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Editors:

Jaime Almansa Sánchez & Elena Papagiannopoulou



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Online Journal in Public Archaeology

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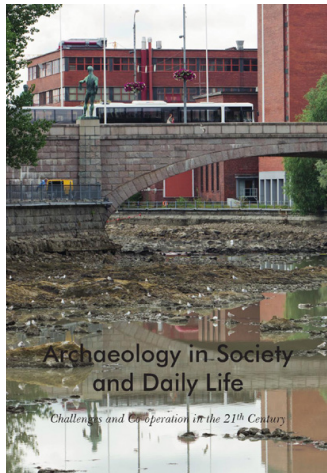
Online Journal in Public Archaeology

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REVIEWS



Dawid KOBIAŁKA

Archaeology in Society and Daily Life Challenges and Co-operation in the 21st Century

Pinkanmaa Provincial Museum

ISBN: 978-951-609-713-1

2013, 100 pages

The presented book is an outcome of a session entitled *Archaeology in Society and Daily Life* organised during the 18th annual meeting of the European Association of Archaeologists in Helsinki (Finland) in 2012. The book editors are Ulla Lähdesmäki, Sami Raninen and Kerkko Nordqvist: the same researchers who organised the session. Due to the fact that each of 11 chapters is written by a different author, the book touches upon many issues of public archaeology and heritage management. This is the reason why only some aspects of otherwise interesting ideas will be highlighted in this review. It is impossible to discuss each chapter in detail; I will rather focus only on chapters that I found especially worth analysing.

At the most elementary level, the book is about the ways in which the past is manifested in the present and how archaeologists interact with society. Indeed, this is one of the burning issues of contemporary archaeology that has been discussed already for some decades. All authors would agree that the strength and relevance of archaeology does not simply lie in the past itself. The past is always *for itself*, as Hegel would have put it. It is mediated by the present and contemporary society. That is why the past should be used to benefit contemporary people.

The unquestionable value of *Archaeology in Society and Daily Life* is the discussion on the different perspectives of public archaeology and heritage management in various European (Finland, Spain, Belgium, the Netherlands, Greece, Estonia) and non-European (US and Egypt) countries. I hope that it is *not* my utterly subjective opinion but contemporary archaeology, including the fields the book touches upon, is dominated by – let us call it – Anglo-Saxon archaeology. Of course, it is true that many interesting things are going on in the UK; however, this book highlights the valuable work of archaeologists in other countries.

For example, Mieke Smit, Corien Bakker and Willem Derde in their chapter “Archaeology in Everyday Life: A Blessing or a Curse?” make a very interesting observation. According to them, the implementation of the Treaty of Malta caused a very paradoxical situation. The intention of the Treaty was to find better and more effective ways of preserving heritage from which the present-day and future society could benefit. However, instead of becoming part of contemporary society, the professionalisation of archaeology (so-called commercial archaeology) created a gap between archaeology and society which has never been wider. Post-excavation reports dripping with incomprehensible jargon are useless for contemporary society. It is a pity, because, as the authors of this chapter try to account for, society is fascinated by observing and experiencing the work of archaeologists and their results. I fully agree with what the authors claim. Nonetheless, I do not think that ‘useless’ knowledge is really in every case – to put it simply – a bad thing. In the history of science, it is easy to find examples showing that, those who were working on useless knowledge, made the greatest discoveries and wrote the most important books in the end. I am even tempted to claim that useless knowledge is what should really define humanities. What for the authors is a curse has its own dialectical reversal: *a blessing in disguise*. This insight should be developed a bit further.

All the contributors of *Archaeology in Society and Daily Life* seem to share one more conviction: there is a gap between archaeology and present-day society. Without any doubt, this is a valid observation and deeds filling in this gap should be undertaken. This is the issue that the authors try to account for, and I fully agree with such a perspective. However, “There is nothing more deceptive

than an obvious fact,” said Sherlock Holmes in one of the novels to his good friend, John Watson. Thus, one should keep in mind an old dialectical lesson: every gap separates things but also every gap is what binds things together. This second perspective and its consequences for public archaeology are evidently overlooked by the contributors.

Jaime Almansa Sánchez, in his chapter “A Problem of Value? Public Perceptions of the Past and Daily-life-archaeology in Spain”, takes an approach in the vein of Cornelius Holtorf when he analyses different references to archaeology, heritage, and the past in general in contemporary popular culture, taking the situation in Spain as a case study. It has always been surprising to me how archaeology can be *recontextualised* in the present, as Michael Shanks would have said. The author does not complain that archaeology is simplified by popular culture and so on. Quite the opposite, the Spanish archaeologist accurately points out that “The daily presence of products like these [e.g. products that make clear references to archaeology and the past in general – D.K.] is an opportunity to consciously increase the presence of archaeology in social debates” (p. 29). He also refers to a well-known event that happened during the summer of 2012 in one of the Spanish churches. An old woman, who was asked to clean the church, took her tasks too seriously. As it is known, the woman decided to ‘restore’ a small fresco of an *Ecce Homo* (Fig 1).

