

## **Involving the public in archaeological fieldwork: how heritage protection policies do not always serve public interests.**

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### **Premise**

In this paper I wish to make some fairly obvious points about how the doing of archaeology, although destructive, is a key opportunity for sharing archaeology. I argue that our approaches to the protection of cultural heritage should not be used as an excuse to exclude people from the rewards of seeing and participating in fieldwork. This is an appeal for us to enjoy and promote the theatre of archaeology, and to be less precious about either our professional status or the vulnerability of the resource.

In promoting wider access to the process of excavation I am not advocating a return to profligate destruction, or any abdication of our responsibility to conduct work to professional standards: my comments are qualified by full acceptance that we must first build on the established platform of good archaeological and conservation practice. I also accept that there are many situations, especially in handling sacred sites and human remains, where intrusive investigation would be insensitive and inappropriate. A strong case can be made, however, for encouraging archaeological excavation to take place not as a means towards research or display, but as an end in itself. This recognition of the value of excavation calls into question some of the assumptions that underpin the way that archaeological heritage management is currently theorised and practiced.

We need to recognise more explicitly that people matter more than things: a simple enough goal that is obscured by the legislative emphasis on cultural property and resources, and by the way in which archaeologists have become part of the apparatus of government (Smith 2004). It remains the case that we study and protect sites and finds because of the meaning that they may have to people. These meanings are differently distilled from the detritus of the past and can be mediated and expressed in various ways – such as academic publications, museum displays, site visits and television programmes - but little can compete with the experiential learning embedded in the process of scientifically conducted archaeological investigation. More needs to

be done to promote and extend opportunities for the public to visit and participate in such excavations.

### **Visitors unwelcome**

Like most of my colleagues in British archaeology I have spent most of my career dealing with the conflicts that arise when modern needs threaten archaeological remains. We study the historic landscape in order to better protect our cultural heritage, or – where we can not find ways of doing so – in order to rescue what we can in advance of construction (see Matsuda this volume for a description of a similar state of affairs within Japanese archaeology). Most archaeological work in the UK takes place on behalf of construction companies before roads and houses are built, and the purpose of the work is to either reshape construction proposals in such a way that archaeological sites can be left unharmed or to salvage evidence by undertaking archaeological excavations. This is the discipline most often referred to as Cultural Resource Management, where the stated goal is conservation and where excavation is considered a second-best option: a way of mitigating the destructive consequences of development (Neumann and Sanford 2001). Since construction companies are responsible for causing the threat to the archaeological remains, it is they who are usually charged with finding the time and money to allow for archaeological studies and investigations deemed necessary by public authorities. Heritage professionals working for national or local government may guide the process, but the archaeologists undertaking the works are liable to find themselves working for the developer either directly (under contract) or indirectly (through agreements mediated in the public sector). These procedures have contributed to the growth of a successful business resulting in the discovery, investigation and conservation of many otherwise threatened sites, but they do not always cater for wider public interests.

One of the consequences of the close relationship that has been forged between the construction industry and archaeologists is that it militates against sharing archaeology beyond the narrow confines of the professional sector. There are several reasons why this is the case. Archaeologists involved in Cultural Resource Management are employed to provide expert advice to planners and builders. They have become adept at communicating with these professional colleagues and clients, but this is often at the cost of addressing the interests of other audiences. The technical and legalistic nature of the dialogue between archaeological experts and their clients in the building industry

and government officials is exclusionary and off-putting to outsiders. These problems can be exacerbated by the bureaucratic nature of consultation procedures (Gallivan and Moretti-Langholtz 2007). The brisk process of exploratory mapping that takes place in programmes of impact assessment means that archaeological features may be exposed for no more than a few hours before reburial, leaving no window of opportunity in which local interest can be engaged. Where important discoveries are made the preferred option is usually to isolate, bury and protect the archaeological remains, rather than to leave them vulnerably exposed. Where conservation is not feasible further excavations may take place, but these usually happen on building sites that are closed to the general public on grounds of safety and security. On many projects archaeologists are only permitted onto site after extensive formal induction into the procedural safety regimes of the construction company, and access is denied to all but essential workers. These considerations mean that there is often little opportunity for the wider public to see what is going on, let alone participate.

