

# ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATIONS AS SITES OF PUBLIC PROTEST IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY BRITAIN

## Abstract

What happens when an archaeological excavation becomes the focus for media attention and public outrage? Protests of all kinds, ranging from letter-writing and legal challenges to mass rallies and illegal occupations, are a longstanding feature of global public archaeology. In this paper, I examine this phenomenon through three case studies of protest in UK archaeology, dating from the 1950s to the 1990s: the Temple of Mithras in the City of London, the Rose Theatre in Southwark, and the ‘Seahenge’ timber circle in Norfolk. The accounts of these sites and the protest movements that they sparked reveal a set of consistent themes, including poor public understanding of rescue archaeology, an assumption that all sites can be ‘saved’, and the value of good stakeholder consultation. Ultimately, most protests of archaeological excavations are concerned with the power of private property and the state over heritage: the core of the disputes – and the means to resolve them – are out of the hands of the archaeologists.

## Keywords

Contested heritage; heritage management; public archaeology; social movements

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## Introduction

‘Operation Sitric’ was launched in June 1979 when a group of 52 protestors, including academics and local politicians, broke into the archaeological site of Wood Quay in the centre of Dublin, set up tents, and began an illegal occupation. Years of excavation on the 1.5 hectare site had uncovered the remains of the Viking city, with more than 100 buildings and deep complex stratigraphy. With time and money running out and the developers growing impatient, the site was at grave risk. From 1976 the ‘Friends of Medieval Dublin’ had campaigned for the protection of the site, brought legal challenges to halt the development, and organised marches through the city attended by tens of thousands of people, many in

Viking costumes. When all else failed, they occupied the site, facing hostility from police, construction workers, and senior archaeologists. After three weeks the occupation ended peacefully. When archaeological work finally ended, large areas of the site remained unexcavated and were destroyed by the developers. But despite this defeat, the pressure from protestors and media coverage of the controversy had bought time and money to continue the excavations far longer than expected, and had a lasting impact on development in Dublin (Bradley 1984; Heffernan 1988: 1–2):

The reaction to events at Wood Quay produced one of the most intense battles ever waged by the public to save an archaeological site anywhere. And Wood Quay became more than an archaeological issue; it became a political milestone.

The idea of archaeological excavations as sites of controversy and mass public protest is an odd and uncomfortable one. All the most interesting episodes in the history of public archaeology involve tensions, frictions, or conflicts. Change and progress are forged in these moments of contestation: the breaking of old institutions, the foundations of new ones, narratives of failure and endurance. Protests of excavations – rather than museums, heritage sites, or sites under threat – are relatively uncommon, but the spectacular nature of the excavation makes it a natural stage. Protests of all kinds, from letter-writing campaigns to spectacular violence, are a well-studied phenomenon within fields such as history and political science.

Most archaeologists are keenly aware of the impacts and contexts of our work, and the risks that this entails. Archaeology has been a factor in political, religious, legal, and cultural conflict for centuries, and in many of these cases archaeologists have found themselves on the front lines of heated and even violent disputes (e.g. Ucko 1987; Bernbeck & Pollock 1996; Hafsaas-Tsakos 2011; Apaydin & Hassett 2019 ). By far the most common public protests concerning archaeology are found in colonial-settler nations where archaeology has been a tool of dehumanisation and dispossession of indigenous and enslaved communities (e.g. Watkins 2000; Taylor 2014).

The best-known episode of protest in North American archaeology concerned the African Burial Ground in Manhattan, New York, where the remains of 419 people were uncovered during development work by the US General Services Administration in 1991. While concerned scholars and members of the public initially lobbied for the protection of the site, protests broke out when it became clear that, in the words of one archaeologist, 'the agency's bureaucratic arrogance had led it to violate both the legal requirements of public input and careful archaeological resource management' (Blakey 2010: 62). The victory by African-American activists saw the site protected from development, and later designated as a National Monument. The human remains were eventually reinterred as part of a permanent memorial on the site. Like the Wood Quay site and the other excavations examined in this paper, the protests at the African Burial Ground would also have a lasting impact on the public understanding of archaeology and heritage management.

Patterns of protest vary worldwide, reflecting the very different political and economic contexts of archaeology and its histories. Some of the most important variations reflect the role of the state in governing and claiming ownership of archaeological heritage, and the relationship between states, private landowners, heritage stakeholder groups, and the archaeological community.

Despite the extraordinary Irish and African-American examples cited above, in this paper my primary focus is the history of protest in British archaeology. As Pyburn (2011: 30) has observed, there are fewer inherent tensions within British public archaeology than in most colonial-settler nations:

Of course, there are community and national controversies over the disposition of archaeological resources, but repatriation and preservation of sites in English contexts are not areas of dramatic racial or cultural contestation, since the museum curators and site stewards more or less share the heritage of the people whose material and human remains they control.

While they might not carry such heavy historical burdens, most controversies in British archaeology share the same themes that one finds in contested heritage worldwide: questions of ownership, control, protection, and access to archaeological heritage, the function of the profession and the state, and the manoeuvres of stakeholder groups and individuals to project and protect their interests (Skeates 2000).

