Key Concepts in Public Archaeology

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Introduction: public archaeology as practice and scholarship where archaeology meets the world

Gabriel Moshenska

Public archaeology is all the New Territories, lying around the periphery of direct research into the remains of material culture ... All of them are about the problems which arise when archaeology moves into the real world of economic conflicts and political struggle. In other words, they are about ethics.

(Ascherson 2000: 2)

any area of archaeological activity that interacted or had the potential to interact with the public – the vast majority of whom, for a variety of reasons, know little about archaeology as an academic subject.

(Schadla-Hall 1999: 147)

it studies the processes and outcomes whereby the discipline of archaeology becomes part of a wider public culture, where contestation and dissonance are inevitable. In being about ethics and identity, therefore, public archaeology is inevitably about negotiation and conflict over meaning.

(Merriman 2004: 5)
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.
(Moshenska 2009a: 47)

a subject that examines the relationship between archaeol-
ogy and the public, and then seeks to improve it
(Matsuda and Okamura 2011: 4)

The aim of this book is to give the reader an overview of study and prac-
tice in the field of public archaeology. It offers a series of snapshots of
important ideas and areas of work brought together as an introduction,
albeit an inevitably brief and incomplete one, to one of the most chal-
lenging and rewarding parts of the wider archaeological discipline.
Read the book from cover to cover and you will have a good working
understanding of public archaeology as a complicated, rich and diverse
field, as well as knowledge of some of the most significant and iconic
examples of public archaeology in action. Dip into a specific chapter and
you will find a concise and insightful introduction to one aspect of pub-
lic archaeology with case studies and a list of readings to develop your
understanding. However you use this book I am confident that you will
emerge with a better understanding of what public archaeology is, why
it matters and what you can do about it. First, it is necessary and useful,
drawing on the quotes above, to ask what we mean by public archaeol-
y, and to examine some of the different ways it has been defined.

The archaeologist and television personality Sir Mortimer
Wheeler, one of the first prominent public archaeologists, stated

I was, and am, convinced of the moral and academic necessity of
sharing scientific work to the fullest possible extent with the man
in the street and in the field.

(1955: 104)

and that

It is the duty of the archaeologist, as of the scientist, to reach and
impress the public, and to mould his words in the common clay of
its forthright understanding.

(1956: 224)
Wheeler was an eloquent promoter of the ideals of public archaeology, but he was by no means the first or the only archaeologist of his time to look beyond the material remains of the past to consider the place of archaeology in the world (Moshenska and Schadla-Hall 2011). Public archaeology has remained at the core of archaeology throughout its history and into the present, touching upon every aspect of the discipline worldwide. Public archaeology straddles the great divides within archaeology between professional, academic and amateur; between the local and the global; between science and humanities: in fact, the study and critique of these disciplinary divisions is a vital part of what public archaeologists do.

One of the challenges of public archaeology is its all-encompassing nature: its study draws on fields as diverse as economics, international law and film studies, while its practice ranges from grassroots community activism to high-level international diplomacy. All of this makes public archaeology difficult to pin down and define. Public archaeology exists in a tangle of overlapping definitions and interpretations, many of them the result of different national, organisational and educational traditions: public archaeologists from Greece, Argentina, the UK and Japan will often find ourselves talking at cross-purposes, even with the best of intentions.

For now, I will offer a working definition for this chapter at least, as given in the title: ‘practice and scholarship where archaeology meets the world’. This book is for people who want to better understand this point of contact between archaeology and the wider world, and for those who want to work at that interface. Within this definition of public archaeology, we can include a multitude of things: local communities campaigning to protect local heritage sites, archaeologists and producers collaborating to create television documentaries, metal detector users bringing their finds for identification and recording at local museums, archaeological heritage sites researching their visitor demographics, students studying the depiction of prehistoric women in comic books, and plenty more. The aim of this chapter is not to lay out the boundaries of the field; rather, it is to give an overview of the principles of public archaeology that underlie this book and to outline the values of studying and practising public archaeology.
Hybridity

The phrase ‘practice and scholarship’ in the brief definition above gives a hint of one of the challenges of understanding contemporary public archaeology; that is, its hybrid nature as a discipline. This hybridity and the resulting relation of public archaeology to archaeology as a whole is best understood by comparison with the sciences. The natural sciences are served by the two distinct fields of science studies and science communication. Science studies is the field of research into scientific practice in its contexts, whether those be economic, social, cultural, philosophical, legal and so on. It is a notably interdisciplinary area of scholarship drawing on elements of sociology, history, public policy, literary criticism and other fields (Sismondo 2010).

