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No future in archaeological heritage management?

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ABSTRACT

Although the future is mentioned frequently in overarching aims and visions, and it is a major drive in the daily work of archaeological heritage managers and indeed heritage professionals more generally, it remains unclear precisely how an overall commitment to the future can best inform specific heritage practices. It seems that most archaeologists and other heritage professionals cannot easily express how they conceive of the future they work for, and how their work will impact on that future. The future tends to remain implicit in daily practice which operates in a continuing, rolling present. The authors argue that this needs to change because present-day heritage management may be much less beneficial for the future than we commonly expect.

KEYWORDS

Archaeological practice; conservation ethos; future consciousness; heritage futures

Introduction

'These questions about the future you are asking me are definitely relevant – but this is the first time in my life that I am thinking about them.' –A Swedish archaeologist interviewed by Anders Höglberg

A substantial part of work conducted within archaeology and the heritage sector generally is motivated by a present-day desire to preserve past objects and knowledge about the past for the benefit of future generations (Holtorf 2014). The underlying preservation paradigm relies on a strong conservation ethos. It knows two distinct strategies: preservation-in-situ and preservation-by-record. Both strategies are intended to prevent the loss of heritage sites and safeguard the information they contain.

The principal thinking motivating the conservation ethos is based on the assumption that future generations will in one way or another value what we leave for them so that we effectively will become 'good ancestors for future generations' (Agnew 2006, 1). Typical for the heritage sector is the assumption that heritage consists of valuable, tangible or intangible entities from the past that are at risk in the present or even threatened by destruction and therefore must be preserved so that future generations can study and enjoy them, too (see Holtorf and Ortman [2008]; Vidal and Dias [2016]). Policy documents justifying the conservation ethos typically include phrases like 'preservation for posterity', 'hand on to future generations' and 'stewardship for tomorrow's generations' (Spennemann 2007a; Holtorf and Höglberg 2015a).

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Although the conservation ethos governs the heritage sector and enjoys wide public support, its specific assumptions about the future are not usually critically discussed in the heritage sector despite a growing body of literature contextualizing conservation in critical heritage studies (e.g. Rüscher [2004]; Spennemann [2007a]; Spennemann [2007b]; Holtorf and Ortman [2008]; Vidal and Dias [2016]). Merely considering ‘the possibility that, in the decades to come, people will eventually become “heritaged-out”’ (Cameron [2010], 212) has a revolutionary ring to it and appears somewhat heretical. Few alternatives to the prevailing forms of heritage management, the conservation ethos and its perceptions of the future have ever been discussed or even mentioned (but see Cameron [2010]; Harrison [2015]; Lavau [2015]). Although there may be non-Western alternatives to heritage management and associated futures, these too have only begun to be systematically explored (e.g. Karlström [2009]; Byrne [2014]).

In the present paper we argue, therefore, that there is a definite lack of substantial engagement with future issues in archaeological heritage management and heritage management generally, at least as it is practised throughout the so-called Western world. This lack can be observed in the academic literature, in official planning and strategy documents, and in personal reflections of heritage professionals about their work. As a consequence, present-day archaeology and heritage management may be much less beneficial for the future than we commonly expect. We call for immediate action to remedy this situation.

The future in planning and strategy documents

In key documents of state heritage management worldwide, the future and how it relates to what we do in the present is addressed perfunctorily, if at all. Instead there are nebulous references confirming the significance of conserving heritage ‘for the benefit of future generations’ (Spennemann 2007b). A classic example is Article 4 of the *World Heritage Convention* (UNESCO 1972) which confirms ‘the duty’ of each State Party to the Convention to ensure ‘the identification, protection, conservation, presentation and transmission to future generations of the cultural and natural heritage ... situated on its territory’. However, there is no further discussion as to what is meant by ‘transmission’ and ‘future generations’ – 45 years on maybe we are the Convention’s future generations?

An example for vagueness on the national level is Historic England’s report *Facing the Future: Foresight and the Historic Environment* (2015). This extensive analysis intends to enable the historic environment sector ‘to be more prepared for change’ (2015, 2). However, in the report, this is taken to mean almost exclusively to try and understand how discernible trends for the future, as ‘drivers of change’, may impact on the preservation of the historic environment. There is no analysis of which impact heritage may have on the future and how it may benefit future generations. By the same token, the Swedish document *Trends in time 2010–2015* (RAÄ 2010–2015), limits itself to an analysis of the current situation, highlighting a number of contemporary trends and their possible effect on future heritage management.