My aim in this paper is to explore the history of protest at excavations in Britain, focusing on three case studies: the excavation of the Temple of Mithras in the City of London in 1954; the discovery of the Rose Theatre in Southwark in 1989; and the removal of the timber circle known as ‘Seahenge’ from a beach in Norfolk in 1999. These sites are well-known and widely studied, and the controversies they sparked have been aired and litigated in public, in the press, and later in scholarship. In this paper, I am interested not only in the specifics of the case studies but in their differences and similarities, and the common themes that connect them.

This study presents a narrow slice of a much larger issue. Public protest and controversy in archaeology are issues that should concern us, and prompt reflection on both individual and collective levels. A richer understanding of these protests that draws on analytical models from political science and other disciplines – as attempted in this paper – can only enrich our understanding and contribute towards a critical public archaeology that can better anticipate, negotiate, and avoid future conflicts, and where possible build stronger and better relationships with would-be antagonists.

Protest in public archaeology is generally quite distinct from the much larger and more spectacular world of protests against science, technology, medicine, and allied subjects. The best known of these are the most spectacularly violent, such as the destruction of genetically modified crops, animal testing laboratories, and most recently 5G telecommunications

antennas by organised groups or individual vigilantes (Monaghan 1997; Kuntz 2012). I am reluctant to generalise from such politically, socially, and economically complicated conflicts, but most significantly for this study they describe a level of systemic and violent hostility that is vanishingly rare in public engagement with archaeology. However, even here there are exceptions: ultra-Orthodox Jews protesting archaeological excavations in Jerusalem have attempted to disrupt fieldwork by pelting excavators with stones, accusing them of desecrating graves (Balter 2000). I have personally witnessed religious nationalist ‘new believers’ throwing stones and shouting abuse at archaeologists on an excavation in Russia, accusing them of polluting a sacred megalithic site.

Sociologists of science have examined ‘anti-science’ attitudes amongst individuals and groups, and have noted distinct and largely exclusive themes. These include epistemological objections to science such as religious anti-evolutionism; historical-political suspicions based on, for example, harmful and unethical medical testing on the African-American population; and humanistic concerns about the over-reach of science in fields such as human cloning and genetic modification (e.g. Holton 1992; Gauchat 2008). Can we speak in the same way of ‘anti-archaeology’ attitudes and movements? Archaeology and the natural sciences share many of the same legacies of colonialism, structural racism, and epistemic violence, albeit to different degrees and with markedly different levels of harm. Those hostile to campaigns for indigenous or post-colonial heritage rights might view such movements as ‘anti-archaeological’, and indeed they might choose to describe themselves in these terms. However, outside of colonial-settler contexts these issues are less often contested in such stark terms. In many cases of protest in archaeology, and in the UK examples outlined below, archaeologists and protestors share a common interest in the heritage and a concern for its protection. The tensions arise, instead, from profoundly divergent views on the nature of archaeological heritage, and on how it should be studied, recorded, protected, or destroyed within the excavation.

### **Protest and spectacle at the London Mithraeum**

Before Mithras, such a massive public protest over the destruction of an archaeological site in the City of London had never been witnessed. (Lyon 2007: 11.)

To visit the London Mithraeum today, one must make an appointment and book a (free) ticket for a time-limited tour. From the glass-fronted modernity of the Bloomberg office in the City of London one descends into the darkened chamber where the reconstructed ruins of the Temple of Mithras are displayed close to (but not precisely upon) the spot where they were first uncovered by archaeologists in the early 1950s. It is one of the oddest and most enchanting archaeological experiences in London, echoing the similarly subterranean remains of the Roman Amphitheatre under London’s Guildhall Yard.

The London Mithraeum’s journey from initial discovery to final display has been odd and convoluted, and uniquely illustrative of the changing relationship between rescue archaeology and public archaeology in the twentieth and twenty-first century (see Jackson

2017). It illustrates some of the most important themes in this paper on the relationships between archaeologists, developers/landowners, the state, and the public. Most importantly, it highlights one of the main sources of anger and protest in public archaeology: the difference between public expectations of archaeology and heritage management, and the (often disappointing) realities.

The excavations on the Mithraeum site were led by W. F. Grimes under the auspices of the Roman and Mediaeval London Excavation Committee (RMLEC), during the redevelopment of the City of London as it emerged from the devastation of the Second World War and the financial constraints of post-war austerity. Local and national government guidelines recognised historic buildings as worthy of preservation in these processes but made no mention of archaeological remains – although rescue excavation was supported in theory and funded in a few cases (Shepherd 1998). Grimes and the RMLEC were invited to excavate the site that would become Bucklersbury House, and began to uncover the remains of a well-preserved Roman structure. Initially the function of the building was unclear and it was only in 1954, two years into the excavation – on the final day before construction was scheduled to commence – that a white marble carved head of the god Mithras was uncovered (Grimes 1968).

