

# Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



Museum of London Archaeology (MOLA) Team. MOLA

S. P. Cerasano

Volume 46, numéro 3-4, été–automne 2023

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1110388ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v46i3.42691>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (imprimé)

2293-7374 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Cerasano, S. (2023). Compte rendu de [Museum of London Archaeology (MOLA) Team. MOLA]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 46(3-4), 481–486. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v46i3.42691>

© S. P. Cerasano, 2024



Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

éru  
dit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

## Digital Resource Reviews / Comptes rendus sur les ressources numériques

### **Museum of London Archaeology (MOLA) Team.**

#### **MOLA.**

London: Museum of London Archaeology Service, 2004–. Accessed 26 May 2023.

[mola.org.uk/blog](http://mola.org.uk/blog).

Most of the sources reviewed by *EMDR* are projects or databases centring on persons (e.g., the Medici), or a general academic interest (e.g., Women's Early Modern Letters Online), or even a fascination with a historic location (e.g., Hidden Florence). By contrast, the Museum of London Archaeology (MOLA) blog serves multiple purposes and is designed to speak to a diverse audience. It is simultaneously a scrapbook in which to archive news reports, a display cabinet for ongoing excavations, a kiosk for upcoming public events, a showcase for interviews with noted staff members, an educational file folder, and a virtual bookstall in which to market MOLA's latest publications. But even this description does not do justice to the full variety of materials posted on the blog, which seems to bear the burden of providing the one and only place for a complex organization to interface with the public.

The access point for the blog is easy to identify on MOLA's home page because there is a dedicated tab identifying it in the navigation bar. Searching within the blog itself can be performed in a few different ways. In the upper right corner of the main blog page is a universal search bar with a magnifying glass, and on the left side of the page every blog post (spanning the years from 2004 to 2023) has been organized into 28 topical categories, arranged alphabetically, with the number of tagged posts alongside each subject. To cite a few examples, the user encounters "Artefacts (112)," "Built heritage (47)," "Ecofacts (16)," "Medieval (47)," "News (221)," "Publications (28)," "Roman (78)," and "Science (46)." Beneath this is a "Filter by year" section that also allows browsing by individual calendar year. To the right, as is the custom with any online blog, are the latest postings organized in reverse chronology (the newest first) without regard to a more specific area of interest. Individual posts are identified by a short title, the name(s) of the author(s) or simply "MOLA

team,” and the date. A link takes the user to the material on offer, which varies greatly in length and purpose. On the day that I accessed the site for the final time, the most recent post was from 11 May 2023. Browsing back through previous years indicated that some periods offered a wealth of postings while others were sparsely annotated. Generally speaking, the blog exhibits the work of MOLA, a sprawling organization, or, as they characterize themselves, “an experienced and innovative archaeology and built heritage practice.” They also identify themselves as “an education charity” while maintaining a profile as an independent research group. With all of this in play, an unusual mix of responsibilities, priorities, and choices governs the content on the blog. Even within a category as seemingly well defined as “theatres,” the selections are much broader and wider ranging than might be expected.

The content related to early modern theatres is all organized under the category labelled “Shakespeare (27)” in the “Filter by tag” list. It can also be accessed from the list in large typeface below the calendar years on the left side of the main page (titled “More Blogs”), where the focus is on those subjects that regularly draw a lot of attention. (Unhappily, I tried the link labelled “MOLA Shakespeare Posts” several times and it didn’t respond; however, “Shakespeare (27)” worked perfectly well.) The oldest entry in the Shakespeare category, dated 4 August 2008, announced that MOLA had undertaken a survey of the former Grade II\* listed Royal Shakespeare Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon. A brief but instructive history of the building (with a description of plans for the intended renovation of the structure, now completed) is provided. By contrast, the most recent entries are from 25 September and 28 October 2019, when preliminary excavations of the “Shakespearean-era” (their words) Boar’s Head Playhouse in Whitechapel were just beginning. A short historical sketch of the playhouse, the acting company that occupied it, and the company’s repertory are offered in the first post. There follows a note that the archaeologists hoped to find relics from performers and spectators, and that most of the work would target “areas of the playhouse’s structure, including the galleries on the eastern side of the stage.” Whatever scientific finds proved important “would be preserved in-situ within the footprint of the development” (in this case, a student housing unit). In the October update, readers learn that the dig led to “some fascinating discoveries,” chief of which was the discovery of an eighteenth-century kiln used to make clay pipes, which MOLA promises will lead to a better understanding of this

area of London. No further updates regarding theatrical discoveries at this location have been posted in the interim, however.

The most informative cluster of blog posts centres on the explorations of two playhouse sites located in Shoreditch—The Theatre and the Curtain Theatre—with which Shakespeare was definitely associated. Fortunately, MOLA teams were able to locate the foundations of both structures, despite the fact that the specific placement of The Theatre was less well known. The Theatre (built as the earlier entertainment space) is the subject of a handful of posts written over a 10-year period. The first, from 6 August 2008, is a short announcement regarding the discovery phase, which occurred while the site was under excavation for the building of a new playhouse by the Tower Theatre Company. There follows another posting (6 March 2009) in which the discovery is confirmed. On 29 June 2010, readers are informed that the excavation has resumed, in collaboration with English Heritage ([english-heritage.org.uk](http://english-heritage.org.uk)), and is being funded by the Tower Theatre Company. Two years later, on 25 June 2012, readers learn that MOLA has teamed up with Cloak and Dagger Studios to create an animated model of the playhouse. Finally, in a post from 29 August 2018, readers learn that new evidence has been gathered from the excavation that will be incorporated into part of the new building planned for the site. (There is a promise that it will be opened towards the end of 2019, and that the material culture found by MOLA will be the subject of an in-house museum space. Again, readers are left to wonder what state the project has reached today.) The earliest and latest reports are complemented by some intriguing black-and-white photographs showing archaeologists uncovering the foundations of structures.<sup>1</sup>

