

Talking People

From Community to Popular Archaeologies

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Abstract

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One issue that in recent years has become more important to all archaeologists are the relations between professional archaeology and “the public” at large. A new archaeological sub-discipline has emerged that deals with all such issues using the shorthand phrase of “public archaeology”. This paper addresses some aspects of public archaeology, by focusing on both community and popular archaeologies. We argue that contract archaeology should be opened up for public involvement and that archaeologists should to some extent ride on the wave of their own popularity. We believe that, in the future, archaeology will largely have to be concerned with the present rather than the past. This is a shift in focus, from stories about the past told in the present to stories about the present referring to the past. In our opinion, future archaeology must work most closely with the pre-understandings of the public and their expectations of archaeology.

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Introduction

Archaeologists, whether they work in contract archaeology, heritage management, museums or in universities, are part of the common archaeological project that is the translation of the past into the present. This task requires many different skills and it leads to many different results. The resulting diversity of archaeology is a strength rather than a problem. The fact that archaeology is both academic and political, both commercial and educational, both practical and theoretical makes the disci-

pline strong and ultimately not only more interesting but also more relevant than would be the case if any of these aspects were lacking.

One issue that in recent years has become more important to all archaeologists, whatever they do, is the relations between professional archaeology and “the public” at large. A new archaeological sub-discipline has emerged that deals with all such issues using the shorthand phrase of “public archaeology” (see e.g. the journal with that name). Whether the specific

relationship between archaeologist and non-archaeologist is one of supplier–customer, teacher–student, or expert–amateur, among others, it is becoming increasingly relevant to understand better whom archaeologists are actually dealing with. What do customers expect of the archaeology they pay for? How appealing or relevant are university curricula to archaeology students? How are the professionals perceived by hobby archaeologists? In each case, an important question is how relations between the two sides could be improved for mutual benefit.

This paper addresses some aspects of public archaeology, by focusing on both community and popular archaeologies.

Community archaeology

Meeting the public during a contract archaeology excavation project brings up many questions: Is it necessary to arrange activities to meet the public at all? What kind of stories are told, and why? How are they presented? Are we to speak of communication, dialogue or participation in this context? Do the stories told concern the past, the present or the future, and whose past, present and future would that be?

The increasingly important concept of “community archaeology” is concerned with some of these questions (Marshall 2002; Derry and Malloy 2003; Smith 2004). But it does not only touch upon the public part of the archaeological excavation. It permeates all activities of archaeology. In a project carried out as community archaeology, everything is done from that perspective. Community archaeology must thus be “understood as a distinctive set of practices within the wider discipline” (Marshall 2002, p. 211).

Community archaeology includes an intimate involvement in project design and interpretation by community members. Archaeology is no longer a goal in itself and

instead becomes a means to achieve other objectives. In accepting pluralism and embracing multivocality in telling stories about the past, community archaeology accepts that the archaeologists will not control every aspect of a project, but need to create space (and power) for additional stakeholders too. This, however, does not mean to accept an “anything goes” perspective (for a discussion of this, see Magnusson Staaf 2004). It rather means accepting the many contemporary claims about the past as an important element of modern society, and it also means accepting that the archaeological viewpoint is only one among many.

In the practice of community archaeology, goals and objectives of projects are developed jointly by the archaeologist and members of local communities (Malloy 2003). Community archaeology therefore requires two kinds of knowledge: knowledge of the resources used, i.e. the archaeology and the archaeological record, and knowledge of the contemporary society and the project’s audience, i.e. how the world surrounding the project uses the past and what it desires for the future (Derry 2003, p. 27). This approach emphasizes the importance of considering and reflecting on what we as archaeologists bring into a project, how that influences what we find, and the story we later tell about the project – not only in terms of how we interpret the past, but also in terms of the meaning we choose to give the past in the present. Likewise, community archaeology is about considering and reflecting on what community members and groups bring into a project, how they give meaning to the past in the present and what they desire for the future. If community archaeology was to be adopted as the paradigm for all contract archaeology, fundamental changes in its entire discursive practice would be required with regard to all these aspects (Moser *et al.* 2002, pp. 220 ff.).

