

The Value of Archaeology

This article is meant to give a very brief overview of the value of archaeology in contemporary society in relation to the changing values of today's world.

Archaeology as a discipline is often considered to be a past-time, the desire of some people to obtain useless details on human evolution or long-vanished civilisations and archaeologists must shoulder, at least, part of the blame for the present situation as they have failed to adequately explain and disseminate their findings in a way which is accessible and attractive to the public in general. Archaeologists have themselves created the 'cultural consumer' referred to by Tilley (Tilley 1989), that is, a public whose contribution is passive in nature, a helpless spectator being shown selected 'treasures' in a museum.

It is, or it should be, the main task of the archaeologist to change this mercenary view and ensure that the public recognises the importance of archaeology and the past in modern society. The advantages of opening up the world of archaeology could be even greater than we can imagine. Long term it has the potential to expand knowledge by looking at the data from a previously unexplored point of view. Short term, it might be the only way to preserve our cultural heritage. (Knoop 1993:442) The public, ranging from the youngest child to the elderly, from the college professor to the workman, has to be made aware of the value archaeology has in its everyday life.

What is the value of archaeology?

"The past is the basis on which contemporary society has been built. A knowledge, or at least an awareness, of the past is crucial in order to understand modern society through the evaluation of past social interaction. It is this link between the past and the present which makes knowledge of the past a valuable commodity"¹. Such value has been divided by Martin Carver into three main categories: human value, community value and market value. (Carver 1996:45-56)

Archaeology's **Human Value** consists mainly of its information value, that is, its use of the archaeological record to try to arrive at a reasonable picture of the past. Archaeology has overcome the limit placed upon history by the availability of written documents and has also provided an insight on sections of society which are often overlooked in the documentary records such as women, the working class and ethnic minorities. This new insight has often shaken the traditional view of the past and provoked debate on the present understanding of the past and its influence on the future. (Malone et al 2000:126)

Archaeology can also be a great teacher if modern society would only bother to look for the lessons it can give. The individuals and societies we study are both similar to, and different from, ourselves. History cannot repeat itself but problems often recur – wars, economic distress, environmental disasters. (Figure 1 – The Maltese Temples – why did the society who built them collapse?) History and archaeology can help us see why societies survive, change and collapse. The use of historical science, can help us understand the different processes involved in the creation of a sustainable environment by helping us avoid the mistakes of our ancestors and emulate their successes. In English

¹ Layton 1989:3

there is a common saying which goes “He who does not learn from the past, is doomed to repeat it.”

Archaeology’s **Community Value** refers to its contribution to modern society – how it can be used and controlled to manipulate the present. Our cultural heritage has a strong aesthetic value, that is, it appeals to the public with its impression of mystery and its great age. It is often the aesthetic value which drives people to visit museums in the first place and thus it often supersedes its value as a source of information. As a result, certain characteristics of an object or site are thus often exaggerated, regardless of historical accuracy, in order to attract more visitors and this nullifies its human value.

Archaeological interpretation also has enormous political value, derived from its unique relationship with history, and this can be, and has often been, used to engender patriotic sentiment and a particular pride in one’s country’s history (Figure 2 – Phoenicia Hotel). And, since the past is a fundamental element of a nation’s national and cultural identity, archaeology can also be used to construct a national identity, as in the case of Israel, or destroy it, as in the case of the Balkan wars where the main issue was “ethnic cleansing” symbolised by the destruction of its historical identity represented by its monuments. (Chapman 1994:122) The past has also been used as a political tool to validate certain ideologies and justify a new state policy, as happened with the manipulation of archaeological data by the Nazi regime in WWII Germany. (Arnold 1996)

Archaeology’s **Market Value** refers to the economic worth of archaeology and cultural heritage – a value that is usually measured according to the size of the profit it brings. Although it may sound mercenary, a site or object’s market value is what draws the line between its destruction or survival. The market value of a site lies not only with its archaeological importance. There are other elements which we have to consider such as the economic value of the land on which it sits – its geographical location, its fertility – all those factors which make a particular piece of land desirable for development. Very often it becomes a choice between the value of the land and the value of the archaeological site (Figure 3- A new hotel being built within 16th century fortifications). Unfortunately, commercial, industrial and agricultural interests often take precedence over archaeological interest in a piece of land. What is not destroyed is increasingly being reduced to the level of a commodity in Entertainment with movies such as the Indiana Jones series, which, while entertaining, have unfortunately given the public a distorted perception of our past, and Tourism, which has become a significant source of income for many countries around the world. It must therefore be the archaeologist’s aim to come up with a viable compromise between the archaeological value and commercial value of a piece of land. (Carver 1996:45-56)

Still, every day, a site is in danger of being completely destroyed to make way for a hotel, as the victim of an act of vandalism, or due to the effects of time (Figure 4 – Abandoned Building slowly disintegrating). At a time when the government is no longer able to provide enough funds to ensure proper care of the heritage, the public, must be made aware of the importance of archaeology. It is only through the help of the public that our archaeological sites can be saved. The archaeologist has a duty to spread any knowledge gained, as the cultural heritage is the property of society as a whole and, in turn, the public has a duty to preserve its cultural heritage for the benefit of future

generations. Finally, archaeology will only survive and develop if it can show its relevance to the present and to the public at large.

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