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Archaeological Heritage Management in the Netherlands: Perspectives and Problems

Willems, W.J.H.

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Archaeological Heritage Management in the Netherlands: Perspectives and Problems

WILLEM J. H. WILLEMS

In the Netherlands, archaeological heritage management has a long tradition. In the present context, it is useful to present some information on its history and organization but it is not the purpose of this contribution (1) to go into details which have been published elsewhere (2). The focus will be on some of the central issues and problems of today and on the perspective for the future, when national traditions will increasingly be part of a larger, European framework.

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

The Rijksdienst voor het Oudheidkundig Bodemonderzoek – the State Service for Archaeological Investigations – was founded in 1947. The ROB is a semi-independent government institute which is part of the Ministry of Welfare, Health and Culture. Together with a separate and somewhat larger institute which is in charge of historic buildings, the ROB is responsible for heritage management in the Netherlands. The foundation for this task is the Monuments Act which came into effect in 1961, after a rather long preambulatory process.

In the Netherlands, the first ordinance for the protection of monuments dates from 1730 (megalithic tombs in the province of Drenthe). It even predates the start of the professional interest for archaeological finds and sites, which can be set in 1818. In that year, the State Museum of Antiquities at Leiden was founded and its first director, C. J. C. Reuvens, was appointed professor of archaeology at Leiden University. Reuvens was the first university professor in the world charged with teaching pre- and protohistory in addition to the usual classical archaeology. His appointment marks the start of scientific excavations and the systematic documentation of sites.

His archaeological map of the Netherlands (3), the first of its kind, was published posthumously in 1845. For more than a century, the State Museum of Antiquities remained the primary centre of Dutch archaeology. It was only after 1920 that a second centre developed at the University of Groningen, with the foundation of the Biological-Archaeological Institute by the well-known archaeologist A. E. van Giffen. He was responsible for fundamental scientific and technical developments, but his work was also of great importance for archaeological heritage management.

By 1940 there were – apart from these two institutes and a third, smaller one at Utrecht – a considerable number of archaeological societies and clubs as well as provincial and regional museums, all engaged in various kinds of archaeological work. This state of affairs made it increasingly difficult to regulate archaeological activities in the country. The government felt a need for this, as there

was no longer a central institution and there were two increasingly problematic issues: the regulation of excavation work and the distribution of finds to the museums.

Preparations for legal provisions had already been made when the Netherlands became involved in the war after the German invasion in May 1940. Two weeks later, presumably to prevent the occupier from taking matters into his own hands, the Supreme Commander of the Land and Sea Forces issued a 'Decree containing specifications concerning archaeological excavations and finds'. On the basis of this decree, a State Commission for Archaeological Investigations was established in which various institutes were represented. The commission had its own executive arm, the State Bureau for Archaeological Investigations.

The main task of the State Bureau was to document all archaeological sites and finds in the country and to inform the State Commission. The decree and the arrangements based on it were the first formal regulation and recognition of the responsibility of the State for its archaeological heritage, because the documentation of the State Bureau was intended to provide the basis for a future national register of monuments. In practice, however, the decree of 1940 did not achieve all that much and the State Bureau was compromised by political collaboration.

After the war, a fresh start was made and in 1946 a Monuments Council was established, which incorporated various State Commissions, including the archaeological commission. Its main task was the preparation of a Monuments Act which was finally approved by parliament in 1961. The docu-

mentation of sites and finds was taken up by the new State Service, the ROB, as one of its two primary objectives. The second task of the ROB was to carry out all excavations being done on behalf of the state, with the exclusion of all other institutes. This meant that not only societies and museums were no longer entitled to dig, but that even university institutes had lost their independence. Henceforth, their archaeologists could carry out excavations only in cooperation with the ROB.

It is no surprise that such a system did not work and that in practice the ROB has never been the sole excavation institute in the country. The regulations between 1945 and 1961 had favourable as well as unfavourable results. It was an advantage that excavations by individuals, societies, and gradually also those by most museums, were no longer carried out. This meant that digging in order to obtain finds, or excavations where this was at least a secondary objective, became a thing of the past. On the other hand, much controversy arose from the position of the universities who could obviously not do without excavations as a vital element of their research programmes. The situation was only resolved in 1961, when the Monuments Act came into effect which allowed universities to obtain excavation permits from the Minister of Culture. In practice, this has proven to be a healthy development and over the last decades university institutes (4) have in fact become integrated in the organisation of archaeological heritage management because most of their digs are nowadays rescue excavations.

Only this year, the ROB has been charged with a new task, namely, the underwater

heritage management and nautical archaeology. For this purpose, an existing unit for underwater exploration and the maritime museum at Ketelhaven have been added to the state service. In the future, these two units will constitute the nautical branch of the ROB.