At the Alexandria Archaeology Museum in Virginia, for example, US community archa-

eology has been an integral part of activities for several years. Cressey *et al.* (2003, p. 3) described the work they have been carrying out like this:

Rather than move through a linear procedure ending in a public interpretive product, Alexandrians have created a spiralling process that starts with public dialogue, includes public interaction along the way, and produces many different public products that meet community needs as defined by its members. Archaeologists are not always the key or central actors in the community archaeology process ... we are striving toward a cooperative forum of discovery and expression of the material past in Alexandria.

In this text some key issues of community archaeology are emphasized – public dialogue and interaction, a focus not on the archaeological interpretive results but on the process of interpreting as such, and a recognition of the importance of others than the archaeologists.

How this perspective works in practice is illustrated by an example where an area with an abandoned black cemetery was the object of plans for development. By including a community archaeological perspective in the project, the local museum, together with a group of local collaborators, was able to draw attention to the site and its historical significance. As a result, a plan to create a commemorative park around the cemetery was established. The developer conducted archaeology to locate and mark out the graves. These were left unexcavated and became an integral part of the park. A modern sculpture was raised to commemorate the people buried in the cemetery. The benefits of carrying out the project on a community archaeological basis were enormous:

The pairing of the historic cemetery and contemporary sculpture in a park setting

has done far more for people's inner sense of history – our presence of the past – than excavated human remains. Archaeology was applied to contemporary needs, and in so doing, people seized history and made it meaningful today (Cressey *et al.* 2003, p. 8).

Community archaeology and Swedish contract archaeology

So what about Swedish contract archaeology and the concept of community archaeology as it has been briefly presented here? Is community archaeology a valuable model for Swedish contract archaeology? Was Maureen Malloy correct when she stated in her introduction to a book entitled *Archaeologists and Local Communities: Partners in Exploring the Past* (2003, p. ix) that in archaeology “partnership with the public must go beyond participation by the public”? Swedish examples of public education efforts within contract archaeology focus in general on participation. But is it possible to develop a partnership *with* the public?

Even though a wide range of theories, methods and practices can be found in different community archaeological projects, there are several important convictions and premises about archaeological practice and interaction with communities that are shared by all and deserve to be emphasized. Following Maureen Malloy (2003), three issues are most important:

- Archaeologists are accountable to the public in the broadest sense of the term and meeting this responsibility involves developing and maintaining a long-term relationship with the community.
- Archaeology is only one way of knowing the past. Other voices and perspectives must be incorporated in the work.
- Community partnership makes for better

archaeology. Collaborating with local communities improves the quality of the archaeology.

It is obvious from the published views and thoughts about community archaeology that the question of whether or not it is a model for Swedish contract archaeology cannot be easily answered. Considering the three issues pointed out above, community archaeology is a lot about values and attitudes. The people involved need to make decisions about how they think or want the past to be an integrated part of the present and how archaeology should be a part of this. All this needs to be done on both an individual and an institutional level, both within contract archaeology and within society on a broad scale.

From this it is clear that this discussion is important. Both the benefits and the disadvantages of community archaeologies need to be subject to debate. It is also obvious that the discussion needs good examples to illustrate the arguments of both sides: those who claim a need for stronger public participation as well as those who claim the lack of such a need.

Letting the public participate, letting others than archaeologists ask questions from the initial phase of the investigation onwards, and letting this participation and these questions have an influence on the entire excavation procedure of a project is only worthwhile if a number of assumptions are in fact

justified. Among them are the assumptions that:

- the questions raised by members of the community will be different from those raised by archaeologists;
- the questions raised by others will generate other kinds of answers and that this is something positive;
- archaeology has something to offer in practice, beyond the narratives of the archaeological interpretation of past events;
- participation by non-archaeologists in this practice brings about benefits for the project;
- investigating the past has a value different from the educational value of the results.

Within the established framework of Swedish contract archaeology the customary practice is to excavate, to do research, to report and to educate the public about all these different archaeological practices (cf. Burström 1997, 2001). However, the extent to which ordinary archaeological work can include activities involving meeting the public is largely dependent on co-operation by the developer who pays the bill.