Public reaction to the find was immediate, driven by a frenzy of media coverage highlighting both the great significance of the discovery and the tragedy of its impending destruction. The public action took two main forms: first was a campaign of letter-writing to national newspapers and to government, demanding the preservation of the site in the national interest; second was the horde of visitors who descended on the site to see it for themselves (Lyon 2007).

As Grimes (1968: 231) recalled: 'Nobody knew what to expect: perhaps 500 people, it was thought. The police estimated the queue that wound round the streets at least five times that figure. The queues continued on this scale throughout the week.' Queues up to three hundred metres long wound around the site and nearby streets, and some of those denied entry simply climbed over the barriers and broke in. For Grimes (1968: 232), the public audience and their militant attitude towards the protection of the site took on 'a curiously nightmarish quality.'

The public reaction to the planned destruction of the site, as analysed in some detail by Lyon (2007), focused in part on Grimes' explanation of preservation-by-record, a concept far outside the public understanding of heritage value. The RMLEC team did not ask for or expect the site to be preserved in situ, but Lyon quotes letters to the press explicitly attacking this perspective:

If Grimes' view were to prevail in all our dealings with those ancient objects which are so difficult and expensive to preserve should we not be asked to satisfy ourselves with a portfolio of measured drawings in place of City churches?

[T]he temple is something not merely to be savoured by experts in an excavation report. It is part of our national heritage; to see and handle its actual structure is an experience which appeals powerfully to the historical imagination of the general public.

[T]he public can only be grateful to the contractor for a fleeting glimpse of another national heritage before he treats it as his personal property and destroys it. (All quoted in Lyon 2007: 9.)

Public pressure on the government, the developer, and the archaeologists, amplified by the press, bore fruit: time and funding were found to extend the excavation work, and to explore alternatives to the destruction of the structure. The government was at pains to justify itself and to placate the upsurge in public outrage. Press releases emphasised the government's concern to minimise public costs, and a planned exhibition on ancient monuments was adapted to support this narrative.

### **Themes in public protest**

Lyon's study of the Mithras affair focuses on the heritage policy, practice, and governance angles, but also sheds light on the public view and the motivations for the protests. The public response, exemplified in the letters quoted above, reveal several important themes:

- The public regarded archaeological heritage management as primarily concerned with the preservation of sites and monuments, *in situ* and (as far as possible) in whole.
- Conversely, the notion of 'preservation through record' had little or no public recognition, and was viewed as elitist, exclusionary, and unsatisfactory.
- There was a public expectation that heritage sites of national importance would or should be owned by the state on behalf of the public, and not in private hands.
- This public ownership was assumed to include the public right to see, explore, and touch the monument itself. Barriers to view and access were seen as unacceptable.

The public hostility to the archaeologists at the Mithraeum excavation focused on what they perceived to be elitist attitudes and the dereliction of what was assumed to be their public duty. The presumption that the archaeologists worked for the state, and that the state had considerable decision-making power and control over the archaeological heritage, were in part artefacts of early-1950s British culture, with the legacies of wartime central planning and control still in evident at all scales of the society and economy. As one of the correspondents to the *Times* noted, 'Had the Bucklersbury site been found to contain nationalized oil or coal, instead of unnationalized antiquities, clearly further building would at once have been prohibited'. Lyon concludes of the protestors: 'People seem to have been genuinely surprised nothing could be done to save the temple' (quoted in Lyon 2007: 9).

One common theme in public protests in public archaeology from the Mithraeum, to Viking Dublin in the 1970s and into the present, is the use of the term 'save'. The public demand that a site be 'saved': whether by the archaeologists or from the archaeologists is unclear and, given the poor public understanding of rescue archaeology, they are probably unsure themselves. The general sense of 'save' is fairly consistent: when an archaeological monument captures the public imagination, they typically hope for it to be preserved in as clean, original, and visually impressive a state as possible. There is a fear that – in the words of the Nintendo quit screen – 'everything not saved will be lost'.

### **Celebrity protesters at the Rose Theatre**

This must be the wrong way to conduct such business: bad for the developer, bad for archaeology, and an undesirable example of street action in the conduct of our affairs. (Biddle 1989: 754.)

If the Mithraeum excavation and its political shockwaves marked the beginning of a new phase of urban rescue archaeology in London, the discovery of the Rose Theatre and the battle for its survival mark another: the political fallout from this discovery and the high-profile work of the 'Save the Rose' campaign 'caused enormous excitement, and enormous trouble for the development company', and played a significant role in the revision of the UK planning process to take greater account for archaeology (Greenfield & Gurr 2004: 332). This led ultimately to the introduction of the 'polluter pays' principle through the PPG16 planning guidance document (Bowsher 1998). There is also a good record of the process: during the discovery and the controversy, and in their aftermath, a great deal has been written reflecting on the mistakes and missed opportunities (e.g. Biddle 1989).

The Rose Theatre was built in Southwark, London in 1587 by entrepreneur Philip Henslowe. The fourteen-sided geometrical structure was expanded five years after its initial construction and was finally torn down a decade later. During its relatively short life it staged at least two of Shakespeare's plays and many of Marlowe's amongst others. The location of the theatre was well attested from maps and documents of the period, to the extent that an archaeological evaluation of the site in 1971 concluded rather prophetically that the site 'should be considered one of those areas where public action could make excavation and preservation a national issue' (quoted in Phelan, 1996: 67).

