

The Concept of ‘the Public’ and the Aims of Public Archaeology

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This paper discusses the concept of ‘the public’ as used in public archaeology, and by doing so, considers the aims of public archaeology and their specific application to a Roman villa in Somma Vesuviana, Italy. Public archaeology emerged in the 1970s, departing from the traditional view of archaeology by looking outside the academic discipline and the social framework and structures underpinning archaeology. Although it is essential to define clearly ‘the public’ in considering the aims of public archaeology, there seem to be two different concepts of ‘the public’: one associated with the state and another with the people, though both are used interchangeably. In order to overcome this difference, Habermas’ idea of the public sphere is considered, since it may potentially encourage ‘private’ non-archaeologists to engage in an open, democratic debate about archaeology. If public archaeology is to strive for the realisation of an ‘archaeology for the public’, its aim should be to create an open, participatory and rational-critical debate, which is presumably the only way to integrate public opinions into decisions about archaeology. Although managing this debate would not be easy, a case study explores how archaeologists might do so.

Keywords

Habermas, heritage debate, Public archaeology, public sphere, the public

Introduction

Public archaeology has grown gradually and steadily since the 1970s, and as a result there are today a number of academic institutions offering undergraduate and post-graduate courses specialising in this area, a wide range of associated literature and even a periodical entitled *Public Archaeology*. Despite this growth, it seems that the objectives, scope and methodology of public archaeology are not understood equally among archaeologists. This can partly be explained by the wide scope of the discipline, but public archaeology has also failed to articulate what is meant by ‘the public’. This paper delves into the different concepts of ‘the public’ employed by public archaeology, and in doing so, considers its aims. In defining a theoretical basis for public archaeology, this paper explores ways in which the concept of a public sphere can be applied in practice.

In its approaches, the paper draws on theoretical discussions from public archaeology, the social sciences and heritage studies. It first analyses the emergence and development of public archaeology since the 1970s and examines its significance and implications for the discipline of archaeology in general. The focus is then shifted towards concepts of ‘the public’, of which two are specifically discussed: the public as the state authority, and the public as the people. The idea of the public sphere, as formulated by Habermas (1989), is investigated with a view to overcoming the conceptual dichotomy between ‘the public’ and ‘the private’. The discussion then focuses on how to set up a public sphere of archaeology. At this point the ‘heritage debate’ is reviewed briefly, providing insights into how the public receive and consume archaeological informa-

tion. In the conclusion, the paper puts forward some suggestions regarding the possibility of setting up a public sphere of archaeology. The theoretical framework set out in this paper is currently being explored as part of ongoing doctorate research which centres on conveying to the public the archaeology of the Roman villa in Somma Vesuviana, Italy.

The Emergence and Development of Public Archaeology

The use of the term 'public archaeology' first occurred in the United States (Schadla-Hall 1999: 147) when McGimsey published his book *Public Archeology* in 1972, appealing for the preservation of archaeological heritage for the sake of the "public right to knowledge" (McGimsey 1972: 5). The term came into frequent use soon after its publication, and today public archaeology has gained widespread recognition, at least in the United States and Britain, as an established field within the discipline of archaeology. During the 1960s and 1970s, archaeology was experiencing increased specialisation and the creation of subdisciplines, yet the emergence of public archaeology had different implications; unlike other new archaeological fields, which were rather expanded domains of archaeology proper, public archaeology was the product of self-scrutiny within archaeology in an attempt to re-define the discipline within wider social ambits. Differing from the traditional view of archaeology as the study of the past through material culture, public archaeology was unique in examining the relationship between archaeology and present society. It was acknowledged that archaeological studies are not detached from cultural, economic and political aspects of contemporary society, and that various power relations existing within society inevitably influence the methods and objectives of archaeological activities, and *vice versa*.

Archaeology, whatever its objectives are, can no longer remain in the academic domain alone, separate from the external interests of modern society. Any archaeological activity inevitably contains and entails a value judgement, which, by definition, is never disinterested and should therefore be considered from a sociological point of view. It was this realisation that gave archaeologists an impetus to engage not only with fellow archaeologists, but also with the multi-faceted public.

