

CONFERENCE REVIEW

“World Archaeological Congress. Inter-Congress: Threats to Archaeology – Its Importance, Values and Development”, University of the West Indies, Jamaica, 20th – 26th May 2007

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The World Archaeological Congress (WAC) is the only archaeological organisation with elected global representation. It is committed to diversity and redressing global inequalities in archaeology and in protecting the cultural heritage of indigenous peoples, minorities and economically disadvantaged countries (see www.worldarchaeologicalcongress.org for details). It is fitting therefore that the 2007 inter-congress held in Jamaica coincided with the British Parliament Act passed 200 years ago to end the traffic of enslaved Africans. Hosted by the Archaeological Society of Jamaica (whose aim is to bring awareness of the significance of the encounter between indigenous Americans, European, African and Asian peoples in Jamaica), at the University of West Indies (UWI), a diverse, challenging and thought-provoking programme was designed to consider past and, more specifically, current threats to archaeology and the importance of values and development in the discipline. Delegates from China, the UK, the USA, South America, India, Greece and Jamaica etc. presented a broad range of material, case studies and ideas that collectively culminated in a rich, diverse and stimulating congress.

Sessions were titled:

1. ‘Out of Many one People’: The Cognizant and Corollary Effects of the Colonization of Jamaica
2. Ethical Issues in Dealing with the Past
3. Slavery, Plantation Archaeology and Maroon Societies
4. Defining Archaeology: Emerging Perspectives in WAC Student Research
5. Material Cultural Heritage
6. Localizing the Global
7. Indigenous Archaeology
8. Ethics, Values and Sustainability in Archaeology
9. Cultural Resource Management
10. 200 years: Archaeologies of the Precedents and Consequences of the African Slave Trade
11. Underwater Archaeology and Maritime Archaeology

Public lectures were given by Professors Verene Shepherd (UWI) on “The JNHT’s Freedom Monument Project and the Archaeology of Black Memory”, Peter Stone (Newcastle University) “The Management of Heritage in the 21st Century” and Doug-

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las Armstrong (Syracuse University) on “Archaeological Perspectives on the Cultural Landscapes of Slavery and Freedom”.

The inter-congress covered a broad range of data and ideas, with an encouraging number of delegates in the process of having undertaken, or in the process of conducting research at UCL. For this review I am going to focus on three themes (identity, memory and multi-vocality) that recurred throughout the duration of the congress and comment on the establishment and significance of WAC.

Issues of Identity

Many papers explored how cultural identity is both configured and re-configured. Case studies from those working in Jamaica considered how identity is situated both in past and contemporary constructions of Jamaican identity; questioning whether it is appropriate to draw upon notions of their disconcerting past or those of their empowered present. These papers presented the concept of identity as being rather distinct from the non-Jamaican perspectives that have either sought to impose, or, misguidingly, construct a sense of Jamaican identity. This contextual approach questions what we draw upon in our constructions of identity both in the past and in the present, a theme explored by Douglas Armstrong in his consideration of the varying elements of freedom which he defined as: 1. Life (concepts of ownership of oneself), 2. Liberty (to choose one’s life trajectory) and 3. Property (of self, community, land and possessions). Likewise, Mark W. Hauser’s (University of Notre Dame, USA) examination of the Yabba (a Jamaican ceramic that is made and used by people of African descent) that are distributed through informal markets in the 18th and 19th centuries, considered how the Yabba has the potential to add considerable depth to our understanding of how social relations were created and transformed within an oppressive slave system. Moreover, he suggested that there are differences in the scale and scope and identity of these island economies.

Colonialism and how it impacts on the construction and expression of identity was also considered with regard to the influential role it has in the development of archaeology worldwide. For papers that drew upon Jamaica as its main case study area, the impact of colonisation was considered as the importing of various racial, ethnic and what were referred to as ‘hybrid’ groups. This created various Diasporas which are the result of both ‘forced and free’ migrations evident in Jamaica from prehistory onwards. Lesley-Gail Atkinson (Jamaican National Heritage Trust; Department of Anthropology, University of Florida, USA) presented an argument for the prehistoric colonisation of Jamaica based on known ceramic assemblages, raising challenging issues relating to the, often ignored, prehistoric migration, colonisation and identity of the first people of the island. From a historical perspective, the establishment and operation of the William James Foundry (1817-1843) by Veront Satchell (UWI) and Shani Roper (Institute of Jamaica) presented an ‘exposé’ of this local Jamaican enterprise, arguing that there has been a problematic assumption made (based on neoclassical and Marxist references) that technological change and industrial development is alien to slave societies and that slavery was incompatible with technological change. Using the Foundry as a case study they presented an alternative option; that the establishment of enterprise actually testifies to the technical and investment capabilities of the Jamaican slave society.