Heron Group purchased the site for development in 1987 and obtained planning permission from the London Borough of Southwark: the Museum of London had advised that permission be granted for the nine-storey development subject to the developers funding an archaeological excavation. Heron Group sold the site to developers Imry Merchant who paid for ten weeks of excavation, later extended to six months (Phelan 1996). Excavations on the site by the Museum of London's Department of Greater London Archaeology revealed the well-preserved foundations of the building, with other structural traces indicating the construction phases of the theatre, including the use of hazelnut shells in metalling the floor where the 'groundlings' would stand to watch the performances. The findings of the

excavation constituted a huge advance in the understanding of theatrical staging and design in Elizabethan London: 'To lose it would be a new kind of Shakespearean tragedy' (Orrell & Gurr 1989: 429).

But by the middle of May 1989 time was up: the excavations which had revealed the outline of the Rose were halted, and the developers proposed to bury the site in gravel and drive eleven 1.5-metre-wide concrete piles through the remains. By this point the 'Save the Rose' campaigners had been at work for some time, lobbying for more time and money for the excavation and for the remains of the Rose to be protected beneath the new development. The protection of the Rose was debated in the House of Commons, and subject of a letter to the Prime Minister from the MP for Southwark (Biddle 1989).

Archaeologist Martin Biddle was one of many who realised that the thin layer of gravel would do little to protect the remains from the 75 ton piling rigs, and that the reassurances from the Prime Minister and the Under Secretary of State for the Environment were empty words. The site was at grave risk as the gravel trucks approached, and as Biddle (1989: 753) noted, 'parliamentary efforts having failed, direct action was the only means to secure a reprieve'.

Up to this point the 'Save the Rose' campaign had run a high-profile lobbying campaign, with a petition, extensive newspaper, and television coverage. The main source of this success was the campaign's ability to conjure up a near-endless stream of high-profile actors to stand in or outside the ruins of the Rose and passionately defend its unique value including Laurence Olivier, Peggy Ashcroft, James Fox, Ralph Fiennes, Dustin Hoffman, Judy Dench, Patrick Stewart, and Ian McKellen. It was some of these public figures, together with their supporters and a number of journalists in attendance, who physically blocked the entrance to the site and forced the gravel trucks to turn around. Peggy Ashcroft had already raised official alarm by threatening to throw herself in front of the machinery, leading to crisis meetings between the developer, English Heritage, and senior politicians (Phelan 1996). As Biddle (1989: 754) noted: 'If the lorries had succeeded in dumping their gravel on the Rose, the remains of the theatre would have been effectively destroyed.' The 'Save the Rose' campaign succeeded – at least temporarily.

Laurence Olivier was one of the most prominent members of the 'Save the Rose' campaign: his final public appearance was to speak in favour of its preservation. When he died in July 1989 the dispute was still ongoing, and the campaigners proposed to lay a wreath in his memory on the site of the Rose. Phelan (1996) considers the varying views of this commemoration as either a crass exploitation of the dead, or an attempt to build tradition, drawing together the lineages of actors past and present. The developers refused and described the proposed wreath-laying as 'deeply provocative and [in] extraordinarily bad taste' (quoted in Phelan 1996: 77).

With the immediate threat in abeyance, the campaigners – now a formal 'Rose Theatre Trust' – continued to lobby for the preservation of the site, and ultimately succeeded in obtaining a



six-month extension to the excavations and around £11 million in funding. Most remarkably, they won an agreement from the developers to redesign the building to preserve the remains of the theatre in the basement, which was to have been an underground carpark. The foundations of the Rose revealed in outline remain on view, and the site has also been used as a performance space.

### **To excavate or preserve?**

Martin Biddle's clear-sighted analysis of the Rose Theatre dispute, made well before the solutions had been agreed and finalised, takes a harsh and critical perspective on all parties: the developer who arguably misunderstood the difference between an evaluation and a full excavation; the divided loyalties and opaque operations of English Heritage; and a planning process that failed to take enough account of archaeology. Before all of this, he points the finger at archaeologists' failure to resolve 'the ethical debate in the profession over excavation versus preservation', and to better communicate this to the public. 'Non-archaeologists', he points out, 'do not understand this viewpoint [of preservation] and react with incredulity ('you mean you don't want to know what's there?'), and even hostility.' (Biddle 1989: 760.) As with the concept of 'preservation by record' at the Mithraeum, the public misunderstanding of rescue archaeology generates confusion and antagonism, and the fault must ultimately lie with the archaeologists.

