

FORUM

What is Public Archaeology?

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In the ten years since Schadla-Hall's (1999) outline of the subject, public archaeology has become firmly established as the focus of books, university courses, academic research and a dedicated journal. Nevertheless there is still a degree of uncertainty about the precise definition and delineation of public archaeology. In this short paper I outline my personal perspective of public archaeology as a practice of disciplinary critique focusing on the production and consumption of what I have termed archaeological 'commodities'.

Introduction

Archaeological commodities – things possessing value – exist in a variety of forms, but these can be grouped into a small number of distinct types. The main aim of this paper is to outline a typology of archaeological commodities and to briefly examine some of its implications for archaeology in general and public archaeology in particular. The five types of archaeological commodity that I have identified are:

1. Archaeological materials
2. Archaeological knowledge and skills
3. Archaeological work
4. Archaeological experiences
5. Archaeological imagery

Type one – **archaeological materials** – encompasses the material outputs of archaeological research, including both individual artefacts and entire archaeological sites. The control, movement and treatment of these materials are often regulated by law or convention. The trade in illegal antiquities and the scheduling of historic monuments are two examples of the commoditisation of archaeological materials.

Type two – **archaeological knowledge and skills** – are the intellectual aspects of archaeological work: knowledge gained by fieldwork or research, as well as the skills needed to do the work in the first place. Archaeological knowledge has value as the outcome of commercial contracts, and as the product of education, training and experience – see type four.

Type three – **archaeological work** – are the forms of work carried out by archaeologists. In some cases they are paid for their labour, in other cases such as work experience they are unpaid, and in some cases such as field schools they pay for the privilege of doing the work.

Type four – **archaeological experiences** – are people's encounters with archaeological processes and products – types one and three – such as visits to museums or archaeological sites, educational courses, and various forms of organised historic tourism. The outcomes of these experiences include type two commodities – archaeological knowledge.

Type five – **archaeological images** – are the recognisable archaeological themes and images that feature in popular culture representations of the past; in advertising, architecture, film, art and elsewhere. The value of these commodities is to some extent a function of type two – popular knowledge and awareness of archaeology.

Archaeological commodity relations

The degree of interconnectedness between these five categories is natural, and serves to illustrate some of the complexities and contradictions inherent in the diverse worlds of modern archaeology. It is particularly apparent that the well-attested tensions between commercial, academic and amateur archaeology can be better understood and potentially addressed through an examination of the economics of archaeological commodity relations.

One example of this is how the value of archaeological work (commodity type 3) is closely connected to the perceived value of archaeological skills (type 2). Thus if excavation skills are perceived as a university graduate's level of expertise they can be sold for a higher price than if they are perceived as the result of a weeklong field school. In this context amateur archaeology groups are a threat to commercial archaeology as they offer their members both archaeological work and archaeological skills training (types 2 and 3) for free.

The relevance of this typology to our more general understanding of public archaeology can be demonstrated by considering the work of Brigadier Sir R.E.M. Wheeler. I would argue that Wheeler's instinctive understanding of the value of archaeological commodities has never been equalled, and contributed considerably to his fame and success. Wheeler ran a number of large excavation projects at Maiden Castle, Verulamium and elsewhere, as well as museums in London and Wales. Much of his fieldwork was subsidised by the sale of genuine and replica artefacts, written reports and postcards (commodity type 1) (Holtorf & Schadla-Hall, 1999; Wheeler, 1943). He sold exclusive rights to press coverage and provided public access to many of his sites (type 4) where his fieldworkers would give lectures for donations (type 2). Wheeler's excavations over the years provided paid and unpaid archaeological work (type 3) for a huge number of people, many of whom continued into archaeological education or work or simply maintained an amateur interest in archaeology (Wheeler, 1955). The Roman ruins at Verulamium (type 1) remain a popular heritage attraction (type 4): Wheeler also published popular accounts of his work and life, and pioneered television archaeology (type 5). Wheeler's career as a public archaeologist can be reasonably well characterised with reference to the typology outlined in this paper.

Discussion

In summary, I contend that public archaeology in the broadest sense is that part of the discipline concerned with studying and critiquing the processes of production and consumption of archaeological commodities. This brief outline is inevitably somewhat simplistic, but it serves to highlight the desperate need for a nuanced understanding of archaeological economics. This can then form the basis for a more sophisticated and critical form of public

archaeology capable of studying and influencing public policy, commercial practices and the multiple, overlapping worlds of contemporary archaeology.

References

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