Candice Goucher (Washington State University, USA) also considered the significance of metalworking in her discussion on iron which she commented on as having two contrasting identities: as being associated with chains and shackles for some slaves, while for others it was representative of empowerment in the form of agricultural tools. Iron for Goucher was at the heart of resistance, empowerment and the construction of identity. Enterprise was explored by Jillian E. Galle (The Digital Archaeological Archive of Comparative Slavery, Monticello, USA) who considered how slave consumption was not only a response to broader demographic and economic changes but was also an explicit and social strategy employed by slaves for effective communication. James Robertson (UWI) also offered an alternative narrative with regard to enterprise in his paper “It may have been a Spanish Town once; it’s a Black town now: Colonial Spanish Town, Jamaica” offering fresh perspectives on the surviving buildings of Jamaica’s colonial capital and the shifting identities of its inhabitants.

Making Memory

Memory was considered in a number of papers, often under the guise of “collective consciousnesses”. In particular, the session “Localizing the Global” run by Stelios Lekakis (University of Athens), considered how the past is appropriated in the collective consciousness through both metaphysical and physical characteristics. This session had a particularly strong UCL representation with papers covering a range of temporal and geographical perspectives. In particular, Anastasia Sakellariadi (UCL) considered how Greek archaeology is a product of the formation of the Modern Greek nation-state, raising pertinent issues as to the temporality of the material that is drawn upon to form an interpretation of the past. Drawing upon the more contemporary history of the Arabian Gulf, Kirsty Norman offered a pertinent paper on the perception of archaeology in times of conflict and the significance of the role of museums in the preservation and presentation of the past.

Considering Multi-Vocality

The theme of multi-vocality was referred to in a number of sessions. The significance of the politics of the present was considered by Alinah K. Segobye (University of Botswana) in her presentation of perspectives on the use of cultural heritage in the post-colonial state in southern Africa, in which she explored how the use of the past often raises challenges of who should interpret the past, how the past is used and to what end different readings of the past are inclusive. Likewise, Sada Mire (UCL) in her consideration of Somali cultural heritage explored what she considered to be a clash between local and western theory and practice, arguing that archaeology should be a part of the wider post-conflict reconstruction of Somalia that can provide possibilities for reconciliation and local community development opportunities. The multi-vocal viewpoints of a range of people either engaged in and/or affected by the excavation of a Roman Villa in Somma Vesuviana (Italy) was explored by Akira Matsuda (UCL) in his presentation of his PhD research. Matsuda advocated the possible potentials of adopting multi-vocality as an interpretative tool, as did the author in her consideration of students’ (from the University of Notre Dame, USA) perceptions of British prehistoric sites. The author, however, raised issues (in both theory and practice) with the multi-vocal perspective, in which she argued for a more robust consideration and application of the multi-vocal viewpoint.

Issues of diversity were explored by Karina Croucher (University of Liverpool, UK) and Wendelin Romer (University of York, UK) in their session. "Ethics, Values and Sustainability". They raised concerns for both practitioners and educators when approaching the diversity of archaeology and other related disciplines, arguing that increased diversity is essential in ensuring the relevance, sustainability and future of the discipline; as is the presentation of a diverse, inclusive past. Diversity was also considered in Professor Peter Stone's public lecture, in which he outlined the history of the establishment of WAC, its significance then, and its continued importance today. He also considered changing perspectives on cultural heritage, outlining the problematic history of Stonehenge as a case study, asking whose ethics are we to consider in our interpretation and management of cultural heritage. Moreover, he promoted the significance of ethics and values of teaching diversity through the archaeological curriculum.

Summary

The 2007 WAC inter-congress in Jamaica presented a defining moment of our engagement in world archaeology. Its programming to coincide with the British Parliament Act passed 200 years ago to end the traffic of enslaved Africans offered an opportunity for archaeologists to consider our ethical responsibilities and the significance of recognising indigenous rights and to re-examine archaeology as a practice. The significance of it being held in Jamaica was that it offered a contextual perspective to the history, outcomes and social issues which are the result of its history both at a local and global scale. It is a pity therefore that the timetabling did not allow for adequate discussion, particularly in terms of the potential application of some of the ideas raised by a number of papers.

The generous hospitality of the Archaeological Society of Jamaica in the form of social and cultural events, organised field trips to Port Royal (in which Anthony R.D. Porter's sourcing of the building materials shipped from the UK and incorporated in the construction of the port were put into context), the Blue Mountain coffee plantation, St Thomas, the National Labour Day Concert, plus the launch of Lesley-Gail's publication *The Earliest Inhabitants: The Dynamics of the Jamaican Taino* created a stimulating, culturally rich and enjoyable conference.

It is fitting to conclude with reference to the late Professor Peter Ucko. Professor Peter Stone commented in his public lecture on the significance of Professor Ucko's role in the creation of WAC, of its impact on archaeology and of the significance of its future. As a founder of WAC Professor Ucko's work in redressing global inequalities in archaeology and in supporting the cultural heritage of indigenous peoples, minorities and economically disadvantaged countries was acknowledged and commended. Tributes to Professor Ucko can be accessed at www.worldarchaeologycongress.org/guestbook and www.antiquity.ac.uk/memoriām.