Science communication is a more practice-based field, focusing on the skills and techniques for sharing scientific knowledge and understanding as widely as possible within fields such as education and policy-making. Trained science communicators work in journalism, museums, universities and scientific industries, and employ skills as varied as technical writing and stand-up comedy (Brake and Weitkamp 2009).

Public archaeology fulfils the roles of both science studies and science communication within the wider field of archaeology, bridging critical academic scholarship and professional practice. Equally, public archaeology draws upon the literature, concepts and skills developed within these fields, as well as in analogous fields such as museum studies (Merriman 2004). This bringing together of scholarship and practice, and the blurred areas of overlap in between, makes public archaeology more complicated – and more interesting.

Origins

At this point some clarification is needed, or perhaps a confession. The model of public archaeology outlined in this introduction and in this book as a whole is neither universally agreed nor widely accepted. In fact, there are numerous narrow, overlapping and divergent definitions of the term in operation around the world, with the greatest variation being the transatlantic one between the UK and US (Fagan 2003; Jameson 2004; McDavid 2004). To be completely honest, the view of public archaeology offered in this book is based on more than two decades of work at University College London’s Institute of Archaeology and the global diaspora of graduates who have emerged from what we
might call the ‘London school’ of public archaeology. This critical mass of scholarship, teaching and publishing was founded on the radical and iconoclastic work of Peter Ucko and driven by the teaching and writing of Tim Schadla-Hall, Nick Merriman and Neal Ascherson and the work of their students starting in the late 1990s (Ascherson 2000; Grima 2002; Matsuda 2004; Schadla-Hall 2006; Ucko 1987). Over the following decades this loose network has driven many of the most important developments in public archaeology, outlined in more detail in this volume, including the emerging study of digital media in public archaeology, the engagement with cultural economics, and concerns with heritage and human rights (Bonacchi 2013; Gould and Burtenshaw 2014; Hardy 2015; Richardson 2014). It is the breadth, inclusivity and global reach of this particular model of public archaeology that make it a suitable framework for this volume.

A typology

Over several years of teaching and research I found that the lack of an agreed definition of public archaeology was causing problems for students, scholars and practitioners across the field. The single greatest problem for me was the difference between the inclusive definition of public archaeology given above (practice and scholarship where archaeology meets the world) and its narrower definition within the wider field of archaeology as a synonym for public outreach by professional archaeologists. In response to these challenges I developed a simple seven-part typology presented in the form of a graphic, which I first published as an illustration in an open access paper (Bonacchi and Moshenska 2015). Entitled ‘Some Common Types of Public Archaeology’, this typology offers a good overview of the different and distinct elements of the field, detailed and expanded in Figure 1.1. While I have listed them as distinct categories there is obviously a considerable amount of overlap between them.

Archaeologists working with the public

This first category covers a great deal of what is generally referred to as public archaeology or, in many cases, community archaeology (Marshall 2002; Moshenska and Dhanjal 2012; Thomas 2014). It refers to archaeological work conducted by professionals which includes, by design, the provision of participation opportunities for members of
the public or a specific community. Many projects of this kind are run under the auspices of museums, commercial archaeology units, university departments and local government bodies, and in the UK many are funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund (Bewley and Maeer 2014). While the specific forms of these events vary they tend to be time (and money) limited and aim to provide the public with experience of archaeological skills and methods, as well as insights into the heritage of their local area. Increasingly these opportunities for public involvement are moving away from excavations towards museum and archive archaeology, including outreach by archaeological archives and online crowdsourcing of archaeological data (Bevan et al. 2014). The instigation and execution of projects of this kind are almost always in the hands of the professional archaeologists, sometimes working in partnership with organisations such as schools or community groups (Dhanjal et al. 2015; Nevell 2014; Simpson and Williams 2008).
Archaeology by the public

