

THE ROLE OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETIES IN PRESERVING CULTURAL MEMORIALS

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Keywords: amateur archaeology, Antiquarians, archaeological heritage management, archaeological societies, cultural resource management, heritage, nationalism, professional archaeology, public education quality assurance

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Summary

This paper examines the role of archaeological societies in preserving cultural memorials. The phenomenon of archaeological societies has its roots in the antiquarianism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries but dates primarily from the beginning of the nineteenth century. There are many different types of archaeological societies, with different aims that can be broad as well as very narrow, and they operate at different levels, nationally and internationally. Their development over two centuries is examined in relation to their aims in dealing with material remains from the past. These can be summarized under four headings, three of which can be seen as traditional concerns of archaeological societies, although they have reappeared in different forms: research, public education, and political activity. The fourth, professionalism, has been born in the last quarter-century, although some of its aspects have a longer history.

1. Introduction

Human fascination with the past has a long history that can be traced back into antiquity. The roots of “archaeological” thought are indeed very old, although archaeology became an academic discipline in the modern sense only gradually, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Concerns about the way in which material remains of the past are dealt with have an equally long history. In fact, it can be said that the

roots of modern day archaeological “heritage” or “resource” management are as ancient as those of the academic discipline.

Although we know about this history largely because the remains of the past were a concern of emperors, kings, or popes, we also have the evidence from the writings of classical philosophers and historians. In the Middle Ages, and especially during the Renaissance, such learned men and collectors were part of networks that encompassed all of Europe and soon extended into the New World and Asia. China, of course, had its own independent tradition of antiquarianism with equally ancient roots. But it was not until the eighteenth century that the existing antiquarianism in Europe led to the first organizational structures, and many archaeological societies were formed, especially by the nineteenth century.

Although the history of organization in archaeology is a quite interesting subject in itself, it is not the primary purpose of this paper to discuss it in too much detail. In the previous century, and especially in the last two or three decades, archaeology and its position in society have changed rather drastically, and this has also affected organizational structures and institutions, though perhaps not as much as one might wish. Some of these changes will be examined here, especially current trends and developments that may point the way to new roles, created by the challenges put to archaeological organizations by contemporary society in relation to their role in preserving cultural memorials.

A modern definition of cultural resources, proposed by W. Lipe is: “All cultural materials, including cultural landscapes, that have survived from the past, are potentially cultural resources—that is, have some potential value or use in the present or future.”

The idea of seeing the material remains of the past as a *resource* (for society as a whole as well as for research by archaeologists) became widespread in the last quarter century. This was especially true in the English speaking part of the world (despite there being similar, relatively neutral terms in other languages—such as the Italian term *beni culturali*—these are not necessarily attached to the same idea). It is seen as an effective way to put archaeological remains as cultural resources at the same level as other scarce—and in this case also fragile and non-renewable—resources in the modern day world. It is also a way to use a more value-free concept than “heritage,” although it has been argued that such a view creates a utilitarian view of the past and is linked to a positivist theoretical framework.

2. Heritage, Nationalism, and the Beginnings of Archaeological Societies

The use of archaeological heritage for nationalistic and ideological purposes has become a popular subject of study in recent years, which in part is due to its clear abuse in many cases that are now well documented. The use of the past in, say, early nineteenth century Denmark, in the newly founded Greek state in the same period, or in the current formation process of the European Union differs significantly, of course, from the role of archaeology under the Third Reich. However, while studying the past in itself need not necessarily be politically motivated, dealing with remains of the past and wanting to take care of them is always a political activity, and in most countries the

beginnings of this activity are intimately connected with politics and nationalism. In fact, even the word “heritage” carries the meaning of “that what is inherited from one’s ancestor” and is thus intimately connected to the political and cultural history of groups or nations. This is true for many languages, for example the French concept of *patrimoine* or the German *Kulturerbe*. In fact, both the Latin terms of *patrimonium* and *monumentum* refer to *moneo*, “to cause to think,” and this is also found in Germanic languages, for example Scandinavian (*fornminnen*) or German (*Denkmal*) and indeed in the concept of “cultural memorial” (see *Archaeology*).

