

10 years

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Online Journal in Public Archaeology

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FORUM:

CHATTING ABOUT THE FUTURE OF PUBLIC ARCHAEOLOGY

With the tenth anniversary of the journal we wanted to take a deep breath and look into the future.

This forum consists of short pieces from colleagues around the world that discuss general and specific issues regarding public archaeology in the coming years. We asked for an open format, trying to grasp a fresher approach than the one usual academic writing permits.

As with other forums in the journal, we will keep it open from now on in case any of you want to participate too. It is a good occasion to debate the current and coming role of public archaeology and we hope this selection of papers helps to foster it.

We originally invited 50 people to participate. However, these difficult times made it difficult for some to do so. Nevertheless, we have a good set of contributions that will be of interest to you all.

Enjoy it (and participate if you feel you have something else to say).



Laugh now,
but one day
we'll be
in charge.

banes

FORUM: Chatting about the future of public archaeology

“LET’S SEND MILLIONS OF QUALIFIED PUBLIC ARCHAEOLOGY CADRES TO THE NEW MUSEUMS AND COMMERCIAL UNITS!”

Gabriel MOSHENSKA

Introduction

An obsession with origins is a hallmark of pseudoarchaeology, while the celebration of arbitrary anniversaries is one of the more meaningless conceits of the heritage industry. In that spirit, I would like to wish a happy tenth anniversary to *AP: Online Journal in Public Archaeology*, and to extend my warmest congratulations to the editorial team.

I have spent much of the last year happily engrossed in public archaeology’s past (see Moshenska 2020a; 2020b). The Covid-induced cancellation of conferences and fieldwork has cast a gloomy shadow across the discipline’s present. This feels, then, like a good time to be thinking – optimistically, creatively – about the future. In that spirit, I borrowed and slightly adapted the title of this piece from some Soviet Five Year Plan propaganda, hoping for a modicum of the same glazed-eyed optimism, Stakhanovite effort, and ruthless implementation.

What follows is a rambling exploration of my own fancies, prejudices, and such original ideas as can break through this fog of anxiety-induced insomnia. I imagine that most academic papers could begin with a disclaimer of this kind. My other disclaimer is simply a reminder that I write from a highly privileged position within anglophone academia, and that this privilege both informs and limits my perspectives.

Soviet aspirations aside, the suggestions and directions outlined below are not intended as any sort of imperative or guide, but rather as a personal ‘to do’ list for making my own engagements with public archaeology and its wider worlds more intellectually dynamic and satisfying, and with the aim of providing better expe-

periences and opportunities for my students. I hope that they might be of modest interest to others.

Reconnecting in a spirit of disciplinary humility

The first years or decades of an emergent intellectual sub-discipline are spent in vigorous intellectual, institutional, and individual self-fashioning aimed at carving out a unique and defensible position. New theories and methods are announced, new terminologies are coined, and a great deal that is borrowed from adjacent disciplines must be hastily repainted in fresh new colours. If public archaeology has been less obnoxious in this than some of its cognate fields, it has not been wholly innocent.

My primary prediction for the near and middling future of public archaeology is a reconnection with other disciplines, a growth in collegiality and collaboration, and a recognition of the strengths and advantages of drawing together around shared aims and approaches. Some of these, such as aspects of rapprochement with the academic fields of museum studies and cultural heritage studies, are beyond the scope of my personal interests and expertise. I want to briefly examine three distinct areas where I believe public archaeology could gain considerably from greater interdisciplinary bridge-building, in a spirit of humility and general recognition of ourselves as the smaller or more junior party.

Public humanities

The first of these is to more firmly situate public archaeology as a component of the broad field of public humanities, and to engage with discourses and activities taking place under this label. Public humanities is a growing field with research centres (most notably at Brown University), professorships and fellowships, graduate programmes at Sheffield (UK) and Brown (US), and a number of networks and other arenas of activity (see Smulyan 2020 for more details).

Public humanities is defined slightly differently in scholarly and applied contexts, but broadly speaking it refers to both promoting public engagement with the humanities, and encouraging

humanities scholars to engage in activities in the public sphere. For these purposes 'the humanities' are generally defined broadly, to include elements from the arts and social sciences as well as traditional humanities disciplines such as history, philosophy, and literary and cultural studies.

Like public archaeology, public humanities has a foundation of scholarship and practice in academia, as well as a presence in museums and cultural institutions of various kinds. There are also a probably incalculable number of public humanities projects taking place on local scales and through a mixture of grassroots and externally led sources. Again, like public archaeology, there is far more public humanities work taking place than is ever formally labelled as such.

What can we gain from a closer alliance or identification with the public humanities? This remains to be seen. To some extent there are benefits of putting a name to existing collaborations between, for example, public archaeology and public art (e.g. Acheson Roberts and Sterling 2017), or between public archaeology and public history in museums. More substantial networks of scholars, practitioners and activists across the public humanities disciplines would enable a far easier sharing of practices, tools, evaluation data, and could help open up access to new audiences.

From students' perspectives there are advantages in more general or blended graduate courses that could lead to a wider set of employment opportunities across the GLAM and education sectors. Aside from employment interests, many students might appreciate a broader liberal arts-type education with a firmer grounding in public engagement, socio-political contextualisation, and activism.