The underlying reason for such a lack of substantial engagement with the future may be the inherent difficulties in doing this. The English policy document *Conservation Principles* (English Heritage 2008) explicitly questioned our ability in the present to ascertain any future impact of heritage management:

In reality, our ability to judge the long-term impact of changes on the significance of a place is limited. Interventions may not perform as expected. As perceptions of significance evolve, future generations may not consider their effect on heritage values positive. (English Heritage 2008, 46)

But instead of addressing this difficulty, and exploring ways of dealing with persistent uncertainty, the document lapses back on making assumptions about the future that presume that the patterns of the present will continue, rather than change. For example, the discussion of future archaeological excavations suggests that the development of investigative techniques and the purpose of their application will not change much at all, bar extending somewhat on what we have today:

The continuing development of investigative techniques suggests that, in future, it will be possible to extract more data from excavation and intervention than is currently possible, just as now it is usual to extract much more information than was possible a few decades ago. [...] It must be recognized that much of the evidential value of the primary archive – the place itself – lies in its potential to increase knowledge of the past, to help protect the place and other similar places by a better understanding of their significance, to stimulate research, to encourage the further development of techniques to extract data, and to train successive generations of archaeologists. (English Heritage 2008, 54)

Unfortunately, a recent survey by the present authors of knowledge and attitudes towards the future among heritage professionals confirms this bleak picture.

The future as perceived by heritage professionals

Our study was primarily based on semi-structured interviews conducted in 2012 and 2013 with experienced professionals, often in senior positions, working in the heritage sector in Sweden, England and globally. This included in particular 46 interviews in nine Swedish County Administrative Boards (by Höglberg or Wollentz); seven interviews conducted within English Heritage (by May); five interviews conducted within UNESCO (by Holtorf and Höglberg); and nine interviews of various international heritage experts from Israel, Italy, Japan, Mexico, the U.K. and U.S.A. (by Holtorf) (Table 1). About half of our interviewees were archaeologists. We did not perceive any notable differences among the answers received in relation to where the professionals we interviewed came from, or where they worked.

The interviews were aimed at understanding how individual archaeologists and other heritage managers and experts think about the future in their professional roles, and how the future informs their work. Most interviews were preceded by a study of their respective organizations' key policy documents, regarding in particular any references to the future. The questions were informed by a series of pilot interviews conducted by Wollentz in 2012 (Wollentz 2016). Each

Table 1. The present study is based on semi-structured interviews conducted in 2012 and 2013 with 67 professionals working in the heritage sector.

Interviewees	Total number	... among which directly responsible for archaeological heritage (*)
Swedish County Administrative Boards	46	23
English Heritage	7	7
UNESCO senior heritage management	5	4
ICOMOS experts from various countries (°)	9	2
TOTAL	67	36

Notes: * Number of interviewees either identifying themselves as archaeologists or who were at the time of the interview directly responsible for archaeological heritage; ° based in Israel, Italy, Japan, Mexico, U.K. and the U.S.A.

interview took about one hour and was either captured through extensive note-keeping during, and immediately after, the conversation or audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed. The quotes cited below are taken from these interviews.

During the interviews, it became clear that some interviewees were not only unused to the questions we asked, but also uncomfortable with them. Despite the central role of the conservation ethos in heritage management, most of the professionals we talked to struggled to reconcile personal thoughts about the future with their specific responsibilities in the workplace.

All interviewees agreed that cultural heritage is important for the future. In particular they recognized the conservation ethos as an important foundation of heritage management and a common legitimization for heritage policy. A majority agreed that the future is inherent in their daily work because of the very character of heritage management: 'The main aim of what we do is that it should be good for the future. The future is already in our work automatically, it is always present'; 'We are appointed to preserve things from the past so that they will exist in the future. That is the basic question, the foundation for our work.'

But although the future is regarded as an obvious integral part of the day-to-day work, the majority of the professionals we interviewed stated that they had not thought about the future at all in their professional roles. It became clear that the only discussions about the future that tend to exist in professional archaeology and the heritage sector are about resources, policies and support for heritage conservation – in other words, questions that concern the continuation of the status quo. Based on our survey, there are in practice nearly no discussions concerning the ability of professionals to deal with future change for which they appear to be utterly unprepared (with the possible exception of Disaster Risk Reduction; see NICH [2016]).