The Curtain Theatre is the subject of a greater number of blog posts that explore excavations from 6 June 2012 through 30 January 2018. Here the archaeologists' work yielded some of the most exciting results. Instead of a traditional polygonal wooden structure, the Curtain turned out to be a rectangular brick building. Consequently, more effort seems to have gone

1. The documentation of artefacts revealed from The Theatre site was limited to a pottery sherd and a common beaker shown in a separate, earlier posting on 22 March 2016. Entitled "Shakespearean Playhouses in Four Archaeological Artefacts," the bulletin features a leather shoe found during the Rose Playhouse excavation in 1988–89 and a small cannonball of the type that "would have been part of the Tudor special effects department." The provenance of the latter is not identified, but the accompanying photographs are valuable.

into apprising readers of the most recent discoveries as they occurred. None of the bulletins are very technical, but some details are revealed. Additional announcements include publicity for events happening on or near the site, but notwithstanding all that was uncovered by MOLA's research, the stream of posts slowed down after a while and eventually stopped.

The "MOLA team" is overwhelmingly identified as the author of the blog posts in the Shakespeare category, and many entries are constructed using a similar format. Frequently, the historical background of the playhouses is foregrounded to a greater extent than the technicalities of the archaeological discoveries. The result is that any real knowledge of the excavations needs to be referenced from external MOLA publications. However, little regarding *The Theatre* or *the Curtain* has been published at the time of this writing. (Meanwhile, most prior MOLA publications on early theatres, such as the *Rose*, are unfortunately out of print.)

In sum, the MOLA blog consists primarily of brief reports describing present happenings. For this purpose alone, the blog is useful in that it provides a window into the timeline of how some excavations unfolded. At the same time, the lack of timely updates makes it a bit unclear as to whether the "early theatres" section is really "live" or not, so readers are left wondering what the state of some work really is. It would also be helpful if the authors did a bit more fact-checking. In an 8 April 2016 posting by archaeologist James Wright, there is the unqualified statement that Shakespeare's *Henry V* "premiered at the Curtain Theatre in 1599." This is open to question. The play is thought to have been written sometime in 1599, and we know that Shakespeare's company built the first Globe Theatre within the opening few months of that same year. Why, then, would the company have premiered the play at the old Curtain when they had a new playhouse in which to stage Shakespeare's latest material? Especially when it seemed—in line with what we know of other playhouses—to have been the custom for acting companies to commission many new plays specifically for the opening of a new playhouse.

Additional problems are raised in a subsequent posting of 23 June 2016 "from archaeologist Brigid Geist" (but, somewhat confusingly, posted by Sarah Trehy) in which the general argument is made that the "difference between a playhouse and a theatre is essentially whether the venue is open to the elements (a playhouse), or closed (a theatre)." This isn't exactly the case as demonstrated by two well-known contemporary playhouses. In 1619, the officials

of the Blackfriars precinct complained to the Corporation of London officials about “a common Play-house” in reference to the *closed* entertainment space renovated by the King’s Men (Shakespeare’s company) in the Blackfriars sometime after 1608 when they assumed occupancy of the premises.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, in 1607, the parish register of St. Dunstan’s (Whitefriars) noted one “Gerry out of the play-house in the Friars buried” in reference to the *closed* playing space in the Whitefriars.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, in 1613, the Master of the Revels (who licensed plays and regulated some other aspects of performance) received a fee of £20 “for a license to erect a new play-house in the White-friars [*sic*], etc.” in reference to what would be a *closed* playing venue.<sup>4</sup> In fact, “playhouse” was the preferred contemporary term for the space in which plays were staged, whether it was open to the elements or roofed over.

Granted, having to play to varied audiences puts MOLA in the odd position of needing to demonstrate to the general public the fascination of archaeology and, perhaps as well, that it is worth funding. At the same time, the archaeologists need to communicate their discoveries to the more academically minded in a manner framed by the technical language required by their shared conversation. And perhaps, as well, it is in the nature of a blog to be no more than a space that reflects whatever seems to be happening at the moment. Yet many of MOLA’s early theatre blog posts seem to be trending in the direction of something more sophisticated, and, certainly, readers are looking for a site that manifests the good educational work that MOLA’s public associates with them. Nevertheless, during the process of bridging disparate constituencies and purposes, difficulties naturally emerge, which MOLA might usefully consider for the future of the site, along with a conversation about the need for regular updating and maintenance. (Perhaps creating an archive of the more substantial postings? This would be extremely useful for researchers, even those from outside the field of archaeology, who have much to gain when they can follow the path by which knowledge emerges as excavations unfold. Sometimes, this can be just as useful as the final results.) In any event, after careful consideration, it seems that this area of MOLA’s website might be at a genuine crossroads. For

2. Quoted in Chambers, *Elizabethan Stage*, 511n2.

3. Quoted in Chambers, *Elizabethan Stage*, 516n1.

4. Quoted in Chambers, *Elizabethan Stage*, 517.

all of the blog's usefulness, and if staff and funding allow (these are always key elements), there is certainly some untapped opportunity here.

S. P. CERASANO

Colgate University

<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v46i3.42691>

### **Work Cited**

Chambers, E. K. *The Elizabethan Stage*. Vol. 2. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923.