Another important theme from the Rose Theatre campaign is the general marginalisation of the archaeologists, lacking the legal right and economic clout of the developers, the executive power of the government, or the moral clarity and single-mindedness of the protesters. The slight exception in the case of the Rose was the role of English Heritage archaeologists. A senior English Heritage manager spoke at one of the 'Save the Rose' rallies and attempted to explain the government viewpoint and the complexities of the issue, but he was shouted down during his speech and faced criticism from all sides for his participation in the rally. One thing everybody agreed: a crisis of this kind should never be allowed to happen again. Martin Biddle (1989: 760) noted:

[T]he now-urgent need to reform the process which allowed the saga of the Rose to take place as if nothing had changed in the 35 years since the Temple of Mithras was discovered in the Walbrook valley.

While Geoffrey Wainwright (1989: 434) of English Heritage concurred: 'It is clearly inadequate that the future of a site as well known and documented as the Rose Theatre should have reached a crisis in mid May in the way that it did.'

With the right timing, circumstances, power, influence, and luck, protesters can win and affect changes, both immediate and structural.

### **Seahenge: A perfect storm**

The controversies around the discovery, excavation, and removal of the Bronze-Age timber circle at Holme-next-the-Sea, Norfolk, have been extensively documented (e.g. Wallis 2003; Pryor 2002). In many respects the story is like that of the Mithraeum and the Rose: a stunning discovery of a threatened site that presented difficult decisions for archaeologists and heritage authorities, with public dissatisfaction sparking protests and an occupation of the site. But at Seahenge the threat to the site came not from impatient developers, but from the relentless force of the sea eroding the site.

The site that became known as ‘Seahenge’ was a ring of 55 timbers some seven metres across, with a large up-turned oak bole at its centre. The trees that formed the structure were found to have been felled in 2049BCE. Although known to local people for some time, the site came to the attention of English Heritage and Norfolk archaeologists in 1998 after the layers of peat sealing the site began to be washed away by the sea (Watson 2005). An exploratory excavation was carried out, during which a piece of wood was cut from the central oak bole with a chainsaw to provide dating evidence, a tone-deaf piece of destruction that would later cause anger amongst those opposed to the excavations. English Heritage initially proposed to leave the wood *in situ* to erode away, but with growing visitor numbers there was concern at the impact on the local community and the nearby nature reserve. With pressure mounting from the press, pagan groups, and some local people, a new decision was made to excavate the site and remove the timbers. Crucially, this decision was made by English Heritage without consultation with stakeholders and was announced as a fait accompli to the local community at a public meeting that they had assumed would involve a modicum of consultation (Wood 2002).

The fast-growing opposition to the excavation, sparked in part by widespread media coverage of the site, brought the local community together with other stakeholders including Druids, Pagans, and New Agers. Some travelled to Seahenge to experience the site and to perform rituals, while Druid Rollo Maughfling claimed the sites as a Druid creation for all people and Pagan protestor Buster Nolan attempted to bring a legal case against English Heritage, without success. As tensions grew police became involved, and two of the Druid protestors were served with legal injunctions restricting them from accessing the site. Meanwhile the local parish council formed the Friends of Seahenge campaign group, which included some of the Pagan protestors. Excavation work was challenging as the tides that had eroded the protective layer of peat over the timbers now flooded the site at regular intervals, giving only narrow windows of time for archaeologists to work. Meanwhile some of the protestors tried to disrupt the ongoing excavation work by occupying the site and removing the sandbags that the archaeologists put in place to reinforce their workings (Wallis 2003) (Fig. 1).

**FIGURE 1. Confrontation at Seahenge. (Copyright: Archant CM Ltd – Norfolk)**

Some attempts were made to build dialogue between the parties: in June 1999 while the excavation was ongoing, Clare Prout of Save our Sacred Sites (SOSS) held a meeting with representatives from English Heritage, the Norfolk Archaeological Unit, the local community, and the protestors (Watson 2005: 42). This meeting, which included invocations

of ‘Ancestors and Great Spirit’, led to a provisional agreement that the timbers would be removed and preserved, but that the site would be reconstructed. Nonetheless, the removal of the timbers remained unacceptable to some of the New Ager protestors.

The confrontations between the archaeologists and the protestors which had continued throughout the weeks of the excavations came to a head in July 1999 when the large central oak bole was to be lifted by a tracked excavator and removed from the site. Archaeologist Francis Pryor (2002: 259) recalled the event:

[T]hree New Agers had arrived: two women and a young man. We had met the young man before and he was mentally disturbed. In point of fact, he was a genuinely sad case. The two women were, however, different. One had two young children with her ... while all eyes were on the tree, the policewoman on our side called across and I looked up to see one of the team stop the young woman (the one who came with the two children), who was making a dash towards the tree. He brought her to the ground. Immediately the policewoman took over, while the intruder screamed blue murder, and the young man with the intellectual impairment screamed wildly, adding to the general cacophony.

The timbers were removed from the site and sent for conservation: today they are on display in Lynn Museum. Despite the violent disruption and Pryor’s intolerant tone, he and other archaeologists were at pains to avoid an ‘us and them’ attitude, noting that most of the Pagans present at the site were friendly and interested in the archaeology, even if they opposed the removal of the timbers.