In the light of the opinions, perspectives and visions expressed in governmental propositions and writings (*Kulturpolitikens inriktning* SOU 1995, p. 84; *En hållbar framtid i sikte* SOU 2003:31), and recent statements about the aims and objectives from the Swedish National Heritage Board (Johansen 1998; *Det dynamiska kulturarvet* 2002), it is possible that the customary practice of archaeology, as outlined in the Act concerning Ancient Monuments and Finds, might change in the future. This is also the suggestion put forward in the recently published governmental report about the future of Swedish contract archaeology (*Uppdragsarkeologi i tiden* 2005). In a vision and strategy document for the years 2004–2006, the Swedish National Heritage Board highlights values such as accessibility,



Fig. 1. Contract archaeology in Malmö meeting the public, summer 2004. Photo: Malmö Museer.

co-operation, communication and participation as important aspects for institutional work with cultural heritage (*Kulturarv i tiden* 2004). It is obvious that many of the basic values promoted by community archaeology are close to these intentions, and might therefore very well inform the legal framework for Swedish contract archaeology. For example, participation in the initial planning of excavation research programmes could easily be done together with local community representatives. This could be a possible way to make it easier for subsequent community participation and ongoing dialogue (Högberg 2002).

However, the community archaeology concept cannot be uncritically applied to Swedish contract archaeology excavation projects. The conditions in which the community archaeology concept has been developed differ radically from the conditions for Swedish contract archaeology. For example, most of the community archaeology projects focus on local communities. Swedish contract archaeology must be concerned with more than just the local level, though. Community archaeology is also problematic in other respects. A specific community and the public at large are not always the same, and they may have different interests and views. For instance, concerning the costs involved in contract archaeology, a given community may have a special interest in archaeology and be willing to spend a great deal of money on it, whereas most of the population may have another view. Also, the shared convictions and premises about community archaeology presented earlier (Malloy 2003) raise questions. For example, if other voices and perspectives ought to be incorporated in the work, whose voices and perspectives should that be? Is it every voice we meet, or just the most interesting, or the most uninteresting, or maybe the loudest ones? Moreover, is it possible to combine a project aiming to develop a long-term relationship with a community with the demands of competition and flexibility in line with how

archaeological business is to be carried out, as addressed in the previously mentioned governmental report (*Uppdragsarkeologi i tiden* 2005)? These are polarized questions which nevertheless must be asked. Any answers given to them will need to be carefully scrutinized. If Swedish contract archaeology wants to further develop integrated working methods, community archaeology has a lot to offer concerning how this might work and which issues need to be considered.

Archaeology's popular appeal

A very different strategy of giving people a stronger voice in archaeology involves a realignment of the discipline in terms of its existing image in contemporary popular culture in the Western world. The German journalist and archaeological author Dieter Kapff (2004, p. 130, our translation) argued in a recent commentary:

Archaeology appeals to a large number of people. But members of the contemporary fun-society are not actually interested in increasing their knowledge, in education, information or intellectual stimuli. The educated classes [Bildungsbürgertum] of the 19th and early 20th centuries no longer exist. Today, people want entertainment.

Does that mean that we are now living in a new type of society which requires a new profile for archaeology? Have the links between archaeology and traditional values of education been severed? Is archaeology's popular portrayal showing the field its perspective for the future?

Few disciplines are lucky enough to be similarly widely and similarly positively represented in popular culture as archaeology is. The brand of archaeology is associated with so many positive appeals, stories, and dreams that other brands, despite their sometimes vast

advertising budgets, could only be envious. If brands are like persons, then archaeology comes across as a person you would intuitively like to have as a good friend and maybe spend your holidays with. In other words, archaeology can make people enjoy themselves and satisfy some of their innermost wishes and desires. Archaeology's positive appeal provides also an enormous opportunity for the entire discipline because it helps build a huge support network on which it can rely when needed. There is one crucial condition for all this, though. Archaeologists will only be able to use the enormous appeal of their own brand if they themselves stand behind it and embrace its various connotations in their work. The most important question that archaeologists in public contexts need to ask their audiences is not "How can I best persuade you about the merits of my project or discipline?" but "What does what I am doing mean to you?" (Ascherson 2004, p. 157).