This alienation of local communities is not always the accidental consequence of hostile working conditions. New construction projects are often unwelcome and put developers into direct conflict with local communities. One scheme on which I am presently working involves the construction of a large sewage plant. Local residents recognise the need for such a scheme, but would rather it were located somewhere further from where they live. Archaeological finds that come to light on this project will gain an exaggerated status and importance. Local residents would welcome any new discoveries that might be deployed to delay or prevent the construction of the sewage farm, and popular attachment to the archaeological past is a convenient vehicle for objection to change. The risk of public protest encourages developers to control flows of information and to limit access to areas of investigation. Archaeologists are frequently complicit in this process, reluctant to be drawn into heated arguments that they fear may misrepresent the scientific evidence and promote economically unsustainable schemes for display and presentation, preferring to advise their clients privately on how best to study or protect the remains uncovered. These tensions were played out in the excavation and exhumation of the Prestwich Street cemetery in Cape Town: where archaeologists found themselves aligned with developers in resisting the pressures of a local opposition that wished to halt construction and memorialise an early colonial cemetery (Shepherd 2007). In his critical review of the limitations of cultural resource management archaeology in South Africa Shepherd describes the failure of professional archaeologists to engage with community interests. London's archaeological *cause celebre* came when the discovery of the foundations of

Shakespeare's Rose Theatre during excavations in advance of office building in 1989 resulted in enthusiastic calls for the further study and public display of this iconic site. These calls were not heeded by most of the archaeologists involved in the scheme, who instead assisted the developer in coming up with a revised foundation design that allowed for the reburial of the interesting remains (Miles and Brindle 2005). Subsequent attempts to put the remains on public display have foundered on problems of cost. In managing archaeological sites the easiest and cheapest option is usually to avoid the more sensitive remains and leave them buried, total archaeological excavation is more expensive but can open up sites to profitable redevelopment, whilst conservation and display is usually the most costly and least sustainable solution.

Archaeologists working in Cultural Resource Management are in an invidious position. Our profession has gained in status and influence because of its ability to find solutions to problems that allow builders to build without causing undue harm to the archaeological resource. We find ourselves in the business of pragmatically mitigating impacts, not quixotically championing resistance to change. The burials at Prestwich Street were found and exhumed, and the remains of the Rose Theatre were conserved *in situ* beneath a new building – in both cases cultural resources were managed in accordance with professional codes of practice - whilst profitable new developments took place against the wishes of objectors and leaving little evident legacy. The fear of many professionals is that if we can not find workable solutions to the problems of our clients in the construction industry, then we will return to a situation where archaeological sites that stand in the way of development are destroyed without record. This is what happened before the practices of cultural resource management became embedded in planning legislation and still happens in many places where these practices have not been adopted. This worry introduces an understandable degree of hesitancy in the relationship between archaeological practitioners and local communities. Our interests are not aligned.

These problems are most acute in cultural resource management projects. Research and training excavations undertaken by universities and research institutions are less evidently compromised by the partisan involvement in the process of modernisation described above, but can be insensitive to local interests and concerns for different reasons. Many archaeological missions are conceived and implemented with little direct reference to the concerns of the communities where the work is scheduled to take place. This has been a recurring problem in the colonial and neo-colonial explorations of western universities working in former colonies, and in the relationship

between academic establishment and indigenous societies (Nicholas and Hollowell 2007; Bernbeck and Pollock 2007b). Here the problems derive from different world visions and different ideas about the purpose of exploration and its impact on the explored, compounded by the essential inequality within power relations. These problems are particularly acute in situations where exaggerated wealth inequalities contribute to social and cultural barriers between the educated middle classes involved in archaeological research (public officials, university professors and students) and the disadvantaged communities who occupy the sites where excavations are planned. They also come to the fore in situations where archaeology has been pressed into the service of nation building in states that have lost the confidence of their citizens. The sad situation of archaeological looting and destruction in Iraq can in part be seen to follow from a local perception that archaeological sites are the property of the state and not of the people, and are legitimate targets for robbing in a state that stole from its citizens.

Often enough the main problem in engaging with local communities is a lack of adequate preparation, and of a shortage of time and resources to establish the complicated lines of communication that will put archaeologists in touch with other concerns and interests. This is a problem of the way in which archaeological fieldwork is funded, planned and organised and in the academic and teaching priorities of such exercises.

### **In defence of digging**

Archaeology used to be dominated by the business of digging, and most people outside of the profession still see us excavators first and foremost. Over the last half-century, however, we have become increasingly concerned with attempts to conserve and manage sites and finds (Lowenthal 1990; Smith 2008, 65). Presumptions in favour of conserving archaeological remains *in situ* for future generations are widely embedded within national antiquities and planning law (as in the UK by Planning Policy Guidance note 16). The same ideas are incorporated within a variety of international charters such as those of UNESCO and ICOMOS. Archaeologists have therefore recast themselves as stewards of heritage resources that need to be protected for future generations. Our opportunities to engage communities in the act of excavation are limited by the way in which we have embraced the rhetoric and philosophy of conservation. We excavate as a last resort, and on sites that are just not quite

important enough to warrant protection. If the emphasis is on conservation how, then, can we justify destructive fieldwork? When does the future, for which the archaeology is being protected, become the present?

