

Forum

Putting a Price on the Past: The Ethics and Economics of Archaeology in the Marketplace

A Reply to "What is Public Archaeology"

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This paper is in response to a discussion following Moshenska's 2009 paper, "What is Public Archaeology," published in the first issue of this journal. Moshenska proposed a model for breaking down the various parts of archaeology into marketable commodities, arguing that the relationship between the various interested groups could be understood as an economic relationship of supply and demand. My aim here is not to question this model. Rather, I would like to call into discussion the ethical and economic implications of understanding and presenting archaeological practice in this way.

Moshenska, and the first discussant Burtenshaw (2009), see the remit of public archaeology as a disciplinary critique, which focuses on the 'hows' and 'whys' of the production and consumption of archaeological "commodities," placing it "firmly between supply and demand" (Burtenshaw 2009:49). Effectively, Moshenska and Burtenshaw are arguing in true utilitarian fashion that the importance of archaeology to the public can be measured in terms of its monetary turnover. In doing so, they have a concrete objective. Especially in Moshenska and Burtenshaw's (2009) final forum response, it becomes clear that behind the attempt to assess the economic value of archaeology is a perceived need to justify its existence in the modern world. Flatman's (2009) praise for Moshenska's model is telling: "if you outlined [it] to any politician, then they might just get it, surely the acid test."

In a time where large cuts in public spending are taking place and UK universities are being reconstructed as free-market companies selling employability, most academics are apprehensive about the future of their subject. Is it not therefore logical and instrumental to our future to demonstrate that we, too, are contributing to that slogan that has become the panacea of the Western world: economic growth? Certain uneasiness with this idea becomes apparent in Flatman's response: while generally agreeing with the model, he claims to be concerned about the precedent it sets. So is calculating its monetary profit the right way to try and secure a future for archaeology?

My answer to this question rests on two different considerations. The first is philosophical: Should we put a monetary value on archaeology? What are the implications of doing so and what is the precedent Flatman is concerned about? The second is economic: Can we really apply a supply-and-demand model of economics to archaeology? What alternatives to this form of valuation are there? Will having a market valuation of archaeology be beneficial to its future?

In order to get to the bottom of these questions, we need to go back to the very basics of the value of archaeology, by considering how this value is created and, thus, on what basis the demand for archaeology rests. I would contend that the production of commodities, however real and saleable they are, was never the objective of archaeology, nor the reason for its existence. Seen in a wider economic context, possessing knowledge of the past is not necessarily useful, and it does not respond to a predictable need. The valuation of it lies in a much less rational sphere. This becomes apparent when we consider the relationship between the commodities and the discipline of archaeology.

For example, the laws governing the protection of archaeological remains, upon which the commercial archaeological sector is founded, were not created in order to provide a market for the commodity of archaeological skills. They were created in recognition of the fact that, behind the commodities and providing them with value, there lies a debate about the past which shapes our identity today. It is this debate that is the actual objective of archaeology, and it is also the reason why people value the commodities that result from it. After all, an old pot with a hole in it is something to be thrown away. Once it becomes, by virtue of research, a 2000-year-old vase of Roman Samian ware (slightly damaged), it is a valuable object, a collector's item with a story to tell. This point is, for the main part, tacitly acknowledged in all of the forum papers. I, however, find it central to the discussion, since, if we acknowledge that an emotional attachment to knowing the past is where the underlying reason for archaeology's value resides, moving the focus away from it threatens the existence of a marketable commodity. If we accept this basis for the value of archaeology, the heritage

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sector, commercial archaeology, and the antiquities trade, etc., cannot value themselves independently of it.

Flatman's unease relates to an ethical point: it is distasteful and feels wrong to look at archaeology in this way. This sentiment feeds a growing critique of utilitarianism, which argues that utility does not adequately reflect value. Following Anderson (1990), Sandel (2009:97) has argued that valuation occurs on different scales: not only do we value things more and less, but we also value things higher and lower. By solely describing value in terms of utility (or money), we lose the subtlety of our value judgements, and we degrade those things whose value ought to be measured on a higher scale. Thus, by measuring archaeology's worth by the market value of its saleable commodities, we degrade people's interest in the debate about the past. The key point here is that not all goods can be valued in the same manner; therefore, to apply the same techniques of evaluation to something like archaeology as one would to an object of use is like using a hammer to drive in a screw – it can be done, but misses the point.