Yet up until now the meaning of archaeology to its own public audiences has not very often been investigated by archaeologists (significant exceptions include Kirchner 1964; Pallotino 1968; Welinder 1987; Jensen & Wiczorek 2002). An explanation for this may be that academics prefer studying eternal cultural



Fig. 2. Playmobil toys featuring a popular archaeological cliché. Image courtesy of Playmobil, a registered trademark of geobra Brandstätter GmbH & Co. KG, reproduced by permission. The company also holds all rights to the displayed toy figures.

achievements to investigating the pleasurable frivolity and ephemeral superficiality of popular culture (Maase 2003). But if we want to understand how people now are appreciating archaeology within the worlds in which they live, it is inevitable to study archaeology within that very context.

Maybe as a result of this lack of research, archaeologists have not properly come to terms with the popularity of their own subject in the mainstream. It is revealing that a fairly large proportion of archaeologists still seem to find nothing more urgent than to distance themselves from popular heroes like Indiana Jones or Lara Croft. Typical for the awkwardness with which archaeologists meet their own popularity is the following account:

People everywhere are fascinated by archaeology. Archaeologists know it. We are all familiar with exclamations like "Oh, how interesting," or "How lucky you are," when a new acquaintance learns of our profession. We are accustomed to fielding questions like "What's the oldest (weirdest, most interesting, or most valuable) thing you've found?" Each of us has developed a set of polite responses to these questions – responses we hope are not patronizing, misleading, or didactic. (Jones & Longstreth 2002, p. 187)

Ironically, nothing seems to be harder for archaeologists to get to grips with in their relations with non-archaeologists than their seemingly limitless public popularity which is unrivalled among academic disciplines. Ascherson's question ultimately leads to a new paradigm for public archaeology (see also Holtorf 2004a, 2004b, 2005). Put simply, professional archaeologists will need to try and work *with* rather than *against* the pre-understandings and expectations of their non-archaeological audiences. It has become pertinent and even urgent to try and relate archaeology to "what's hot and what's cool in the world

beyond the professional and academic boundaries of the discipline” (Darvill 2004, p. 57).

Any possible benefits of a purely academic understanding of archaeology – different from its popular appeal – are not obvious to the rest of the population. As a group of Swedish students (André *et al.* 2001) demonstrated in a thought experiment, it is all too easy to argue that archaeology is a pretty useless and unsuccessful academic discipline that tells us very little of a highly hypothetical nature about issues of little relevance to us today. Arguably, archaeology produces little else than artefacts that end up in dark storage vaults and literature, such as excavation reports, that not very many people will ever read. At the same time, money is lacking for health care, social security, education, alternative energy research, or international solidarity, so that one can only wonder how anybody could possibly want to go ahead with archaeology at all. To counter such arguments, professional archaeologists must be proactive and make sure that they fulfil, and are seen to fulfil, a social role that is widely appreciated in society. This ambition to define archaeology in terms of usefulness and legitimacy should not be considered as the “prostitution” of an academic discipline. It is rather a reminder of its social duty (see also Rieche 1996).

The role of archaeology in society

It does not take more than a single look at the characterization of archaeology in popular culture to find out what might be archaeology’s most important aim and function in contemporary Western society: archaeology tells us stories that are both exciting and full of important metaphorical meanings (Holtorf 2004b). Archaeological stories are about heroes who overcome adversities and solve mysteries. Archaeologists can give meticulous attention to detail. Their research is often about con-



Fig. 3. A popular rendition of the archaeologist on a rescue mission. From the comic *Tumac* (1981). Drawn by Jesús Blasco (1919–1995).

templating, and perhaps answering, large existential questions or addressing other issues of great significance to many people. Archaeologists are taking responsibility for scarce resources to everybody’s benefit.

These issues and stories matter to very many people, for they reflect some of their own dreams and aspirations but also issues of concern and immediate relevance to their own lives (Jensen 2002). We all live through adventures during which we need to overcome adversity, hoping to emerge as heroes. We all need to attend to detail, occasionally hoping to solve complex “cases”. We all wonder about what it all means and where it will all end, hoping to gain some certainties and peace of mind in an uncertain world. We all need to use resources economically, both personally and on levels of larger communities of, for instance, employees or citizens, hoping that we will “manage”. In other words, archaeology tells us stories that are directly concerned with ourselves. It is these stories that give archaeology currency in the contemporary world. By the same token, John Fritz (1973, p. 81) summarized what archaeology contributes society in the following way:

archeology is of interest to, rooted in the experience of, and is beneficial to the common [hu]man in several respects. It provides puzzles to be solved, vicarious experience of the exotic and the adventurous, the hope of “striking it rich,” and a form of contact with the “other world”.