The most commonly presented justification for fieldwork is to permit academic research, where excavations are undertaken in the quest for more complex interpretations and understandings of past society, or to improve our understanding of the survival and extent of archaeological sites and deposits in order to better protect and manage them. This approach is enshrined in Article 5 of the ICOMOS Charter for the protection and management of the archaeological heritage (1990) which states:

*“As excavation always implies the necessity of making a selection of evidence to be documented and preserved at the cost of losing other information and possibly even the total destruction of the monument, a decision to excavate should only be taken after thorough consideration. Excavation should be carried out on sites and monuments threatened by development, land-use change, looting, or natural deterioration. In exceptional cases, unthreatened sites may be excavated to elucidate research problems or to interpret them more effectively for the purpose of presenting them to the public. In such cases excavation must be preceded by thorough scientific evaluation of the significance of the site. Excavation should be partial, leaving a portion undisturbed for future research.”*

The research and management objectives used to justify such professionally designed exercises in destructive excavation provide a starting point, but have a worryingly narrow focus. The decision making process does not always take into consideration the fact that *“many archaeological sites have associative or educational values in addition to or independent of their research value”* (Lipe 1996, 23). In attempting to protect sites and monuments we are sometimes at risk of forgetting that the very act of excavation has a benefit. The archaeological site is where we discuss and interpret our findings, and where simplistic notions of how the past was constituted are challenged by the complexity of the evidence (Tilley 1989). Our experiences of discovery draw us towards new ways of making sense of both past and present (Shanks 1992). Because of this excavation is a form of theatre, instructive to both performers and audiences. It is the revelatory adventure of discovery, structured by scientific process that both authenticates and ascribes value to the material evidence, which captures attention. Our involvement can change the nature of what it is that we

deem to be significant and how we value things, where the importance of a site is increased not by abstract values of rarity and condition but by the interactions of people drawn to study and explore it. There is a didactic value to involving communities in such excavations, especially where archaeology can help confront and explore painful or contested pasts. *“Excavation as a central goal and ongoing activity is to be understood in both a metaphorical and literal sense: of excavating in minds, memories and archives as well as in the ground. The disturbing practice of exposing material elements of the past has a corollary in the reevaluation of collective memory through public discourses concerning the work”* (Bernbeck and Pollock 2007a).

It is this experience of field and laboratory research that is important, not the material remains themselves. The act of excavation is a means to constructing the past, and as a consequence it helps create the historic landscape: giving substance to the claim that *“archaeologists do not destroy sites, they create them”* (Frankel 1993). This theme has been explored more thoroughly by Lucas, who sees excavation as representing a process of transformation in which we give new life and new meanings to material remains through the experience of investigation (Lucas 2001). Holtorf goes further in his defence of excavation, and compellingly argues that the process of doing archaeology is more important than its results (Holtorf 2005, 74). He also shows how we have an abundance of material to work with, a body of material which is growing not contracting as we find new ways of finding and creating archaeological value, allowing him to claim that the past can be characterised as a renewable resource (Holtorf 2005, 132). These conclusions suggest that our proper objective should not be to preserve everything, but to find benefit in intrusive fieldwork and other forms of active engagement: *‘instead of preserving too much in situ and endlessly accumulating finds and data for an unspecified future, it is more than appropriate to take seriously the challenge of providing experiences of the past that are actually best for our own society now’* (Holtorf 2005, 147-8; with reference also to Leone and Potter 1992 and Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996, 13).

This does not change the need to ensure that we can manage the resource and protect it from ill-considered destruction. Nor does it serve to excuse badly conducted programmes of excavation that add to management problems without advancing research objectives. There is an abiding need to avoid destructive waste and profligacy, but the purpose of doing so is to husband resources so that they can be put to good use. In looking at possible uses of the resource it has to be recognised that only a few sites and finds can usefully be placed on display, or have an evident

contribution to make to the modern landscape. Most archaeological sites remain buried and invisible and only obtain value as places of discovery through the process of excavation. We should, therefore, be giving more of our attention to making sure that the benefits of excavation can be realised. The current emphasis on the research value that such sites might hold, and the consequent importance of creating some form of professional archaeological record that can be used as the basis for academic publication, is unnecessarily limiting. The event of archaeology is an occasion, presenting a sense of drama, and can be used as a means of engendering a sense of ownership of the research process by different communities. In dedicating our professional efforts towards managing and protecting archaeological sites, working in consort with developers and planners, we have lost sight of the fact that the main value of the resource is as a venue for activities and learning. In the right circumstances digging should be encouraged, and the experience of digging extended beyond the narrow confines of our profession. Archaeology is too interesting and too important to be left to archaeologists alone.

