. 111.
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(20) Jan Broadway, ‘No historie so meete’: *Gentry Culture and the Development of Local History in Elizabethan and Early Stuart England* (Manchester and New York, 2006).


(23) Bodleian MS Wood F 39, fol. 340r.

(24) *Monumenta* Aubrey also knew Worm’s record of his own collections, the *Museum Wormianum, seu historia rerum rariorum* (Leiden, 1655),


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