

THE ROLE OF MUSEUMS

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Summary

Museums play a variety of roles in the preservation of archaeological sites and monuments. Some museums undertake heritage protection functions themselves, and manage the archaeological heritage of a region or nation. Many museums give advice on development proposals and undertake fieldwork. The most common roles of the museum, however, are the preservation of sites “by record” through the curation of the finds and records made in advance of the destruction of sites through development, and the dissemination of a conservation ethic through public education programs. While the latter role is successful, recent investigations have shown that the curation role of museums is being inadequately fulfilled. Storage areas are crowded, material is often in poor condition, and usage of archaeological archives is low. If the records of excavations cannot be adequately cared for, then the rationale of preservation “by record” is challenged. It is argued that the way forward must be to achieve improved resourcing for this role of museums through encouraging greater use of archaeological collections in the present, and hence greater support for their preservation.

Archaeological curators have to be a little more adventurous in what they do, take account of the interests and needs of contemporary communities, and be prepared to relinquish the notion of the inviolable nature of the archive.

1. Introduction

Some of the first public museums in the world, such as the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, included antiquities amongst their collections, and in the last three hundred years archaeology has been one of the principal museum disciplines. Today, there are approximately 25 000 museums around the world, of which an unknown number feature archaeological collections and undertake archaeological activities. Museums in general, and even museums dealing with archaeology, vary hugely amongst themselves. At the one end of the spectrum there are large scholarly institutions such as the British Museum or the Louvre, which are international in outlook and which have historically seen themselves as research institutions with a public face. At the other end of the spectrum are the small local museums of archaeology and history, usually with few resources and frequently voluntary staff, sustained by dedicated groups of individuals and often with close links to the community. What unites these otherwise disparate organizations is their common focus on preserving and making accessible the material remains of the human past. It is this focus on the physical evidence for past human activity that generally distinguishes museums from theme parks, heritage centers, and open air “museums,” where modern materials are used to “recreate” the past.

2. The Role of Museums

The most commonly accepted definition of a museum is that promulgated by the International Council of Museums (ICOM):

A non-profit making, permanent institution in the service of society and of its development, and open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates, and exhibits, for purposes of study, education and enjoyment, material evidence of people and their environment.

The twin roles of the museum in both preserving and making accessible the remains of the past have always been in a certain degree of tension. The most successful method of preservation would be to store material in climate-controlled stores and allow little or no access to it; while total access to material would in most cases lead to deterioration. This tension reflects the two temporal orientations of the museum. One of these is towards future generations, for which the material should be preserved. The other is towards the present generation, which should be encouraged to use the material and the knowledge contained within it for their education and enjoyment.

With the growing desire in recent years in many parts of the world to see greater short-term accountability for public funds, the balance in museums has shifted much more towards the use of museum collections in the present. This has been expressed by the new definition of a museum accepted by the Museums Association of the UK in 1998, which sees much greater emphasis on museum users and services in the present:

Museums enable people to explore collections for inspiration, learning and enjoyment. They are institutions that collect, safeguard and make accessible artifacts and specimens, which they hold in trust for society.

One of the major questions raised by this greater orientation towards service in the present is whether this means that the museum's role in preservation has diminished.

3. Categories of Archaeological Museum

There are several different categories of museum that encompass archaeology within their remit. The commonest is the archaeological collection within a more general museum. In many countries of the world, there are local, regional and national museums that provide an overview of the art and culture of their area. Very often these will contain substantial archaeological collections with their own dedicated galleries and specialist staff, while in other cases the archaeological material will be under the care of a more general curator who also has responsibility for other material.

Museums devoted to archaeology, however, are not uncommon. Many are multi-theme or multi-period museums, such as the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, the Sharjah Archaeological Museum or the South Tyrol Museum of Archaeology (which includes famous "Iceman" find). Here the collection has usually been accumulated over a long time, and may reflect the entire archaeological past of a particular region or country, or even (in the case of encyclopedic museums) selected parts of the world. Many archaeological museums concentrate on a single theme or period such as Egyptology, or Classical civilization, while many are even more specific, such as the Limesmuseum Aalen, which concerns itself with the Romans in Baden-Württemberg and the military history of the "limes" region.

The most specific kinds of archaeological museum are site museums, which are adjacent to, or located within, archaeological sites and monuments. Sometimes these are essentially vehicles for the interpretation of the wider site, using finds from excavations, often supplemented with audio-visuals, graphics and models. An example of this type is the Wall Museum in Staffordshire, UK, which is a small museum located adjacent to a Roman settlement with a modest display of finds. Sometimes, as at the ancient city of Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka, they are fully-fledged museums which house the material excavated from the site itself and fulfill the role of research centers, being equipped with stores, laboratories, and facilities for post-excavation processing and analysis.

Other archaeological museums are essentially site museums but are for various reasons not located at the site itself. The Vedbaek Museum in Denmark, for example, presents finds and reconstructions relating to a single Mesolithic site found nearby. The Museum of the Iron Age in Andover, England, showcases the extensive fieldwork investigations of the nearby Danebury hillfort. And the Neanderthal Museum at Mettmann near Dusseldorf presents the discoveries of early human occupation in the area.