The second category of public archaeology is what is often called amateur archaeology: work carried out (often to the highest professional standards) by local archaeology societies and amateur interest groups (Manley 1999). The work of these groups long pre-dates the emergence of professional archaeology: in the UK many local societies date back to the early nineteenth century (Wetherall 1994). Alongside fieldwork and archive-based archaeological research many amateur archaeology societies organise programmes of talks or events often linked with formal educational organisations. The work of amateur archaeologists varies considerably around the world. In many countries there are licensing systems or legal restrictions on archaeological work by non-professionals, while in some places amateurs can only take part in projects run by professionals (Duineveld et al. 2013). One of the most controversial aspects of amateur archaeology is the work of metal-detector users and metal-detecting clubs (Thomas 2012). Again laws on metal detecting vary worldwide, between outright bans and complete freedom (Dobat 2013; Rasmussen 2014). Many archaeologists do not regard metal detecting as an archaeological activity, comparing it to treasure hunting: working standards and ethics are extremely variable, but at best metal-detector users produce valuable research that is incorporated into archaeological heritage databases (Bland 2005). The demographics of amateur archaeologists are of interest to public archaeology researchers: for example, most archaeology society members are older, white and middle class, while metal-detector users are overwhelmingly male. Amateur archaeology is the original form of public archaeology but it is increasingly under threat from restrictive laws and exclusionary professional practices.

Public sector archaeology

The first book entitled *Public Archaeology* was published by Charles McGimsey in 1972. McGimsey’s meaning of ‘public’ refers to the state rather than to the people themselves: it can be best summarised as public sector archaeology. This broad category includes all the work of state-controlled or -funded bodies on national, regional and local scales to manage, preserve, study and communicate archaeological heritage. One of the largest such bodies is the US National Parks Service which employs a considerable number of archaeologists and heritage professionals (Jameson 2004). Over time it has become less common to refer to this work as public archaeology, with the rise of terms such as cultural
resource management or heritage management (King 2012). However, the significance of incorporating these practices within a wider public archaeology is to emphasise the power and the democratic accountability of taxpayer-funded bodies with responsibilities for vast archaeological resources. They may not work directly with the public or even in the public eye, but they are (in theory at least) answerable to the public.

Archaeological education

The idea of education underlies a great deal of work in public archaeology, based on the principle that experts have a responsibility to share their knowledge with those who can appreciate and use it. Archaeological education takes place in museums and heritage sites through visitor interaction with displays and archaeological materials, and through the work of curatorial staff and museum learning professionals (Corbishley 2011; Henson 2000). In public or community archaeology projects education can take many forms: sometimes visitors will get informal talks and guided tours; in other cases they will get basic training in archaeological skills. Many projects include field schools where amateur or student archaeologists can learn excavation, recording and surveying skills (Baxter 2009). In some cases, this training resembles formal teaching and learning, but in many cases archaeological skills are shared and developed through practice, with more experienced fieldworkers advising and assisting others. This fits within a wider model of archaeological knowledge as a ‘craft’ (Faulkner 2000; Shanks and McGuire 1996; Walker and Saitta 2002). Formal learning about archaeology is a marker of public interest in the subject: most archaeology classes in schools, colleges and universities are optional, taken out of personal interest (Henson 2004). Archaeology is a popular subject of lecture tours and cruises, online courses, adult education courses and evening classes: many prominent public archaeologists have worked extensively in these fields. Public archaeology has, in Merriman’s view, long been based on the ‘deficit model’, a term taken from science communication that suggests that experts have a duty to remedy the deficit of scientific knowledge in the general public, who are viewed as empty vessels to be filled with information (Merriman 2004). Merriman’s critique and suggested alternative, a ‘multiple perspectives’ approach, has advanced the understanding of education in public archaeology but in practice a wide variety of educational philosophies are employed, tacitly or explicitly, with greater or lesser success.
Open archaeology

One of the most interesting aspects of public archaeology is the degree to which archaeology can be made open: compared to many of the sciences and other scholarly fields, many of the processes and practices of archaeology (particularly around excavation) are visible and easily comprehensible to the public (Farid 2014; Moshenska 2009b; 2013; Tilley 1989). People watching an excavation can see artefacts, bodies and structures emerging from the earth before their eyes: this is part of what makes archaeology popular and successful on television. Throughout the history of archaeology this openness has been a factor in its popularity and success. Tourists visiting excavations frustrated Sir Flinders Petrie and delighted Sir Mortimer Wheeler, while many modern excavations, particularly in urban areas, provide a view of the site through viewing platforms or, more recently, webcams (Morgan and Eve 2012; Moshenska and Schadla-Hall 2011). In many cases visitors are able to tour the excavations and talk to the archaeologists, while in some cases dedicated tour guides are used. While excavation is only one aspect of archaeology this openness is a vital element in maintaining the public profile of archaeology and its democratic nature as something (at least potentially) participative and accessible to anybody. Open archaeology is part of what sets public archaeology aside as a distinct field within the wider fields of science communication and science studies.

