
Symposium: Public Archaeology

Nick Merriman and Tim Schadla-Hall

This symposium will explore the theme of 'public archaeology', characterised not in a limited way as cultural resource management, but as an approach to archaeology which lays a particular emphasis on the public dimensions of doing archaeology. Central to its concerns are the social, political and economic contexts in which archaeology is undertaken, indigenous attitudes to archaeology, and the educational and public role of the discipline. It is an approach that has been fostered by the World Archaeological Congress, and relates strongly to two of WAC4's specific themes: archaeology in a global context and the role of archaeology in the coming millennium.

The aim of the session is to summarise the field and to look forward to the future. Each of the ten speakers will take a particular area of public archaeology, such as the public perception of archaeology, archaeology and the media, community involvement in archaeology, treasure hunting and looting, or the conflict between academic and popular views of the past. They will provide a summary of current issues and approaches, and suggest developments that may occur in the context of an expanded role for public archaeology in the next millennium.

Archaeology and the media

Neal Ascherson

The relationship between archaeology and the media is a two-way process. After more than a hundred years of reporting and representation in print, and latterly on radio and TV, the profession has in the last half-century acquired proactive media skills which have enabled it to impose at least some of its concerns on the media, and to enlist publicity in support of archaeology.

Media representations have been burdened with a number of Eurocentric stereotypes which essentially date back to the 'imperial' 19th century image of the profession. There has been an assumption that archaeology is exclusively about 'finds', and an insatiable demand to know the cash value of those 'finds'. The coming of television, in Europe a post-1945 development, offered a new medium which was largely free of this obsolete imagery. Archaeologists were swift to take advantage of it, and to create an enduring public fascination with 'real' archaeology, its techniques and expectations. Most field archaeologists today understand how to enlist local communities and local media into their activities.

Aboriginal post-contact cemeteries and the archaeology of indigenous minorities

Denis Byrne

Along with other traces of the Aboriginal post-contact experience, Aboriginal post-contact cemeteries in New South Wales have suffered from a degree of neglect by heritage managers. This results from a privileging of pre-contact over post-contact archaeological remains by the non-indigenous archaeologists who have tended to dominate the field of Aboriginal heritage management. While such archaeology is no longer publicly identified as 'prehistoric', in practice this remains its orientation, making its influence over the heritage field particularly unfortunate. The conservation of the cemeteries provides scope for study of changing styles of grave decoration and commemoration, and for other archaeological approaches. However, it is not possible to pursue a fabric-based approach in isolation from the emotional and social layers of meaning which these places have for Aboriginal families and communities. As with such sites as ceremonial ground and even shell middens, the physical archaeological traces on or in the ground become a focus for memory and story-telling about the past.

Public archaeology in Brazil

Pedro Paulo A. Funari

The paper aims at discussing the social, political and economic context in which archaeology is undertaken in Brazil, suggesting also the developments in the context of an expanded role for public archaeology in the next millennium.

The presentation of archaeology to the public

Alistair Hinshelwood

Archaeology for whose interest, archaeologists or the locals?

Bertram Mapunda,

Archaeological research in East Africa started over eight decades ago. Since then almost every district in the area has been visited by archaeological researchers at least once. In fact some districts have become almost second homes for some researchers. Surprisingly, the majority of the East African public, including those from areas with semi-permanently based archaeologists, are unaware of the meaning, scope and significance of archaeology and archaeological materials. Using concrete examples and indicators of public lack of awareness about archaeology, this paper discusses factors and effects of this problem as well as suggesting some remedial measures.

Involving the public in museum archaeology

Nick Merriman

Museum archaeologists are required to serve two principal constituencies, the needs of the discipline on the one hand, and those of their museum employers on the other. For the profession, museums primarily serve as repositories of archives passed on by contracting units, as providers of services to specialist enquirers, and as disseminators of synthetic statements for the public via galleries and exhibitions. For the museum employer, museum archaeologists are expected to play their part in providing services for the many rather than for the few, and to participate in programmes aimed at boosting the museum's audience.

It is argued that the pressure on museums produced by the archaeological resource management process leads to an overbalance in the time and resources spent on servicing the archaeological profession. This can lead to a perception by local authorities of archaeology in museums as being narrow in focus and specialist.