The Definition and Aims of Public Archaeology

Being well aware of the contemporary context of archaeology, public archaeology examines a variety of external social territories in which archaeology has a stake and from which it receives influence. But how can public archaeology be defined? Schadla-Hall (1999: 147) states in an editorial for the *European Journal of Archaeology* that "[public archaeology is] concerned with any area of archaeological activity that interacted or had the potential to interact with the public – the vast majority of which, for a variety of reasons, know little about archaeology as an academic subject". Schadla-Hall admits that this definition can be too all-embracing, but he also argues that it is nevertheless "defensible in terms of how and why the public becomes [*sic*] involved in, or aware of, archaeological issues" (Schadla-Hall 1999: 147). On the other hand, in the editorial of the first volume of *Public Archaeology*, the chief editor, Neal Ascherson, puts forward a more reformative definition, that "[public archaeology is concerned about] problems which arise when archaeology moves into the real world of economic conflict and political struggle...[it is therefore] about ethics" (Ascherson 2000: 2).

Neither of the above definitions explicates public archaeology in detail, but, probably wisely, it is treated as a broad socio-cultural study, the fundamental element being the focus on the relationship between archaeology and the public. As Carman (2002: 96-97) proposes, however, it is worth considering what 'the public' really means in public archaeology. This questioning assumes particular relevance when it comes to *prescriptive* discourses. As cited above, Ascherson suggests that public archaeology aims not only to remain *descriptive* in order to observe the relationship between archaeology and modern society, but to achieve, through critical discussions, an 'archaeology for the public'. In other words, the development of public archaeology implies archaeologists should actually strive to be perceived as "messengers for and about archaeology" (McManamon 2000: 16), or more radically, to achieve "archaeology from below" (Faulkner 2000: 30-33). Public-oriented archaeology would not only explain the present social situation in which archaeology finds itself, but also attempt to develop and reform it so that archaeology can better engage the public. If one is to accept, therefore, that public archaeology aims to achieve an 'archaeology for the public', which might take on a certain political tone (Ascherson 2000: 2), then the ambiguous term 'the public' should be conceptualised all the more clearly in order that one can better expound what position public archaeology takes up in a wider, critical debate of 'how archaeology should be'.

The Concept of 'the Public'

In sociology there has been a traditional distinction between 'the public' and 'the private' (Carman 2002: 97). It is the modern nation-state, in particular, that formulates the concept of 'the public' as opposed to 'the private' (Giddens 1984: 197; Weber 1978: 957) and grants authority to the former in order to establish the administration governing the latter in the common interest. 'The private' is separated from 'the public' and associated with the intimate realm of human activities, such as family. This model has prevailed since the establishment of the modern state, and sociologists today still frequently use it to describe the type of government found in modern societies (Kooiman 1993: 1-6). Archaeologists, too, often use this dichotomous model, particularly in the context of Cultural Resource Management (CRM), where archaeological heritage is considered to be of public interest, above private interests, and therefore worth protection (Carman 2002: 97; Merriman 2004: 1-3). As Carman (2002: 99) points out, the same model was arguably in the mind of McGimsey when he insisted that, "there is no such thing as a 'private archeology'...[because] no individual may act in a manner such that the public right to knowledge of the past is unduly endangered or destroyed" (McGimsey 1972: 5). Such a view implies that archaeology belongs to the public and affirms the necessity of having control over the private to preserve archaeological heritage for the public. In fact, although there is variation from one country to another in legislation for the protection of archaeological heritage, to regulate the public and private nature of archaeology, most modern states include an administrative system responsible for this control. This system, as typified by laws and regulations, sorts, categorises and groups archaeological sites and objects, to determine their status or treatment for protection. In this regard, the state administration serves the public interest in archaeology by controlling the private.