### **Widening participation**

Presently there are three main ways in which non-professionals become involved in the process of archaeological discovery: as students on training excavations, as volunteers working to supplement professional provision, or on community archaeology projects set up to involve the wider public in archaeological fieldwork and research. The widespread use of students to support research projects shows that we are both able and willing to work with unskilled staff. The assumption is that academic staff will ensure that students are not entrusted with work beyond their competence, but it remains the case that students are not qualified archaeologists.

Volunteers have also played an important role in archaeological fieldwork, particularly in Britain. Before the second world-war school-children regularly took part in excavations, and this trend was extended by the involvement of local archaeological societies in the rescue excavations that took place in the post-war redevelopment of cities such as London, Southampton and Canterbury. Local societies were particularly active in weekend working where they could take charge of fieldwork projects and conduct independent research into local history and topography, but the emerging professional teams also drew heavily on volunteers in a support capacity. Because of this the 1960s and 1970s represented something of a high-water mark in public



participation in fieldwork in the UK. This period also witnessed many of the methodological and theoretical developments that underpin contemporary fieldwork practice. The constructive dialogue achieved between the different communities drawn to the larger projects of the time gave impetus to a burgeoning profession.

Heritage professionals have subsequently taken greater control of access to both the resource and the research process, reducing opportunities for non-professionals to work in the field (Merriman 2002, 550). I have already touched on some of the reasons for this above. The widespread adoption of competitive tendering, where developers and construction companies can choose between archaeological contractors on the basis of cost (amongst other considerations), has necessarily been accompanied by a stronger and more restrictive regulatory regime. Attention has necessarily been given to the issue of how to make sure that archaeological works are undertaken by people who understand what they are doing, and will not sacrifice quality in pursuit of profit. This is the chief purpose of Article 5 of the Valetta Convention where the signatory nations undertake *'to ensure that excavations and other potentially destructive techniques are carried out only by qualified, specially authorised persons'* (Council of Europe 1992, article 5li). These procedures do not need to exclude non-professionals, since there are different routes to obtaining qualifications and qualified teams can include unqualified personnel. In many situations, however, procedures exist that restrict involvement to a select minority of the professional establishment.

Archaeology has long been rife with ontological and territorial jealousies that make it difficult for new researchers to start investigations into landscapes that have already been marked as the intellectual domain of more established academics. Licensing systems and requirements to obtain excavation permits, as enshrined in some national legislation, can be used to exclude all but a privileged few from the field of excavation. Even where this is not official policy the archaeological companies involved in competitive tendering look to the regulatory authorities (local and national government) and the professional establishment to establish a 'level playing field' so that unscrupulous companies can not put profits ahead of quality and rely on under-trained and inexperienced staff. It has therefore become difficult to use volunteers on fieldwork projects without falling foul of agreed commitments to use professional staff to meet professional standards. At the same time the greater reliance on employed staff has made it difficult to keep archaeological projects open at weekends and in holidays without costly overtime arrangements, whilst project budgets do not include allowance for using professional staff to guide the inexperienced. A declining will and capacity to

accommodate, fund and supervise volunteers has been accompanied by a decline in the numbers of people interested in volunteering for archaeological excavations, such that a recent survey of volunteering in the cultural heritage sector did not see the need to mention archaeology at all (Gibbs 2008). The value of volunteering in archaeology has diminished in the face of a perception that the professional sector can manage things alone.

Community archaeology projects now provide the main vehicle for non-professional involvement in fieldwork (Marshall 2002). Unlike other attempts to involve wider audiences, which have tended to be project driven and comparatively under-theorised, proponents of community archaeology builds on the concepts of multi-vocality championed within post-processual archaeology (as Hodder 1998). The purpose is to renegotiate relationship between public authority and other communities, especially the indigenous societies of post-colonial nations such as Australia and in the US. In these situations community involvement is also seen as an exercise in empowerment, in which some form of partnership is forged between professionals and the wider public (Simpson and Williams 2008). This has resulted in an increasing focus on the use of archaeology as a tool of civic engagement (Little 2007), where research projects are structured to promote social justice by issue-driven explorations of local and community history. These projects are at their most effective when the communities involved can participate fully in the planning, execution and realisation of project research goals (e.g. Brooks 2007; Gallivan and Moretti-Langholtz 2007). Expert advice remains a necessary and valued component of such projects, not least '*because of the authority of expertise and legitimising power of the institutions within which experts work*' (Smith and Waterton 2009, 117).