In a sense it can be said that the archaeologist is not digging for artefacts but for dreams (Petersson 1994, p. 71; Holtorf 2004b). This entire popular dimension of archaeology should not be buried by traditional academic habits and the social values of the educated middle classes with which probably most professional archaeologists have grown up themselves. At the end of the day, most of professional archaeology is not in the education but in the story-telling business. Archaeologists, like others who have tales to tell about the past, are “sophisticated storytellers” and as such they are “performers on a public stage” (Fagan 2002, p. 254).

All that is not to say that archaeology was any less important than previously presumed, quite the opposite. Well-chosen stories educate people in many ways, and they can also create political good will. Moreover, story-telling and the foregrounding of “experiences” have become central to the society in which we live. Besides their other functions, they contribute to people’s social identities and can give inspiration, meaning and happiness to their lives (Schulze 1993; Jensen 1999). These are no small achievements – not only because of the immediate satisfaction gained by the individuals directly affected (Fowler 1977, pp. 28 f.). Arguably, society too benefits from citizens who occasionally fulfil their dreams, can overcome adversities, develop inquiring minds, ask – and learn to deal with – large existential

questions, or gain a sense of purpose from being able to contribute to important missions. If all that can be fun too, then so much the better.

At the same time, professional archaeologists and others must problematize and critique the stories and themes that are associated with the subject of archaeology. The audience’s interpretations and possible implications and consequences of particular popular portrayals of archaeology need to be critically assessed continuously. This is the single reservation without which archaeological stories, however popular, should not be told. Such assessments may lead to acceptance, require modifications or a complete rejection of a particular way of depicting archaeology. But critical assessments are never easy, and there are no general rules that could suggest perfect responses in all eventualities. Each situation needs to be looked at carefully in its entire context and must be assessed on its own merits. What makes general recommendations harder still is that everybody may have a different set of values or criteria to be applied in any such assessment.

The widespread fascination with archaeology, then, lies on a different level than professional archaeologists – pleased by the interest in their work – tend to assume. Archaeology provides memorable experiences that appeal to many people. It tells stories that relate to wider trends and themes of our soci-



Fig. 4. Elvis comic on the occasion of National Archaeology Day in Sweden. Drawing by Tony Cronstam. Published with permission by Tony Cronstam.

ety. It is engaging people in various ways. Many of these experiences, stories, and engagements draw on the practices of *doing* archaeology in the present: excavating ancient remains, discovering “treasures”, rescuing archaeological sites, and investigating our origins with the help of modern technology loom large (see also Holtorf 2004a, 2004b). It is in these realms that archaeology can meet substantial proportions of its contemporary audiences and thus find its own role in the 21st century.

Conclusion

In this paper we have touched upon two different aspects of a single issue, that is, the future role of (public) archaeology. We addressed it first from the professional viewpoint, discussing community archaeology and claiming that contract archaeology should be opened up for public involvement. We then discussed it in terms of popular archaeology, claiming that archaeology and archaeologists should to some extent ride on the wave of their own popularity and conform to some of the public expectations in order to be meaningful and widely appreciated in society.

We believe that, in the future, archaeology will largely have to be concerned with the present rather than the past. This is a shift in focus, from stories about the past told in the present to stories about the present referring to the past. One of the present challenges for the archaeological discipline is to find ways of coming to terms with this change. In this, two questions emerge as particularly important for further discussion:

- What does what archaeology is doing, mean to others in society?
- What does what others in society are doing, mean to archaeology?

In our opinion, future archaeology must work most closely *with* the pre-understandings and expectations of the public from archaeology.

Both community archaeology and the popular appeal of archaeology in the Western world can serve as inspirations for discussing Swedish archaeology in this perspective.

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