### **In the news: Attitudes and aftermaths**

Seahenge came to prominence and gained its nickname through local and national media interest: the protests and conflicts around the site were fuelled by this coverage and also served to heighten it. As with the Mithraeum and the Rose, public opinion and press coverage was overwhelmingly on the side of the protestors. Neal Ascherson’s (2004: 147) study of archaeology in the British media discussed the case, noting that:

[P]rotesters who attempted to block the removal on grounds of magical integrity and chthonic piety received much sympathy and wide coverage from press and television [...] The chairman of the parish council was quoted at some length when he claimed that most locals wanted the monument to be ‘left in the care of the sea’. In contrast, the English Heritage case for removing the timbers received only a single sentence.

Holtorf draws on Ascherson’s work and notes how the New Age protestors were presented in the press as protectors of the site, while the archaeologists whose work was at least ostensibly responding to a real threat to the site were portrayed as ‘desecrators and violators’ (Holtorf 2007: 95). I have noted previously that the popular image of archaeologists as rapacious adventurers leaves no room for cautious heritage management: ‘the idea of archaeologists as

stewards or guardians of archaeological heritage [...] has barely impacted upon popular culture and consciousness.’ (Moshenska 2017: 164). While state and local agencies work quietly to manage archaeological heritage, the protectors of ancient sites in popular culture are the Medjai in *The Mummy*, the Brotherhood of the Cruciform Sword in *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, or the ghouls watching over ancient treasures in the works of M. R. James and a dozen other horror writers. In short, the image of archaeologists in the media, at Seahenge and beyond, has been negatively impacted by the simplistic but widespread notion of archaeologists as despoilers, along with the romantic vision of single-minded, dedicated protectors of heritage as both separate and opposed to archaeology.

It is worth noting that while Ascherson examined the mass-media coverage of the controversy and found it favoured the protestors, Pagan author Robert Wallis (2003) examined the popular archaeological media including the television show *Time Team* and *British Archaeology* magazine. Wallis found the coverage to be quite nuanced, with the protestors’ voices heard and a great deal of sympathy for their viewpoints and criticism of English Heritage.

The Seahenge controversy generated very poor publicity for English Heritage and for archaeology in general. This has been acknowledged by senior figures in public forums including the ‘Debating Seahenge’ event held at the University of East Anglia in March 2000 and led to some soul-searching and commitment to better consultation. Despite these commitments, in the two decades since the Seahenge excavations it has been disputes between archaeologists and Pagans around the treatment of ancient sites and human remains that have formed the basis for the great majority of protests and public disputes in British archaeology (see Blain & Wallis 2007; Parker Pearson et al. 2011; Wallis & Blain 2011; Wallis 2015).

## **Contexts**

To more fully understand the three events outlined in this paper we would need to place them more firmly within their wider contexts. Each took place in a distinctive historical moment, which are worth briefly reviewing here. The Mithraeum dig was a spark of excitement in a nation – and capital – emerging from post-war austerity and beginning to renegotiate its post-imperial national identity. The 1951 Festival of Britain a few years before had included a striking set of displays on Britain’s archaeological heritage, and *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral?* had made television celebrities of leading British archaeologists (Hawkes 1951). It is debatable to what extent the public interest in the site and outrage at its potential loss reflected lingering wartime attitudes of state responsibility, and in particular the state’s power to bring private property into public ownership. The post-war period saw the transfer of large numbers of country houses in Britain from private owners to the National Trust, and the Mithraeum protestors’ sense of ‘nationalised’ heritage can be seen in this context (Lees-Milne 1992).

The two later events at the Rose and Seahenge both took place against a strong background of political activism and social protest. Many of the celebrity participants in the Rose Theatre protests were seasoned protestors: Peggy Ashcroft was a long-time champion of left-wing causes, and Ian McKellen was then, as now, a pioneering and outspoken gay rights activist (Steele 2001). Against the background of the right-wing Thatcher government, a rich culture of protest emerged in 1980s Britain with focuses including anti-fascism, nuclear disarmament, the Miners' Strike of 1984–5, and – most relevantly – the 1985 Battle of the Beanfield (Byrne 1997; Joyce 2002).

In this still-controversial episode, Wiltshire Police violently attacked a convoy of New Age Travellers intent on reaching Stonehenge, site of the Stonehenge Free Festival every summer since 1974 that attracted tens of thousands of visitors. With the stones declared out of bounds for the protection of the archaeological remains, a few hundred people in a 'Peace Convoy' attempted to breach the exclusion zone. Diverted into a field, the travellers' vehicles were smashed and burned by police who violently attacked the occupants including pregnant women and parents carrying children (Worthington 2005).

The enduring resentment around the closure of Stonehenge during the summer solstice was likely a contributing factor to the bad feeling towards English Heritage within the Pagan community, and thus the adversarial attitudes of many of the protestors at Seahenge. The Seahenge protest itself drew inspiration and tactics from the UK protest movements of the 1990s such as the Twyford Down and Newbury Bypass anti-road protests, and the growing international anti-globalization protest movement that would culminate in the massive protests against the World Trade Organization in Seattle in November 1999 (Milton 2004; Della Porta & Diani 2006). The anti-road protests are of particular interest, as the overarching theme of protecting the natural environment from destructive development has a great deal in common with the archaeological protests examined above.