One of the reasons why community archaeology is gaining support is because of the emphasis given to social inclusion by government policy (Thomas 2008, 148). This has encouraged public funding for projects designed to engage local audiences in the excavation process, such as that undertaken by the Museum of London at Shoreditch Park in London. In two successive summer seasons (2005-6) more than 700 local people, most of whom were school children, excavated Victorian houses that had been destroyed in the Second World War (Aitken and Simpson 2005; Simpson and Williams 2008, 76-7). Such initiatives are welcome, but it is far from certain that community archaeology is an effective tool in developing social cohesion. This policy appears to build on naïve and uncritical assumptions about the nature of community and the value of heritage (Smith and Waterton 2009, 23). Communities are not homogenous groups

of people who live locally with shared ideas about the value and potential of the historic landscape they inhabit. In a recent survey Simpson and Williams (2008) conclude that community archaeology projects in the UK fail to meet public expectations. The excavations were successful, but had only short-lived impact and offered a limited range of experiences of meaningful collaboration with professional archaeologists. Interest soon waned once fieldwork was completed. Brooks (2008, 218) describes more positive outcomes from a project where the relationship between the target community and the archaeological research was more clearly defined. Here too, however, it is not clear that the excavations will offer long-term and sustainable benefits. Most archaeological projects are ephemeral, and offer experiences that are only tangentially relevant to the process of community building.

### **Towards a socially responsible cultural resource management**

A major problem is that community and teaching projects require a significant level of investment and support, but there are limited funds and opportunities for such work. Most archaeological fieldwork is undertaken in the context of cultural resource management projects. This is where opportunities arise, but where we struggle to adequately realise the social benefits of the archaeological resource. We need to rethink the way in which we organise and undertake such work, in order to widen opportunities for involvement and to draw on lessons learnt from the more successful community archaeology projects.

Archaeologists involved in heritage protection need to take account of the social and economic impact of their work. Cultural resource management is generally structured by the policies and procedures of 'Environmental Impact Assessment' (Glasson *et al* 2005), which require developers and their professional advisors to identify and mitigate adverse impacts on the environment. The legal emphasis on assessing material impacts has inevitably biased work towards protecting material remains, without adequately addressing the social consequences of the conservation policies adopted. We need to give equal consideration to the impacts of our work on the different communities and stakeholders involved, with an emphasis that moves beyond mitigation to considering enhancement. One route to achieving this would be through the more widespread use of Social Impact Assessments, and their integration with Environmental Impact Assessments (ICPGSIA 2003). Organisations are increasingly expected to take responsibility for the impact of their work on both society and the

environment and new mechanisms and procedures have been introduced to this end (Partridge *et al* 2005). New emphasis is being given to social responsibility, engagement with stakeholders, and principles of accountability. A key feature of these new procedures is the stakeholder engagement plan, which builds on understanding and mapping the interests of different communities and stakeholders (International Finance Corporation 2007, 168). These procedures are largely concerned with managing negative impacts in order to drive forward projects that are liable to be opposed, and it remains to be seen if they will have any meaningful impact on the practice of cultural resource management. They do, however, represent an opportunity for re-thinking the purpose of heritage protection policies within the context of identifying social benefit. Stakeholder engagement plans may be used to ensure that community participation is made an integral part of the archaeological studies and rescue excavations designed to mitigate development impacts on the historic environment. Archaeologists able to engage effectively with stakeholders may find themselves better placed to meet commercial requirements (International Finance Corporation 2007, 138). These concerns are not exclusively commercial. UK Research Councils are now interested in seeing impact summaries that explain how research output will contribute to enhancing the quality of life, health and creative output.

There are many pragmatic and practical reasons why many archaeological projects will be conducted with minimal public participation, and there are difficulties to resolve in shifting our emphasis away from environmental conservation and onto social engagement. This is, however, a proper objective in some instances. In order to decide whether or not excavation is an appropriate strategy we need to make judgements about relative values. All excavations should be structured to form part of a research cycle, and be driven by intelligent questions ambitiously asked. The goal must be to get the best value from the resource, recognising and protecting the unique. Our approaches have to be sustainable, and balanced by an awareness of the full cost implications of the archaeological process (which includes the need to conserve and store sites and finds, as well as publish and disseminate our results). These approaches need to build on what we have learnt from our engagement with community archaeology, draw on the best of research driven field methodology, but be realised within the world of cultural resource management.

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