As Schadla-Hall (1999: 150) suggests, the concept of 'the public' adopted in CRM is not comprehensive, however, because it may exclude the vast majority of people who are not established archaeologists. In particular, no opportunity would be provided for non-archaeologists to engage in archaeology. This is exemplified by the fact that laws and regulations often limit non-archaeologists from accessing archaeological resources. Thus, while this dichotomous model explains well the nature of shared interests in archaeology, it may possibly exclude public access to and engagement in archaeology – ironically, for the very sake of the 'public interest'.

But why and how is this paradox generated? Merriman (2004: 1-2) partly answers this question when he stresses two specific concepts of 'the public': the one associated with the state and its institutions, and the other with the people. Bearing this in mind, one might note that in the above case there is a gap between these two different concepts of 'the public'. The traditional concept of 'the public', which can often be equated with the state, emphasises the public authority so strongly that there remains very little, if any, chance for 'the private' to take part in the decision-making process of 'the public'. There can, however, be another concept of 'the public', as an open and participatory realm, which assumes that the people, the very constituents of 'the public', have a say in deciding what is in the public interest. Hence, the concept of 'the public' equipped with authority does not necessarily coincide with the concept of 'the public' consisting of the people. The bureaucracy of the modern state, based on the former concept of 'the public', generally operates "through systems of law and regulation rather than through the search for consensus and community control" (Carman 2002: 101), in order to guarantee the equal and orderly observance of archaeological regulation. As a result, the involvement of non-archaeologists, namely 'the private', may be given little consideration or, in the worst case, be dismissed.

Given this situation, one could argue that public archaeology cannot be predicated solely on the concept of 'the public' as opposed to 'the private'. While acknowledging the necessity of a systematised administrative structure for the regulation of archaeological activities and the protection of archaeological materials, public archaeology nevertheless would not confine archaeology to the public realm in the narrow sense but, on the contrary, try to open it up to the general public. At stake is 'the public' consisting of 'private' non-archaeologists and their involvement in archaeology. This leads, however, to another fundamental question. Given the necessity of an administration which ensures the orderly regulation of archaeology for the sake of 'public interests' on the one hand, and the importance of achieving public involvement in archaeology on the other, how should public archaeology understand and deal with 'the public'? To answer this, it is worth considering the idea of the public sphere as formulated by Habermas.

Habermas' Concept of the Public Sphere

Habermas' concept of the public sphere is best articulated in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Habermas 1989). In this work, Habermas analysed the birth of the public sphere in the 17th and 18th centuries in Britain, France and Germany, and its subsequent transformation. While recognising the two different concepts of the public, Habermas argued that the public sphere was a place where private people en-

gaged in a rational-critical debate over issues of common concern in order to confront the public authorities (Habermas 1989: 27-31). These countries gradually established modern states and granted them a 'public authority', which was an abstract and impersonal form of power. During the same period, the bourgeois successfully expanded their presence in the domains of finance and commerce, and those who were educated began to assert publicly their own opinions and demands regarding social issues. While being private citizens, these bourgeois came to see themselves as "constituting the public and thereby transformed the abstract notion of the *publicum* as counterpart to public authority into a much more concrete set of practices" (Calhoun 1992: 9, emphasis in original). This public sphere was unique in that it allowed private people to join in a public debate, and through it they confronted and negotiated with the public authority. It should be noted here that the 'public sphere' and 'public authority' are treated as two separate concepts. The public sphere was created conceptually between 'the public' and 'the private', but it was in fact the latter that constituted it for the purpose of vying with the former, namely, the public authority (Habermas 1989: 30).

With this understanding, one could imagine that the idea of the public sphere could potentially overcome the gap between the two different concepts of 'the public' in public archaeology. The bureaucracy of state administration attempts to ensure orderly regulation of archaeology for the 'public interest' but can impose non-consensual decisions and rules by wielding public authority. If provided with an equivalent of the public sphere in archaeology, however, non-archaeologists could also assert their opinions and become involved in archaeology, at least theoretically, in opposition to the administration. Rather than assuming a complete break between 'the public' and 'the private' by letting only the administration function as their interface, public archaeology would be able to encourage an open debate on archaeology.