Almansa treats the story and its popularity in the media around the world as another example of making fun of heritage. Of course, he is right but in my opinion, it is more productive to treat the fresco as if it was a Freudian symptom. Is the woman not really like every good archaeologist who endlessly fights for the preservation of heritage? We all do something similar to this: try to restore, improve, and preserve the past. And this would be my critical comment towards other contributors of *Archaeology in Society and Daily Life*. Sometimes destroying heritage (e.g. the quite ordinary fresco of an *Ecce Homo* by the old woman) really is meant to give a life to another one: the ‘restored’ fresco has become a famous heritage object of its own, visited by thousands of tourists from around the world. Who knows, perhaps it is the time to destroy heritage a bit instead of preserving it?



Fig 1. A meme of the 'restored' fresco of an *Ecce Homo* (author unknown)

Also, the so-called metal detectorists are usually treated by archaeologists as a threat to archaeological heritage. They are the subject of a very interesting chapter ("Responsible Metal Detecting as a Tool for Enhancing the Protection of Archaeological Heritage") written by Ingrid Ulst. The Estonian archaeologist accounts for responsible metal detecting, relying on data gathered from several countries, including Sweden, Latvia, Denmark and Finland. According to her, strict official regulations are not sufficient. It would be more productive for the fields of archaeology and archaeological heritage to make friends with metal detectorists rather than enemies. Both can contribute to science and society. In addition, detectorists are part of society and looking for metal artefacts is their way of making heritage relevant for them. The task of archaeology is to make metal detecting useful to archaeology as well.

Another way of making heritage relevant for local communities is allowing people to 'adopt' monuments. Frankly, I like this idea very much. It allows people to actively experience heritage as a part of their lives. Indeed, the issue is approached by Aino Nissinaho in a chapter entitled "Experiences of the Adopt-a-Monument Programme in Finland". The author describes the ways this project has been applied by Pirkanmaa Provincial Museum (Tampere, Finland). What is especially worth highlighting apropos the program is the fact that the museum staff discern heritage from more than just the ruins of the medieval church. The same attention is also paid to some defence systems built during World War I or even old transformer buildings from circa the 1950s and 1960s. In short, *heritage is everywhere* and should be practiced in different ways. Without any doubt, the adoption program is an interesting perspective on making heritage meaningful for present-day people.

Relying on my own experiences in archaeology and heritage management in Poland, I used to claim that sometimes the worst thing that can happen to heritage is an archaeologist, a heritage conservator, or a heritage manager. The same insight seems to be shared by Sara Kayser in her chapter "Can the Egyptians' Close Relationship with Archaeology be Used to Enhance Preservation of Sites and Monuments?" Egypt is one of these countries where one can encounter old heritage almost around every corner of a city and village. From one point of view, this is a blessing for Egyptians and

the Egyptian economy because millions of tourists visit the country every year. Tourism and the heritage industry enable millions of Egyptians to earn a living. From another point of view, this blessing is a curse. Tourism has been such an important source of income that politicians were mainly concentrated on making Egypt an even more attractive destination for foreigners. However, this attitude overlooks the fact that the heritage of Pharaohs belongs also to contemporary citizens of Egypt. As Kayer shows, the authorities create obstacles for Egyptians to experience their own heritage: for example 'ordinary Egyptians' are not allowed to hold picnics by the pyramids (p. 95). Tourism might be then a true curse to heritage. That is why the Egyptian archaeologist claims: "Whatever the form, any effort to bring Egypt's archaeology back into the lives of ordinary Egyptians, beyond tourism revenues, could do much to enhance the chances of its preservation in the future" (p. 99).

To summarize, I recommend this book to everyone who is interested in the interconnections between public archaeology and heritage management. Although the book does not offer any sophisticated archaeological theory on the role of the past in the present, this is not necessarily a weakness. The contributors rather discuss more practically-oriented archaeological engagement with present-day society. The past is always present and books that deal with this are always welcome in archaeological discourse.

BLOG REVIEWS UNTIL VOL 4

Almansa-Sánchez, J. Audiences... A review of the CASPAR session at TAG-on-Sea 2013 (Bournemouth University) - 11 February

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Touloupa, S. A 30-year retrospect of the Greek Ministry of Culture educational programmes: an insider's insight - 25 April

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