A good example is the following dialogue.

Högberg: 'What kind of future are you working for?'

– 'We don't talk about the future in our work.'

Högberg: 'If you have listed an archaeological site or a monument that you want to preserve for the future, do you talk about the future then?'

– 'No, we don't,' the manager answered, 'We are all well aware that there is a future, but we don't talk about it. We are bad at carrying on a discussion of the future. We think short-term. We are in the midst of the everyday work we handle, with no opportunity to think on a deeper level.'

This dialogue illustrates the difficulties many heritage managers we interviewed had in expressing how they professionally conceived of the future. It also illustrates a frustration about not having time to reflect upon the future. In this situation, gut feelings govern how professionals think:

The townwall around Visby has started to tumble. In that project [to restore the wall], the people involved think that since the wall has stood for 800 years it should be restored so that it can stand another 800 years. That's what they think about the churches too, they've been there a long time and should stand just as long in the future.

Generally, however, it is not even clear which timespan heritage managers have in mind when something is preserved for the future. Many assume that they work for an indefinite future and potentially for eternity. But some have more realistic expectations: 'I think of two generations. We work a lot with young people, so that they will have a good life, and that they in turn will pass on something good to their children.'

Three generations or about 75 years is a common period in relation to how many societies understand time (Irving 2014). Three generations encompass an interval that many today are

familiar with from personal experience. It is the number of generations that many of us are capable of understanding, through personal meetings with young or old relatives. Some of us have met our great-grandparents or meet our great-grandchildren and can therefore relate to a period spanning four generations. Beyond the generations we can meet in person, the future becomes a blur, eventually turning into an eternity. Since professionals working in the heritage sector appear to think similarly, they do not perceive the future from a distinct professional point of view – based on trained skills and institutionalized knowledge – but just as any other person in society.

Policy documents and funding decisions do not, however, usually extend as far as a couple of generations into the future. As a result many professionals effectively work with short-term futures: 'It's often pretty hard to get people to consider the future in terms of what will happen in the next three years.' Indeed, 'You'd need a crystal ball which I don't have, to know where we're going to be at in five or six years' time.'

It is therefore not surprising that so much thinking in heritage management effectively implies a continuation of the present. Concerning the audience: 'There is an extraordinary amount of people who value heritage in an awful lot of different ways and that is unlikely to go.' Concerning the professionals: 'In the future too there will be a state authority which ensures that culture heritage is responsibly protected and taken care of. If we want to pass history and knowledge on, it is important that there is a public administration to see that this happens'; '[In the future] we might have to work in slightly different ways but we will always need archaeological curators.'

This, too, confirms our argument that heritage professionals look towards the future in similar ways as the rest of society. Studying how a random selection of individuals perceive the future, Quoidbach, Gilbert, and Wilson (2013) found that the future is commonly understood as a continuation of the present. When individuals who over the previous 10 years had experienced fundamental changes in their lives, e.g. serious disease, moving house with the family, changing job, being involved in an accident or having lost a family member, were asked how they see the coming 10 years of their lives, a vast majority replied that they perceive the future as a continuum of the present without fundamental changes. Despite having personal experiences of fundamental changes in their lives, when talking about the future people generally tend to assume that what they have in the present will be what they have in the future. Therefore, even in this respect, professionals working in the heritage sector perceive the future much like any other person in society.

Considering that future generations might in fact make their own decisions and thus might disappoint our expectation and trust in them can lead to devastating consequences for some professionals:

Perhaps, say, they demolish Stonehenge and say we don't need these rocks, we're going to build a brand new whatever [...] if at some point you know basically everybody, not even one person is going to be interested why are we keeping these objects so preciously [...] If someone is just going to say, well they're not very important – why are we bothering to curate them, conserve them, look after them. There's no point, is there, because they would just go. We might as well just not do anything, if that's going to be the attitude in 100 years' time. So that's quite a depressing thought.

Maybe precisely in order to avoid such thoughts, the vast majority of our informants agreed that archaeology and the heritage sector would benefit from investing more time and resources into thinking about the future, involving professional training and the building up of future-related

knowledge within each organization. More than half of our interviewees believe a more developed view of the future would improve their decision-making and create better outcomes as a result. But at present, a shortage of resources and the pressures under which they work mean that there is no room to think about matters of the future in relation to the work they do. This, then, is where the short-term affects perhaps most directly the long-term outcomes of heritage management.