Popular archaeology

This could equally be described as media archaeology or popular culture archaeology: the communication of archaeological research to the public through accessible and user-friendly media, rather than the more serious and detailed educational means described above. At the same time this is probably the largest field of public archaeology in terms of economics, employment and impact on the public understanding of archaeology and the human past. Public archaeologists often forget that the public, by and large, do not want to be archaeologists and nor do they want huge amounts of detailed archaeological knowledge (Merriman 1991). In fact, most people who engage with archaeology are antiquarians: they have a general, broad interest in the past that takes in local history, genealogy and family history, some military history, and a degree of interest in, perhaps, Ancient Rome or the lands of the Bible (Holtorf 2005, 2007). This hulking majority engage with antiquity through television documentaries such as Time Team, through museum
and gallery exhibitions, and through popular books and magazine articles by media-friendly scholars (Bonacchi 2013; Fagan 2005). A growing number engage with these sources through digital media of various kinds, researching heritage sites and museums online and downloading apps and videos, and public archaeology scholarship is increasingly taking this into account (Pett 2012). Archaeology relies on this shallow engagement by a wide audience to maintain popular interest and support for archaeological heritage in political, cultural and economic terms. They are our market and we ignore or mischaracterise them at our peril.

**Academic public archaeology**

Earlier I characterised public archaeology as a distinctive combination of practice and critique. The six categories described above are largely concerned with the practice of public archaeology: this last is focused on the critical aspects of scholarship in the discipline. The academic discipline of public archaeology is concerned with archaeology where it meets the world, but it draws upon and informs the practices described above: in the ivory tower it sits on the ground floor with a view of the rubbish bins (Flatman 2012). The study of archaeology in its economic contexts draws on the work of heritage organisations struggling to survive cuts, and of communities fighting to preserve their archaeological sites in the face of environmental threats (Gould and Burtenshaw 2014). The legal and political contexts of archaeology determine the survival of archaeological sites threatened by violent conflict, and the limits or opportunities for amateur archaeologists, scholars, looters and other interested parties (King 2013). Studying the social and cultural contexts of archaeology defines its role in the construction of individual and group identities amongst nation states and diasporas (Kohl 1998; Trigger 1984). Ultimately much of the scholarly critique of archaeology in these and similar contexts is an ethical critique, directed inward at the archaeological profession and the heritage sector more widely. The traditional concerns of archaeological ethics – including the nature of cultural property, dealing with descendent communities, and ensuring material and social sustainability – are core issues within the study and the practice of public archaeology (Carman 2005; Colwell-Chanthaphonh and Ferguson 2006; Tarlow 2006; Zimmerman et al. 2003).
This seven-part typology is meant to be descriptive rather than prescriptive, and any engagement with the world of public archaeology will quickly demonstrate the overlap and connections between these apparently distinct types. Crowd-sourced archaeology projects use digital media to connect members of the public with academic research projects, with the results of their work feeding into museum displays. A trip to see a working archaeological site might inspire visitors to get involved in a local archaeology or history society and begin to learn – and later, perhaps, to teach – archaeological skills of their own. A student inspired to study archaeology by television documentaries might go on to produce or work in media archaeology, or to become a researcher, or to work in the public end of the heritage sector. Ultimately this typology aims to make people aware of the breadth of possibilities within public archaeology, the range of approaches and methods that can be selected, honed and put into practice.

The future of public archaeology

In introductions of this kind one is obliged to reflect on the future of the discipline. This is actually a rather pleasant experience: public archaeology has seen a decade or more of growing mainstream acceptance and interest within academic archaeology, professional archaeology and heritage management, and in the wider world. The public interest and demand for documentaries, books, magazines and web-based media based on archaeology and archaeological themes seems to be as strong as ever, and there are even rumours of a new Indiana Jones movie in the works.