What can public archaeology contribute, in turn, to the public humanities? The elements of practical fieldwork, community engagement, and amateur inclusion are long-standing themes in public archaeology that were once far more common in public history – for example in the history workshop movement – and have since begun to fade in significance. Public archaeology offers a wealth of knowledge and experience in practical, hands-on forms of public engagement many of which could be adapted or shared across disciplines.

Classical receptions

The connections between classical reception studies and public archaeology are so clear and obvious, it's surprising that they have not been explored to a far greater extent already (but see Hamilakis 2007; Moser 2015). Classical receptions examines the representations of Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome – their literature, culture, architecture, art, etc. – in post-classical cultures. This includes studies of classical influence on modern theatre (Andújar and Nikoloutsos 2020), science fiction and fantasy (Rogers and Eldon Stevens 2018), and comic books (Kovacs and Marshall 2011).

How might classical receptions connect with studies of archaeology and popular culture? There is a slight issue of equivalence – much of the archaeological side of this work blends together studies of the representation of the ancient world with studies of the representation of archaeology and archaeologists themselves. Classical receptions, for the most part, has resisted this more narcissistic angle. Some of the most influential studies of popular culture representations of archaeology, archaeologists, and the ancient world are those by Cornelius Holtorf (e.g. 2005, 2007). Holtorf's work is excellent and highly influential, but it slightly predates the current growth in strength and influence of classical reception studies.

What might public archaeology take from a closer alliance with classical receptions? Already we can see a growth in reception studies focused on Ancient Egypt (e.g. Moser 2015) and a more modest amount of work on receptions and representations of pre-history (e.g. Horrall 2017) but these latter, again, are not generally explicitly associated with either classical receptions or public archaeology. It would be good to see future studies in archaeological representation and reception – for example in the growth field of archaeo-gaming – engaging more closely with the rich literature, more established methods, and dynamic forums for debate and publication that classical receptions can offer (for a good example of work moving in this direction see Reinhard 2018).

Science communication

When asked to define public archaeology, I sometimes describe it as a mixture of science communication (SciComm) and science and

technology studies (STS) but focused specifically on archaeology. A considerable amount of public archaeology – those elements focused on engaging public audiences with archaeological processes and knowledge – is directly comparable to SciComm, in the same way that it corresponds to related fields within the public humanities (see above). For a good overview of science communication in archaeology see Melville (2014).

Public archaeology has drawn on SciComm theory and method for decades – see for example Merriman's (2004) discussion of the 'deficit model' and 'multiple perspective model' for the public understanding of science. Responses to alternative or pseudo-archaeologies have also drawn on understandings of anti-scientific thinking in the public perception of fields such as evolutionary biology and vaccines.

Both public archaeology and SciComm have rich, convoluted and centuries-long histories, stretching back to periods in the early nineteenth century when science and archaeology were only beginning to emerge as 'professions', and the public/expert and public/private divides in both disciplines were still forming. Both have more superficial genealogies of 'Great Men' (and occasionally women) who serve as the public faces of their science, from Michael Faraday and Mortimer Wheeler to Alice Roberts and Brian Cox.

There is a growing need and expectation for public archaeologists to be skilled and technically adept communicators, capable of running a podcast, shooting a short film, running an open day for schools or hosting a stand-up comedy night. Some of these skills are learned in practice and in employment, but arguably there is a deficit in skills training within public archaeology, and a widespread acceptance of amateurism.

Compared to graduate programmes in public archaeology, heritage studies, museum studies and related fields, SciComm courses tend to focus more closely on communication skills training. These skills courses bring together elements of print/digital and broadcast journalism, public relations, and audience development. The demand for skilled science communicators is high across STEM sectors and industries as well as within journalism, museums etc.

What might public archaeology gain from a greater engagement with SciComm? Public archaeology is more than just communication, so I would not suggest a move towards SciComm-equiv-

alent skills-focused graduate programmes. That said, a relatively greater quantity of skills training would certainly benefit students and future employers. I think there is a far greater need for open, accessible training and teaching resources for specific public engagement and communication skills, made available freely or as cheaply and accessibly as possible. This is not to undervalue the work of public archaeology experts and specialists, but our aims are better advanced by spreading and developing practical skills across the sector as a whole.

In summary...

I like the idea of public archaeology as a confident and established field of practice, making connections and building bridges with other disciplines and growing stronger together. At the same time, I see a fragmented discipline far too stuck in isolated national traditions, a divide between scholarship and practice, and a too-small (but growing) body of PhD-level research.

Who knows what public archaeology will look like ten years from now? Many of the scholars, practitioners and activists who will shape this next decade are probably only just beginning their studies, and will bring with them a whole new set of skills, ideas, aims and expectations. I hope they won't feel too limited by the dreams and ambitions of their predecessors.

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AP: Online Journal in Public Archaeology

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Tenth Anniversary Edition

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ISSN: 2171-6315

AP Journal is a peer-reviewed journal devoted exclusively to Public Archaeology. It is freely distributed online on the Website:

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