



# SOCIETY OF ANTIQUARIES OF LONDON

Burlington House

Piccadilly

London W1J 0BE

Mr Ben Frow,  
Director of Programming,  
Channel 5 Television,  
10 Lower Thames,  
London  
EC3R 6EN

2 February 2016

Dear Mr. Frow

**RE: “Battlefield Recovery”**

The Society of Antiquaries of London is the senior national Learned Society in Britain concerned with the study and understanding of the past and is a registered charity. Founded in 1707, the Society is charged by its Royal Charter of 1751 with ‘the encouragement, advancement and furtherance of the study and knowledge of the antiquities and history of this and other countries’. Our Statement of Values today ([www.sal.org.uk/about-us/Statement\\_of\\_Values.pdf](http://www.sal.org.uk/about-us/Statement_of_Values.pdf)) recognizes that understanding the past is relevant to present and future generations and that research and debate about, and respect and appreciation for, the material remains of the past are fundamental to our understanding of ourselves. Safeguarding, protecting and disseminating knowledge about heritage are thus important for the world today.

We are writing to you to express our great concern and dismay about the Channel 5 series *Battlefield Recovery*. This programme was brought to our attention by a number of our Fellows and, having seen the three episodes screened so far, we are writing to you to object to the appalling standards of work and insensitive treatment of remains that are portrayed in the films. They bring the excavation of battlefields (whether described as archaeology or recovery) into disrepute. These poor practices, some of which would be deemed illegal in the UK, are being shown in the most congratulatory manner on prime time television. As battlefield archaeology is a well-developed discipline with respected specialists and some exemplary practice, there is no excuse for work of this standard, nor its positive publicity in the media.

Our main criticism centres on the treatment of the human remains discovered. These were recovered with little or no care, certainly destroying important evidence about the human beings buried and how they died (for example, some of the bones were pulled individually out of the ground as though they were potatoes, and little or no attention seems to have been given to recovering all the skeletal remains, particularly in Episode 2). The bodies were excavated in front of the camera in a most undignified and disrespectful manner, and there was no effort to collect evidence, such as DNA, in order to attempt to trace living relatives (as has proved possible on a number of recent excavations).

Other finds recovered were also treated in a cavalier fashion, being brushed and washed on site, for example, with total disregard for the impact on their future survival; sacrificial victims for the camera. The wallet containing coins and other fragments that were tipped out onto a nearby table in Episode 3 is another good example. Although there were caveats shown on screen stating that finds were being recorded, there was no evidence of plotting and planning and no apparent attempt to sieve the soil to find smaller, non-metallic items. The way that ordnance was treated exemplified the naive and gung-ho attitudes of the protagonists; it was also very dangerous and would be illegal in the UK. It is so disappointing that opportunities have been lost to learn so much more about battlefield conditions and how the individuals who died spent the ends of their lives.

Additional concerns relate to the inability of the main characters to recognise features such as grave edges, and the sides and bottoms of trenches: basic archaeological technique. As a result they made their jobs much harder and the chances of understanding the sites and the circumstances of finds deposition almost impossible. The work was also extremely dangerous at times. This was apparent particularly in the excavations in Latvia in Episode 1, where a mechanical excavator was sitting on the top edge of a deep trench, in and around which people were working without any safety clothing/equipment even when they were standing next to the machine bucket. This contravenes not just British Health and Safety legislation but also European Union directives. A serious accident could easily have ensued.

The broadcast of these programmes, which condone unacceptable standards and a gung-ho approach to battlefield recovery, is at best misleading and in extremely bad taste, creating a poor impression of battlefield archaeology. At worst, it has not only precluded a proper investigation of these sites, but encourages others to operate in a similar, cavalier fashion. We hope that you will cease to show further episodes of this programme.

Yours sincerely



John S.C. Lewis FSA

General Secretary

On behalf of the Society of Antiquaries of London.