Given these apparently positive effects of the public sphere, it could be argued that the task of public archaeology should be to create a democratic public sphere of archaeology and encourage rational-critical debate therein. But the question is: how to achieve it? To answer this, it is useful to return to Habermas again. Although Habermas acknowledged that the bourgeois public sphere was born under specific socio-historical conditions of the 17th and 18th centuries (Habermas 1989: xvii-xix), he also saw in it the trans-historical and normative ideals of democracy (Calhoun 1992: 31-32), among which two fundamental characteristics should be noted. Firstly, Habermas considered that the public sphere needed to be an open and inclusive realm, into which anyone was allowed to enter. Analysing the bourgeois public sphere, Habermas noticed that although only narrow segments of the European population – mainly educated and landed bourgeois – joined in the debate, whereas women and those without private ownership of property were not present, the public sphere never ceased to include more participants (Habermas 1989: 2-3). In Habermas' own words, "[h]owever exclusive the public might be in any given instance, it could never close itself off entirely and become consolidated as a clique" (Habermas 1989: 37). It is therefore evident that Habermas regarded openness and inclusiveness as a basic fundamental feature of the public sphere.

Secondly, Habermas thought that rational-critical thinking should lead the open debate. In his view, reason rather than power directs debate, and truth rather than authority is sought. In the case of the bourgeois public sphere, the contemporary culture that promoted individual freedom and rational critique nurtured criticism against the public authority (Habermas 1989: 37-43). Likewise, Habermas believed that a public sphere could be created only when led by a rational-critical debate. One could even argue that it is the strong adherence to rationality that equalises the identity of discussants. In this respect, the notion of common interest in truth underpins the 'bracketing' of differences of social status and generates an open and inclusive public sphere (Calhoun 1992: 13).

The Creation of the Public Sphere in Archaeology

Given the two fundamental features of the public sphere, inclusiveness and rational-critical thinking, it is possible to envisage the public sphere of archaeology more clearly. If public archaeology can produce an open forum where anyone can participate, assert his/her opinions on archaeology and discuss them with others in a rational-critical manner, this would contribute to the realisation of 'archaeology for the public'. Such a public sphere would produce rational discourses on archaeology which could resist authoritarian decisions and regulations imposed by the state administration. Indeed, some periodicals, books and individual archaeologists attempt to create such a public sphere of archaeology (for example, the journal *Current Archaeology*). Some internet websites also provide an open debate on archaeology where any visitor can post his/her opinion freely on forum-like pages (Renfrew and Bahn 2000: 560-561), of which Ian Hodder's Çatalhöyük website is a typical example (see: <http://catal.arch.cam.ac.uk/catal/catal.html>). Despite these efforts, however, the creation of the public sphere of archaeology is not straightforward for various reasons. If Habermas' ideals are directly implemented in archaeology, several problems may arise.

First, it is conceivable that non-archaeologists would not join in a public debate. In some developing countries, for example, the participation of non-archaeologists in an archaeological discussion may be limited for practical reasons, such as more exigent demands relating to their work and life. The public sphere of archaeology might be legally, hence theoretically, open to everyone, yet the actual level of participation could be low. In such a situation, could archaeology really become an issue of common concern? This leads to another crucial issue: whether the principles of public archaeology could be applied in a place where the concept of 'the public', or more broadly, democracy, does not exist, at least in the western sense. Even in developed countries a similar problem could exist. Those who have enough time, information and disposable resources may still shun joining in a public debate on archaeology. There could be several reasons for this, but one of the biggest is probably a simple lack of motivation, which in turn could be ascribed to a lack of interest in archaeology.