Concluding discussion: towards a future consciousness in heritage practice

Although the future is mentioned frequently in overarching aims and visions of archaeology and the heritage sector and the future is a major drive in the daily work of heritage professionals, it remains generally unclear precisely how an overall commitment to the future can best inform specific heritage practices. The future tends to remain implicit in daily heritage practice which operates in a continuing, rolling present.

It seems that most heritage professionals cannot easily express how they conceive of the future they work for and how their work will impact on that future. Arguably, in the mind of many archaeologists and heritage professionals, the future does not appear to extend forward from the present but it sits fairly isolated in the distance, some way removed from the present. Many hope that future generations will look back gratefully at the work done by the heritage sector today, but there is a lack of understanding of how present-day practices and decisions will contribute to creating a desirable future and thus also make future generations more inclined to look back favourably onto our present. Instead of proactively doing anything about this, the professionals hide their passivity behind vague phrases such as 'only time can tell' and 'history will judge.'

In practice, for the heritage sector the future is expected to be a continuation of the present. We have not come across substantial efforts to understand how the future will differ from today and how it therefore requires decisions and strategies in the present that differ from what we would think is best for our own society now. It is therefore easy to agree with Spennemann (2007a, 2007b) that the future is often little more than a popular 'catch phrase' in relation to cultural heritage, while present practice remains firmly focused on the past and the present. How preserved heritage might actually affect future societies is largely unexplored territory among archaeologists and other heritage professionals. The heritage sector lacks a thorough engagement with questions concerning the future benefits of cultural heritage. Consequently, heritage professionals do not engage in critical discussions on the relevance of present-day practices and policies in heritage management for future generations.

We suggest that archaeologists and other professionals in the heritage sector should start discussing in more depth how specific perceptions of the future inform heritage practices and which impact on the future archaeological heritage can, and indeed should, have (see also Holtorf and Höglberg [2014]; Holtorf and Höglberg [2015a]; Holtorf and Höglberg [2015b]; Holtorf and Höglberg [2016]). The lack of substantial engagement with future issues in archaeological heritage management and heritage studies contrasts sharply with the commitment that we have come across among professionals in, for example, the nuclear waste sector addressing concerns that lie in the long term. There are a number of comprehensive studies (e.g. Trauth, Hora, and Guzowski [1993]; Buser [2013]) that discuss how to communicate with our descendants, or indeed other forms of intelligent life that may exist many thousands of years ahead, to ensure we prevent inadvertent exposure to radiation. In these studies consideration is given to the likelihood that no single language or alphabet of the present, including symbolic codes, will be easily understood

(Wikander 2015), and that even ways of interpreting and engaging with material markers or other media we may leave behind may not match our own customs and expectations (van Wyck 2005).

In a pioneering study, Johanna Zetterstrom-Sharp (2015) recently demonstrated how heritage may be strategically employed to advance specific future aspirations for Sierra Leone. We agree with Zetterstrom-Sharp, that instead of breeding anxiety about the risk of loss resulting from present-day changes, the heritage sector should be activating archaeological heritage to instigate specific, desirable transformations of the present for the future. This implies that the future is a matter of choice and it results, to some extent, from decisions made in professional heritage practice today. By the same token, we suggest that the focus of Schlanger, Nespolous, and Demoule (2016) on envisaging an ‘archaeology of the contemporary future’ at Fukushima is inspiring. In their analysis, the tangible witnesses of the Fukushima disasters (earthquake, tsunami and nuclear meltdown), should be preserved as heritage and included in a future ‘museum of disaster’, in order to promote reflection on responsibility and long-term pathways of recovery and renewal in future societies.

We suggest that the heritage sector gives more attention to actual and desired long-term effects of its practice. One way to start this kind of work on a professional level is to support the development of future consciousness concerning meaningful relations between past, present and future within the day-to-day work of heritage management. It may be helpful to ask the following questions: what can we know of any specific futures? What can we reasonably expect of future generations? Which futures are we talking about? How can future risks and opportunities inform the policies and practices adopted by the heritage sector in the present? Asking questions such as these, and bringing about a future consciousness in heritage practice, will shift at least some of its concerns towards the ‘making and shaping of collective futures rather than preserving collective pasts’ (Zetterstrom-Sharp 2015, 612). It will build capacities for archaeology and heritage to be more creatively and more effectively connected with the social, economic, political and ecological challenges of our time as well as their future solutions.

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