While a much deeper exploration of the historical, political, and organisational contexts of these protests is beyond the scope of this article, it is worth considering them through the lens of social movement studies, and in particular the study of protest movements.

### **Protest movements**

[V]irtually all the pleasures that humans derive from social life are found in protest movements: a sense of community and identity; ongoing companionship and bonds with others; the variety and challenge of conversation, cooperation and competition. (Jasper 1997: 220 quoted in Della Porta & Diani 2006: 14.)

The study of protest movements within political science and sociology took off in the 1970s, to a considerable extent as a reaction to the emergence of protest movements around the world in 1968 and their impacts (Jakobsen & Listhaug 2014). The established repertoire of protest practices such as petitions, demonstrations, occupations, sit-ins, boycotts, blocking

traffic, wildcat strikes, and withholding of rent or tax has a long and entangled history (see Della Porta & Diani 2006: 166).

Early studies of protest behaviour such as those by Barnes and Kaase et al. (1979) and others regarded protest as an elite-challenging behaviour characteristic of democratic, prosperous societies. They traced connections between participation in protests (broadly defined but focused on non-violent tactics) and characteristics including higher levels of education, strong civic values, and broadly left-wing politics. Interestingly, while these studies recognised the presence of violent and criminal fringes in many protest movements, they found them to be numerically so insignificant as to fall within margins of error in survey-based studies (Jakobsen & Listhaug 2014: 215–6).

Participation in protests has been considered as a series of escalating thresholds from the least to the most extreme. The first threshold incorporates activities such as signing petitions and taking part in formal demonstrations; the second sees a move to more direct-action techniques such as boycotts, while remaining within the law. The third threshold crosses into illegality while remaining non-violent, as with obstructive occupations of buildings and wildcat strikes; the final threshold is the realm of interpersonal violence and property destruction (Dalton 1988, cited in Della Porta & Diani 2006: 170).

This sliding scale offers comparative insights into the three case studies: the Mithraeum excavations remained largely within the first threshold, characterised by letter-writing and political lobbying, with a small element of non-violent direct action amongst those – including journalists – who illegally entered the site to view and photograph the remains. The ‘Save the Rose’ protests again started with campaigning and petitioning to the point – as with the Mithraeum – that politicians became directly involved. In this case, the holding of increasingly militant rallies and meetings raised the threshold, so that by the time the non-violent illegal action of blockading the site occurred it was not too much of a leap. In both of these cases it is important to distinguish these thresholds within the movements: at the Mithraeum only a tiny number climbed the walls and entered the site illegally, whereas at the Rose a larger number of those directly involved in the campaign were willing to break the law or at least make themselves party to it. The Seahenge campaign is another important case of scale and differentiation within the protest movement: the most hostile and belligerent protestors who physically damaged the archaeological workings and grappled with excavators and police were a tiny minority within a much larger active, engaged but non-violent community.

Studies of protest have often examined the values that underlie individuals’ willingness to take part in non-conventional political engagements of these kinds, including changing values and the emergence of new value frameworks. This included a strong correlation with emancipatory views and the ‘postmaterialist values’ of autonomy, equality, and free expression identified by Ronald Inglehart (e.g. Inglehart 1979; Jakobsen & Listhaug 2014). These and later studies have generally regarded participation in non-violent protest as a positive on both individual and collective scales, as a process of self-empowerment that

strengthens democratic processes. An important step in this development was the general move away from a deprivation theory-based model of individual motivation towards one grounded in rational actor theory: ‘Grievance and greed are secondary factors for a political action theory that sees activism as arising from a person’s skills and capacity to understand and manage the environment’ (Jakobsen & Listhaug 2014: 216).

From the start, studies of protest as political action have noted the importance of the media in amplifying arguments, and in some cases serve as the primary intermediary between the protestors and those they hope to influence (e.g. Lipsky 1965; Della Porta & Diani 2006). Interestingly, this is generally the case whether the media are sympathetic or hostile to the protestors. In the case of the Mithraeum the role of the media was formative and decisive throughout the controversy. Without the spectacular press images of the sculpted heads it is unlikely that the issue would have grown to the magnitude that it did, and the print media remained the main forum for discussion of the issue. At the Rose and again at Seahenge the protestors showed themselves adept and experienced at manipulating the media to their advantage, providing spectacles of speech and protest that played well to cameras. Francis Pryor (2002: 257) remarked of the most hard-core protestors at Seahenge that

They had an extraordinary knack of turning up whenever television news cameras were present – indeed, it was almost as if somebody was tipping them off, as they rarely appeared when the media weren’t there.

Della Porta and Diani (2006: 180) identify the challenges for protestors to create consistently novel, newsworthy material without moving to extremes that place them outside of public sympathies, and note that: ‘Successful movements are often those that are able to develop controversies in such a way that they are more newsworthy by using symbols and images that capture attention.’ At the Mithraeum, it was the spectacular sculptures that became the defining image of the protest, while at Seahenge and the Rose it was the protestors themselves. The ‘Save the Rose’ campaign recognised and used the celebrity of their leadership to great effect, while at Seahenge the images of wildly-dressed Pagans standing and sitting within the timber circle or confronting the archaeologists in the stark landscape created a powerful visual language.