These questions could arise if one attempts to set up a public sphere of archaeology on the basis of Habermasian ideals. Generalisation is, of course, inappropriate, and the answer would depend considerably on the socio-political structure and people's interest in and attitude towards archaeology in each society. The difficulty in balancing the quantity and quality of debate seems, however, almost intrinsic to any public

sphere. In fact, according to Habermas, it was because of the loss of a delicate balance between quantity and quality that the bourgeois public sphere in Europe gradually degenerated in the 19th century. The inclusive nature of the bourgeois public sphere led to the expansion of participation, which together with the appearance of mass culture, replaced rational-critical discourses with passive culture consumption and an apolitical sociability (Habermas 1989: 159-175). Following the same logic, one might argue that it would be difficult to set up a public sphere of archaeology in contemporary society because information on archaeology is mostly delivered by mass media to the public, who receive and consume it passively, rarely bringing it to the level of a critical debate. Or, in such cases as forum-like websites on archaeology, it could be claimed that participants have open ‘chats’, but not ‘debates’. Whether these claims are valid or not, it is undeniable that archaeologists and non-archaeologists alike are unaccustomed to discussing archaeological issues on an equal footing. In research on the archaeology of the Roman villa in Somma Vesuviana, for instance, a survey has shown that most local people are interested in the villa and in archaeology in general, but they rarely debate or challenge what archaeologists say to them as the ‘official’ explanation of the villa. Consequently, one would ask, what should public archaeology do if the public prefer to remain passive consumers of archaeological information, or will not engage spontaneously in a rational-critical debate, which often requires much more effort and energy? In order to answer these questions, it is useful to turn to discussions and debates concerning cultural heritage.

The Heritage Debate and the Relationship Between Archaeology and the Public

The quantity-and-quality control dilemma in public debate and Habermas’ criticism against the ‘degenerated’ contemporary public sphere have some similarities with the so-called ‘heritage debate’, which took place in Britain in the 1980s and 1990s. In this debate, the heritage industry was criticised for fostering ephemeral consumption of heritage products, instead of in-depth understanding of the past. This criticism had a similar tone to the Frankfurt School’s censure of ‘culture industry’ (Adorno 1991: 85-92), which strongly influenced Habermas’ idea of the public sphere (Calhoun 1992: 4-6).

Amid the ‘heritage boom’ in the 1980s, Britain experienced a rapid growth in both heritage tourism and industry, which gave birth to many heritage attractions and presentations. Critics claimed that these market-driven representations presented an oversimplified, sanitised, comfortable and often titillating, but superficial, version of the past (Hewison 1987; Walsh 1992), and also inculcated an ideologically-biased version of the past in the visitor (Wright 1985). These two points of criticism showed a strong concern about the passive consumption of the past to the detriment of its deeper understanding, which was parallel to Habermas’ criticism against the mass public for preferring the passive consumption of culture to rational-critical debate.

There were, however, counter-arguments to this ‘heritage baiting’, notably those raised by Samuel (1994: 242-253), who evinced the popular origins of the heritage boom. According to him, it was snobbish to disdain the heritage industry, which in fact grew out of ordinary people’s interest in the past and which they also appreciated to a great extent. Samuel also rejected the idea of the mass public passively consuming the past:

[T]here is no reason to think that people are more passive when looking at old photographs or film footage, handling a museum exhibit, following a local history trail, or even buying a historical souvenir, than when reading a book. People do not simply 'consume' images in the way in which, say, they buy a bar of chocolate.

(Samuel 1994: 271)

Thus, Samuel argued that even if heritage information appears to pass people by, they may actually gain something from it.

Returning to the question of the creation of the public sphere of archaeology, the assumption that the public are merely consumers of archaeological information is too simplistic. Rather, as some have already proposed (Merriman 2002: 547; Ucko 2000: x), detailed analysis between the production and the consumption of archaeological information needs to be conducted urgently to clarify how the public work with and negotiate archaeological information, as well as how they assimilate or reject it according to their social circumstances. Samuel (1994: 271) has already implied that the real consumption of archaeology takes place in relation to archaeological information already acquired, as well as the quality and context of the information transmitted. Taking this into consideration, one can imagine that the public may understand the archaeological past in diverse, contingent and complex manners. Even when the public appear to receive archaeological information passively, they may interpret it in various, valid ways. Public archaeology will, therefore, first need to conduct an in-depth study of the public, who, it should be reiterated, have the potential to be critical debaters of the subject. Until the public consumption of archaeology is better understood, it is too early to deny the possibility of setting up a public sphere of archaeology.