It is not surprising, therefore, that the first attempt to create a society for the preservation of national antiquities, by English antiquarians in 1572, failed when James I would not grant it a charter because its aim was judged to be political. Following the birth of Academies of Science in many European countries in the seventeenth century, the world’s first archaeological society, the Society of Antiquaries of London, was formally constituted in 1718 and chartered in 1754. In the UK as well as in many other European countries, the period in which the oldest archaeological societies were founded is the first half of the nineteenth century. By the end of that century, there were similar societies in most countries in Europe and in other parts of the world. The German *Verein für Nassauische Altertumskunde und Geschichtsforschung* was founded in 1812, for example, and *Det Kongelige Nordiske Oldskrift Selskab* was formed in Denmark in 1825.

The aims of these early societies were very similar and had to do with the preservation of archaeological and other cultural property and the prevention of its destruction, as well as the investigation of such remains and the founding of museums with educational purposes. They came into existence as a direct consequence of the political restructuring of post-Napoleonic Europe, the formation of nation states and the need to develop, or—in the case of long-established countries such as France, Spain, Portugal, and Great Britain—to (re) define a “national identity” (see *The History of Archaeology*). The past is an essential component in that process, and it is significant that the concept of “national antiquities” was invented in this period. The term *antiquités nationales* was used in the title of a collection of five volumes, published in 1790 by the French antiquarian A-L. Millin and was soon applied widely all over early nineteenth century Europe.

The national heritage rapidly became one of the foundations of the nation as a political and a demographic entity and was—often quite consciously—used to create and foster national awareness and pride. The concern over these national antiquities was a driving force behind the foundation of archaeological societies, as is evident from their original aims, statutes, and the role that they played. At national but also at regional level, collections were assembled and exhibited, often replacing the curiosity cabinets of princes and kings (see *The Role of Museums*). Sometimes archaeological societies also played a part in other aspects of creating an infrastructure for the study of the national past. This includes setting up libraries, creating local and regional archives, and the establishment of archaeology as an academic discipline, which occurred in the same period (around the turn of the century). In 1818, C. Reuven in the Netherlands was appointed as the world’s first university professor of archaeology with an explicit

teaching commitment for “national,” prehistoric archaeology; and in 1819 C. Thomsen in Denmark designed the national museum around the stone-bronze-iron succession.

In other parts of the world developments occurred somewhat later although, for example, in India the Asiatic Society of Bengal was founded by 1784, and an American Antiquarian Society was founded in Massachusetts in 1812. In Mexico, Simon Bolivar himself was apparently involved with creating legislation to protect archaeological remains in the 1820s. In Japan, archaeological organizations were founded during the Meiji period in the late nineteenth century, and the first legislation to protect “national treasures” was introduced around the same time. Nevertheless, the developing science of archaeology was normally practiced if not by European scholars in a colonial framework then at least from a “Western” perspective, although in a country like Japan the nationalist movement led to independent development. In the United States, substantial work was done on American archaeology from about the mid-nineteenth century onwards. But it was classical archaeology, embodied in the Archaeological Institute of America (“AIA,” founded in 1879), that remained far more important in the discipline as a whole until well after World War II. The Society of American Archaeology (SAA) was only founded in 1934 and the Mexican Society of Anthropology, which also covered archaeology, in 1937. In most Latin American countries some kind of archaeological organization was established by the mid-twentieth century.

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Biographical Sketch

Willem J. H. Willems is director general of the State Inspectorate for Archaeology of The Netherlands, and Professor of Roman Archaeology at the University of Leiden. He was born in 1950 and studied anthropology at the University of Amsterdam, Netherlands and the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, USA from 1972 to 1977. He worked as a research scholar at the Netherlands Organization for the Advancement of Pure Research and obtained his Ph.D. cum laude from the University of Amsterdam on a dissertation entitled “Romans and Batavians.” His work in Roman archaeology includes numerous articles and several monographs. Since 1981, his work has mainly been in archaeological heritage management, as provincial archaeologist and later as deputy director of the Dutch State Archaeological Service, ROB (*Rijksdienst voor het Oudheidkundig Bodemonderzoek*). From 1989 to 1999 he was the director of the ROB and state archaeologist of the Netherlands. He also has published extensively on various aspects of archaeological heritage management. He participated in the Council of Europe committee that drafted the Malta Convention and was the founding President of the Europæ Archæologiæ Consilium. Currently he serves as President of the EAA, the European Association of Archaeologists. His present work includes a national committee charged with maintaining a system of quality assurance in heritage management in The Netherlands and the creation of a state inspectorate.