## **Conclusions**

The Wood Quay controversy in 1970s Dublin, cited at the opening of this paper, remains the largest and most impressive protest of an archaeological excavation. As Thomas Heffernan (1988: 3–4) noted:

The “Save Wood Quay” forces surprised the corporation in some of the same ways that the antiwar movement in America had surprised the Johnson administration: they grew fast and attracted a more varied membership than anyone would have expected; they were imaginative and original; they were relentless. Before Wood Quay if one had heard that 20,000 people had marched in the streets of Dublin, one would have

assumed that it was a northern protest or a religious event ... A protest of that magnitude over a cultural cause was, as far as anyone could remember, unprecedented.

Having looked in some depth at case studies of protest at archaeological sites, I am inclined to be a little suspicious of Heffernan's statement. Even if we accept – and it is by no means clear – that protests at archaeological sites are primarily concerned with the archaeology, this does not necessarily place the archaeologists at the forefront of the dispute. As archaeologists, it is nice to think that our work matters, and as public archaeologists it is gratifying to imagine ourselves in possession of a lightning-rod of raw, radical public outrage. However, one of the consistent themes in all of the case studies is the relative marginalization of the archaeologists: neither the protagonists nor the antagonists. To a public first energised by excitement at archaeological discoveries and then galvanised by the threat of their loss, the archaeologists at the Mithraeum and the Rose proved disappointments as putative allies, and ultimately irrelevances in the struggle against property, wealth, and political power. This reflects the financial and contractual imperatives in commercial archaeology and the compromises they force. As Ronayne (2008: 124) notes, 'People protesting against developments can view archaeologists as 'the enemy', although many if not most field archaeologists are sympathetic to their struggles. Thus natural allies are pitted against one another.' At the Rose and again at Seahenge the English Heritage archaeologists forced (however reluctantly) into the role of minor antagonists were opposed by the protestors not as representatives of archaeology, but of the state. Only at Seahenge do we see a direct opposition to the work of the archaeologists themselves, grounded in religious or spiritual principles, and even then only on the part of a small minority of the protestors.

To sum up the key findings of this paper and the common themes of the case studies examined above, I will consider a few pertinent questions:

Q: What do the public want?

A: To 'save' the archaeological heritage that they value. However, the precise meaning of 'save' varies from case to case, and is consistently unclear - even to those demanding it.

Q: What is the public's expectation of archaeology?

A: In the public's view, the role of the archaeologists ends with the uncovering of the site. The protection and preservation of the site as a visible, accessible heritage resource is regarded as the natural and right role of the state.

Q: What sparks the protests?

A: When the public will to 'save' the archaeological heritage is subordinated to the powers of private property and/or the state.

Q: Who wins?



A: In most cases capital and state power prevail, but in every case in this paper protest – amplified by sympathetic media – has proven its capacity to win concessions and compromises, and in the longer term to effect changes to policy and practice.

Q: Could a better public understanding of the principles of rescue archaeology and heritage management pre-empt and prevent future conflicts like these?

A: Honestly, I think it would make people even angrier.

But would this be a bad thing? I think not. The anger behind these protests was a righteous force that helped to strengthen and politicise communities, and affected positive change to heritage practices. Participation in protest is positively correlated with heightened political awareness and civic engagement. Protestors confronting an archaeological project are uniquely motivated to educate themselves about archaeology, and as public archaeologists we do them a grave disservice if we fail to step up and support them in this, even if we do not wholly share their goals or tactics.

The knowledge of archaeology that can empower communities is not found in textbooks, but rather in the understanding of archaeology as economically and organisationally bound up in the construction and development sector. This kind of public understanding of archaeology would be a component in a wider civic consciousness of urban and rural development, housing, infrastructure, public space, social and ecological stability, and the malign forces of the state, capital and private ownership ranged against them. One lesson of the Mithraeum, the Rose, and Seahenge is that if we want to drive progressive change in our industry and beyond, we need an angry and well-informed public on our side.

They need to understand us, but we also need to understand them – there is a clear need and great potential for further research into protest in public archaeology worldwide. Perhaps the most valuable insights might be gained from detailed interdisciplinary studies of ‘save’ movements as political organisations working in specific places, times, and contexts. The life-stories of these groups would provide fascinating insights for public archaeologists, detailing the movements’ histories, internal politics and interpersonal dynamics, their strategies and tactics, their successes and failures, and their individual and organizational afterlives. It would be particularly interesting to examine cases like that of the Rose Theatre, where an organization born in protest evolves into or gives rise to the more traditional form of heritage trust dedicated to the preservation of the site. As long as there are protests at archaeological sites, they will continue to shape our world and remain a valuable source of insights into public attitudes, interests and concerns about heritage, and as public archaeologists we can benefit a great deal from their study.

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