The archaeological profession as a whole needs to embrace the concept of a truly 'public archaeology' both for reasons of good practice, and to ensure that archaeology is valued as a subject that can contribute to education and enjoyment in the wider community. Examples are given of museum archaeological projects that attempt to do this.

Indigenous communities and public archaeology: A case study from Southern Madagascar

Mike Parker Pearson, Ramilisonina and Retsihisatse

To the people of Androy, in the extreme south of Madagascar, despite having strong knowledge of and interest in the past, archaeology is largely an academic construct. As archaeologists, we have to explain our work to people in one-to-one situations or in formal speeches to small village groups. At the same time we are as much interested in what people wish to tell us about traditions and stories or know from the presence of pottery sherds. Excavation needs permission not just from the living but from the ancestors and requires appropriate animal sacrifices. There are also many sacred sites, which no one may disturb. Interest in what we do varies considerably; some wish only to ensure that the appropriate hospitality is dispensed and that we are harmless, whilst others enjoy many days of field-walking, showing us sites and discovering new ones that they were previously not aware of. Many people do not trust outsiders, and others are not particularly interested in what we find since they consider that the past exists and does not have to be searched for. For those that are interested, things that are written down are not of much use and are best held in the memory.

The effect of the antiquities market on archaeological development

Dashu Qin

Most of the centres of ancient civilisation are now in the 'developing countries'. The development of archaeology in these areas is closely related to the antiquities market. Three stages in the relationship could be identified, as follows:

In the early stage, the search and discovery of cultural relics by local people (and the development of a market for their discoveries) also led to the development of some form of archaeological investigation. In the following stage, archaeology developed gradually as a discipline and extended its work systematically into more and more fields. At the same time the antiquities trade also extended its range. However, the development of each field was relatively independent of the other. In the third stage, with archaeological work broad in perspective and widespread in location, the antiquities trade began strongly to affect archaeological development in a negative way. Looters began to target archaeological works and known archaeological sites in order to provide resources for the antiquities market. As a result, many important ancient sites and remains were looted.

Urgent action is required to address the activities of the antiquities trade and to prohibit those that jeopardise archaeological development.

Ayodhya and the influence of religion on the understanding of the past

Nandini Rao

“The comforts of unreason”? Alternative archaeologies

Tim Schadla-Hall

In recent years there has been a steady increase in “alternative” interpretations of archaeology, this is by no means a recent trend. Stories which explain various elements of the past have been invented and manufactured for centuries in the UK, as well as elsewhere in the world. The “comforts of unreason” seems to be more and more popular despite the advances in archaeological explanation and investigation. They are so popular that a constant stream of books and television programmes (based only marginally on facts -whatever they are!) have far higher sales figures and viewer numbers than more factually based accounts. Today many of the books concerned are to be found in history sections of the mainstream bookshops in the UK thus blurring the distinction between academic archaeology and alternative archaeology. The standard approach of the academic establishment used to be to ignore the wilder shores of publication. Certainly there was no truck with the ideas which were promulgated.

However the steady increase in public interest in archaeology (demonstrated by increased visitor numbers to archaeological sites, increased demand for more media coverage and increasing booksales means that it is important and worthwhile both analysing the nature of this development and looking at ways in which it might be turned to the advantage of “mainstream archaeology”. There is no doubt that large numbers of students both young and old find their way into archaeology via an exposure to alternative archaeologies in their various forms, and rather than ignoring this trend archaeologists should do more to participate in them and understand them.

Archaeology and authority in the modern age

Roger Thoma

Since 1881, the authority of the British State has played a significant role in establishing the view of the nation’s archaeological past. This has been done through the process of defining certain monuments as being of ‘national importance’, for the purpose of giving them legal protection. This process has been carried out by officials, with advice from selected academics. There is no system of appeal against a decision to designate (or not) a monument as being of ‘national importance’. Since the 1980s, the role of the state has changed, due largely to the extension of market principles, including the central notion of ‘choice’, into many areas of life, previously controlled by state monopolies. It is not surprising that the notion of choice has affected the way the past is viewed, with different individuals and groups choosing to believe in different pasts. A related aspect of this is the application of the concepts of sustainability to protecting the archaeological heritage, with an emphasis on the value of local, as opposed to national, views of ‘importance’.

Against this background, what should be the proper role of the state archaeologist in the next millennium? I will argue that this role should be one of guide and facilitator, rather than one of unquestioned (and unquestionable) authority.