Applying the Arguments: Public Perceptions of Archaeology at Somma Vesuviana, Italy

As set out in the beginning, this paper centres on the concept of 'the public' with regard to the aims of public archaeology. Habermas' idea of the public sphere is relevant to the discussion because of its trans-historical character, which could be applied to any democratic debate. Public archaeology could prescriptively contribute to an 'archaeology for the public' if it can form a publicly-open debate on archaeology. For the creation of such a public sphere of archaeology, archaeologists would need to understand the public in the first place. In light of this theoretical discussion, I am currently conducting a fieldwork survey of the local people in Somma Vesuviana, Italy, as a part of doctoral research. The survey combines questionnaire-based interviews and open-ended conversations, aiming to understand what local people know about the archaeology of the Roman villa in Somma Vesuviana, how they perceive its archaeology, and how they receive and digest information archaeologists provide to them.

As discussed, it is both the quantity of participation and the quality of discourse that fundamentally characterise the Habermasian idea of the public sphere. Habermas, however, failed to explain how a public debate could be open, yet simultaneously rational-critical. It is this vagueness that renders the realisation of a public sphere ideal,

but also very difficult. The survey research seeks to identify the conditions under which such a debate can take place with regard to the archaeology of Somma Vesuviana.

In addition, the survey reconsiders the definition of a ‘rational-critical debate’, which Habermas did not articulate clearly, despite its crucial and frequent use in his argument. From a Foucauldian point of view, a belief in ‘reason’ could be characterised as “touchingly idealistic, as rooted in a long-redundant Enlightenment rationality and humanism” (McGuigan 1996: 22). This point should be fully underlined, since the requirement of ‘quality’ could prevent the involvement of non-archaeologists in an open debate on the grounds that they are not qualified. In this sense, Habermas’ emphasis on the rational-critical debate could be too strong if applied here; it may run the risk of excluding those who are not trained in academic archaeology. With this in mind, the aim of the present case study at Somma Vesuviana is to examine whether the archaeological work at the site has constructed a mechanism – whether consciously or unconsciously – which, for the sake of ‘rational-critical debate’, impedes the participation of local people in archaeological debates.

Furthermore, as Foucault (1972) cogently pointed out, power and authority are generated in every social milieu – and archaeology is no exception. Without denouncing alternative ways of considering archaeology simply as ‘non-rational-critical’, archaeologists should consider on what sort of ‘reason’ they predicate their own knowledge, as well as to what degree alternative ideas are acceptable in a public debate. On this basis, the survey weighs alternative approaches to the archaeology of the Roman villa in Somma Vesuviana, such as folklore or mass entertainment, against academic archaeology as a means of achieving the wide participation of local people.

The theoretical framework of public archaeology as set out in this paper is thus being tested in a survey in Somma Vesuviana, Italy, and it is expected to reveal the conditions under which the ideal of the public sphere of archaeology can be attained. If archaeologists can be self-critical in a public debate, before being critical of non-archaeologists, they should be able to bring alternative viewpoints into archaeology, which could be a potent tool in resisting the established authority of archaeology (see Bender 1998). Once the public recognise that their voices are considered and represented within the public agenda of archaeology, they should begin to regard the archaeological debate as their own concern. This would be exactly the aim of public archaeology, and is the aim of the present research at Somma Vesuviana. If archaeologists could set up such a public sphere of archaeology, public consumption would become public engagement, which is something even Habermas could not formulate how to achieve.

In research at Somma Vesuviana, the data collected through interviews and conversations with local people are beginning to present patently different ways of perceiving archaeology. Some see it as a way to discover the roots of their culture, some as a new source of their territorial identity, some as mere superstition, some as solemn scientific study, some as amusement and entertainment, while still others see archaeology as a means to make money through tourism. Despite this diversity, interestingly enough, the majority of the local people have some concept of the archaeology of Somma Ve-

suviana. In other words, they have already initiated their own understandings of archaeology. The next challenge in this ongoing research is to establish a forum in which to engage these understandings with the archaeologists involved in order to pursue a public archaeology (or an archaeology of the public) at Somma Vesuviana.

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