Degrading people's interest in the past in this way could have serious repercussions. By presenting archaeology in this light, we change people's perceptions about where the value lies. Knowledge about the past is no more a common good, but something to be bought and sold, meaning that all archaeology will have to be conducted in a profitable manner, as maybe it was in the example that Wheeler that Moshenska (2009) cites. One might quickly imagine an archaeology where research agendas are driven by demand of customers (even more than funding bodies drive them today), and the worth of a project depends, for example, on how many saleable objects are found. But once the "debate about the past" is no longer conducted in the public interest but in the interest of profit, will there be anyone willing to buy? What is more, if we were to present archaeology's value to politicians and other "investors" in this way, there is no defending an archaeological commodity (e.g., a heritage site and visitor's centre) against a commodity with higher monetary value (a shopping centre on the same site). I see this approach to the value of archaeology rapidly leading towards a dead end.

Many economists like to claim that ethical considerations fall outside their field. However, John Broome (2009) has argued convincingly that an economic argument is necessarily also an ethical one, as we cannot divorce the normative claims that economics makes from the conflict that follows from them. The archaeologists investigating the economics of the sector would do well to bear this in mind. Without delving too deeply into economics, this is why simple cost/benefit equations are not helpful when approaching goods that people value not only for their role in the fulfilment of needs, but also for ethical and/or ideological reasons. This has been demonstrated repeatedly in relation to environmental concerns, for example the preservation of endangered species. There is no apparent contradiction in being willing to pay to preserve a population of tigers in the absence of any economic benefit whatsoever (Broome 2009, Sen 2004). What is more, environmental groups manage to raise large amounts of money and public support without ever trying to argue this point.

Economists have long discovered that, when considering goods that people hold dear for reasons of ethics or ideology, it is not straightforward to arrive at a valuation in economic terms. It is very hard to quantify the reasons for the choices people make, because they are not rationally based. For this same reason, it is very hard for a society to come to a consensus about what is good for it as a collective – a principle aim of economics (Sen 1985, Osmani 2009). In his formulation of economic ethics, Broome sees the role of the economist in helping society overcome these problems by fostering dialogue and offering opinions which lead to an informed choice (Broome 2009). If we conceive of an economics of archaeology in this manner, many of the conflicts of interest described by Moshenska (2009), Grima (2009) and Moshenska and Burtenshaw (2009) are thrown in a different light. Rather than being arguments about intellectual property rights (e.g., "who owns the past?"), we can see them as shortcomings in the flow of information that makes up the debate about the archaeological record. I propose a role for public archaeology that is equal to that of Broome's economist: to analyse and improve the structure of the aforementioned debate, effectively promoting the quality of communication amongst the various interested parties engaged in archaeology.

Along with Moshenska and the other discussants in this debate, I believe that it is vital for archaeology to know its markets and to come up with a strategy for survival. This paper has aimed to highlight the fact that our success in doing so depends on the norms (i.e., the different scales of valuation) that we employ, consciously or otherwise, in presenting our value. There can be no doubt that the heritage sector and the antiquities trade operate within a market economy and thus under the constraints of supply and demand. But I hope to have made my case for the fact that these constituent parts of the wider archaeological world cannot be taken separately, as the valuation of their products rests on the public perception of the archaeological debate as a common good. Only by basing their products on this debate will the sellers of archaeological commodities have a demand to supply to.

I am convinced that the norms of utilitarian economics on which Moshenska's model ultimately rests are not appropriate to archaeology. Not only is there a moral argument against them, not only do they result in a very confrontational picture of the field, but I also believe that trying to measure archaeology's worth by its profit margins is both in economic and ethical terms a misrepresentation of its value. I am very worried that, by trying to prove archaeology's worth in this way, we will change the public's perception of its value for the worse, encouraging people to think that their access to and involvement with the past (n.b., not the heritage attraction) is something that ought to be bought and sold, and that archaeology is an activity that is being conducted for profit, rather than in the public interest. I therefore strongly urge archaeologists who are trying to raise data valuating the field to take into account the implications of the economic models they use.

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