All of the above kinds of archaeological museum, which are the subject of this article, are differentiated from open-air archaeological museums by their focus on original

artifacts and materials. The latter, by contrast, are places where modern “reconstructions” (more properly termed “constructions”) of ancient sites are made. Owing to their lack of original materials, they are not normally placed in the same category as other museums, and will not be considered here. However, there can be hybrids. At the Roman Open Air Museum, at Hechingen-Stein in Germany, an excavated site was partially reconstructed, using the original foundations, with the newly reconstructed rooms being made into the museum. In a similar fashion at the Roman site of Arbeia in South Shields, UK, a full sized Roman fort gateway was constructed amidst the foundations of the larger site.

4. The Museum’s Place in Preservation Philosophy

Museums can assist in the preservation of archaeological sites and monuments in the following ways: by helping to preserve them *in situ*, by preserving the records of their investigation *ex situ*, and by promoting the preservation and appreciation of archaeological sites through their displays and other programs. The conservation philosophy of *in situ* preservation is relatively straightforward: by protecting the site from depredation, it is preserved for future generations. Increasingly around the world archaeological resource management philosophy is seeing the option of preserving sites *in situ* as the preferred mitigation strategy in the face of development pressures. As we shall see below, a number of museums operate such protection services.

However, future generations will only ever be able to study and enjoy any below-ground remains if they are disturbed through excavation. *In situ* preservation protects, but (except through the use of non-destructive survey methods) it does not allow any advances in knowledge. Archaeology as a discipline thus has a vested interest in advancing knowledge through destructive investigation of *in situ* deposits. Philosophically such destruction is justified as sustainable because the museum is said to preserve the site “by record” through curating, in perpetuity, the finds, records, samples, photographs and reports which were generated in the course of the excavation. In theory, the site itself can be “reconstructed” through these finds and records. In practice the viability of this role is questionable. As will be shown below, once excavated, sites are not preserved in any meaningful sense. They can certainly be investigated and recorded in advance of destruction, but to argue that they are “preserved” through these records is semantic slipperiness.

5. The Role of Museums in Preserving Sites *in situ*

In many countries of the world, it is museums which carry out national or regional functions relating to the protection of sites and monuments which in other countries are undertaken by specific government agencies (link to article on government agencies). The National Museums of Kenya, for example, has an Archaeology Division that maintains a record of all known archaeological sites in Kenya and mitigates in cultural resource management programs throughout the country. The Museums’ Sites and Monuments Department identifies and gathers information on all locations, buildings and other structures which are, or may be, of cultural significance to Kenya. To protect such sites from destruction or inappropriate development it seeks their registration as legally protected National Monuments.

It is also not uncommon for regional or local museum services to have responsibility for the custodianship of a small number of monuments within their collecting area. The Jersey Heritage Trust, Channel Islands, UK, for example, administers a series of museums, together with the Neolithic tomb site of La Houge Bie, and Mont Orgueil Castle. Colchester Museum Service, UK, is housed in a Norman fortress built on the foundations of a Roman temple, and has responsibility for various archaeological sites in the area.

At a larger scale, and in increasing numbers in recent years, are archaeological parks or reserves, in which an area of great archaeological importance (usually a whole landscape rather than a traditional bounded “site”), is set aside for protection from development, and to which museums and other facilities are added. One example is the Pueblo Grande Museum and Archaeological Park, Phoenix, Arizona, which features a prehistoric Hohokam ruin and exhibits on Hohokam culture and archaeology. Other examples include the Archaeological Museum-Preserve “Tanais” in Russia and the Archaeological Museum Carnuntinum in Bad Deutsch-Altenburg, Austria, which combines a traditional museum with the presentation of the extensive remains of a Roman city.

Museum services that have direct responsibility for the preservation of sites and monuments *in situ* are in the minority across the globe. However, one significant way in which museums can help preserve sites *in situ* (or assist their destruction) is through their stance on the global trade in portable antiquities.

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Biographical Sketch

Nick Merriman has worked at the Institute of Archaeology, University College, London, since June 1997; he is currently a Reader, coordinating postgraduate programs in Museum Studies. He is also Curator of UCL Museums and Collections. After a First in Archaeology at the University of Cambridge and a Distinction in Museum Studies at the University of Leicester, he undertook Ph.D. research at Cambridge aimed at understanding museum visiting as a cultural phenomenon, in order to develop ways of widening museum audiences. This research was subsequently published as *Beyond the Glass Case: The Past, the Heritage and the Public in Britain* (Leicester University Press, 1991). From 1986 to 1997 he worked at the Museum of London, first as Curator of Prehistory, and from 1991 as Head of the Department of Early London History and Collections. In 1993–1994 he led the *Peopling of London* project, which successfully presented the neglected history of London's cultural diversity to new audiences. He has published several books and articles, sits on numerous national committees, and is both an Associate of the Museums Association and a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London.