This general growth is pleasing and encouraging, but it is instructive to look at more narrowly defined areas of the field to examine trends and possibilities. Taking the chapters in this book as starting points offers a number of encouraging perspectives, with two areas in particular emerging as areas of growth:

1. interdisciplinarity
2. data.

Earlier in this chapter I drew a comparison between public archaeology and the related fields of science communication and science studies. As fields of study and practice these are older, larger and far better
developed in many respects than public archaeology: there is a great deal of benefit to be gained from drawing more explicitly and far more heavily upon these fields, as Merriman (2004) and others have already begun to do. From science communication we could gain a broader and richer skill-set, training public archaeologists in the abilities to write for different audiences, to create images, films and other media, to speak in public, and ultimately to create and manage an entire public engagement programme including working with media, professionals and a variety of public audiences. From science studies we might look for a different set of skills including archival, sociological and ethnographic research methods, and a richer engagement with archaeological epistemologies.

Another form of interdisciplinarity can be explored through an understanding of public archaeology as one component part of the ‘public humanities’, encompassing the public-facing and critical elements of other disciplines. These include public history, classical receptions, elements of digital humanities, museum studies and others. Here the possibilities lie not only in borrowing between disciplines but in forging a new broader-ranging discipline around principles such as the public understanding of the past. As discussed earlier, public archaeologists are well advised to restrain themselves from ramming the entirety of archaeology down the throats of any even slightly interested passer-by: we need to recognise that archaeology is, for the overwhelming majority of the interested public, just one amongst several historical and cultural interests in unique combinations. This can lead us to create new networks and collaborations to better understand – and respond to – public interest in the human past.

Data remains one of the most promising areas for growth and future development in public archaeology, due in part to the consistent and longstanding neglect of data-gathering within the discipline (Merriman 1991). For a public-facing field we know startlingly little about the public themselves: in any other industry such a neglect of market research would have long ago proven terminal. This is not to say that public archaeologists have not surveyed and studied public attitudes and interests to archaeology, heritage and museums: there has been and continues to be fantastic work carried out in these areas worldwide. Rather, it is the lack of larger-scale studies or systematic meta-analyses that poses the problem: we might know a great deal about what the visitors to a specific museum enjoy, but we have few insights into the archaeological interests of the people of Norway or Tanzania on a population level, including most importantly those who never visit museums and archaeological sites. Data of this kind
are expensive to gather, time-consuming and difficult to analyse, and have limited commercial or political uses beyond research. There are a variety of possible strategies including building research projects around large-scale market research studies, and carrying out systematic reviews of existing smaller datasets. For now, the paucity of data is probably the greatest single barrier to future developments in public archaeology.

The second area where data are needed is more straightforward: public archaeology projects need to become more proactive and consistent in gathering monitoring and evaluation data on themselves. As the discipline is constantly innovating and developing existing approaches it is vital that practitioners share their successes and failures, and have enough data to be able to point to what worked, what did not work, and – perhaps – why. There are a number of reasons for this deficit. In many projects public archaeology is regretfully treated as a luxury extra bolted onto a research or rescue project. In these circumstances detailed monitoring and evaluation would be a luxury upon a luxury, and over-stretched public archaeologists are likely to lack both the time and the skills to gather this data. However, this is not an inevitable state of affairs: many public archaeology projects collect excellent comprehensive data and use it to develop their own practices. The most successful impetus might come from funders: in the UK the Heritage Lottery Fund is the single greatest promoter of public archaeology projects and makes clear and stringent demands for evaluation throughout the timespans of the projects that they fund (Bewley and Maeer 2014). The most important development will be to add project evaluation and data-handling to the skill-sets that are taught in public archaeology courses and in professional development for practitioners.

Whether or not these specific concerns are addressed it is clear that public archaeology has a powerful momentum as a field of scholarship and an area of practice. The growth comes from within the discipline, as more graduates and experienced public archaeologists move into and up through the workforce; and it comes from the public, who maintain an interest in seeing, learning about and taking part in archaeology. Public archaeology is growing in profile, rigour, global reach and in the rich diversity of perspectives that it incorporates. Long may it continue.