CONCEPTS AND CURRENT TRENDS

Where excavation permits are concerned, the Dutch Monuments Act, which was revised in 1988, differs from similar legislation in many other countries. That is because the regulation for these permits is not openended, in the sense that organisations that meet certain qualifications may apply for one. It is, to the contrary, an exclusive regulation because the law specifies that only state institutions, universities and municipalities can obtain a permit (5) if they meet the requirements. This is very fortunate, especially in view of the fact that the Dutch government signed the revised European Convention on the Protection of the Archaeological Heritage, which may lead to new legislation and drastically alter the funding of rescue excavations in the future. The exclusive character of the law will be very useful in avoiding adverse effects that may result from the commercialization of archaeological work, most notably the start of commercial 'excavation firms' or other derailments such as competitive tendering for excavation projects (6).

Although the regulation of excavation work is an important element in the Monuments Act, its main significance lies of course in the legal protection of archaeological monuments, a task for which the ROB is responsi-

ble. Through the instrument of protection the law recognizes that archaeological remains are a fragile and irreplaceable resource and it provides the social legitimation for the management of that resource. As we have come to realize in the 1980's, such management includes much more than the simple process of protecting individual monuments that was envisaged a few decades ago (7). In practice, it can be understood as a coherent cycle of activities which have, at the same time, both legal/administrative and informational/research aspects reaching from documentation over protection, preservation and care to – as a last resort – excavation and the resulting data. An additional and fundamental aspect is to inform the public, to increase understanding and appreciation for archaeological resources. This provides the necessary basis for the political and social process which in turn provides the means to manage the heritage or, in other words, to keep the cycle going and whenever possible to let it spiral upwards.

This entire process should be conceived as archaeological heritage management. It is very difficult to define this concept in general terms. A working definition that has been used in recent discussions about the objectives and structure of the ROB organisation defines it as 'the management of the archaeological part of the cultural heritage in order to protect this heritage as a source of information about our past and as a means to experience culture'. This definition encompasses in general terms the cultural resource values as defined by Lipe (1984): informational and associative/symbolic, economic and aesthetic. It does not, however, rate these values

equally. Underlying the definition are two basic reasons for managing:

First, there is the recognition that archaeological monuments can indeed be experienced and enjoyed as such, since burial mounds, banks, terps, megalithic tombs, etc. have aesthetic, associative and other values which should be preserved. But such remains are a small minority and in most cases archaeological monuments are valuable primarily or exclusively because of their information content, as part of the archives contained in the soil.

THE VISIBLE HERITAGE

The majority of archaeological monuments cannot function in a direct way, because they need to be investigated, analysed and explained. This circumstance leads to the recognition of the fundamental difference between the management of 'ancient monuments' (Bodendenkmalpflege) and 'historic buildings' (Baudenkmalpflege).

In the Netherlands, as elsewhere in north-western Europe, this difference is generally recognized in practice, although it is not everywhere reflected in the organisation of heritage management (8). Admittedly, there is some overlap between the two because there are ancient monuments which are structures or even buildings. This overlap is larger in southern Europe, to the extent that the archaeological heritage is often identified with standing structures. From the point of view of 'public' archaeology this is very useful and visible monuments, such as megalithic tombs in the Netherlands, serve as showpieces of the archaeological heritage

precisely because they have this visible aspect in common with the architectural heritage. But on the other hand there is a danger.

Everywhere in Europe the total input in the management of the architectural heritage exceeds that which is made available for archaeology to such a degree that it is incomparable. We should, however, take care that a similar situation does not arise within the management of the archaeological heritage. It is necessary to have showpieces and it is necessary to exploit them as best we can. But they must not be allowed to monopolize public, political, financial and even scientific interest, thereby keeping the vast majority of invisible sites under the surface in more than the literal sense. Good public relations are a major cornerstone for a successful heritage management, but they are a means, not a purpose.

Nevertheless, visible ancient monuments are a valuable asset and an important tool in education, which is a purpose as well as a means (to generate public interest and support). In this respect, the role of the cultural landscape should also be mentioned. In the past decade, an increasing number of publications reflects the Dutch discussion on the interrelationship between archaeological monuments and the surrounding landscape (Klok/Vervloet 1983; Waterbolk 1984). Landscapes often have aesthetic qualities which are directly related to their historical dimension and monuments which are still in their authentic context not only have an increased information value, they may also be used to communicate this value more directly. In addition, there is the value of establishing close connections with the very powerful

green movement which has a political impact that archaeology can achieve by itself only in exceptional cases.

THE ARCHIVES CONTAINED IN THE SOIL

The primary objective of archaeological heritage management is to secure the preservation of the archaeological record as a source of information that should remain available for future generations to study and enjoy. When preservation is impossible due to external circumstances, it is vital that the information is at least preserved in the best way possible. That means it has to be extracted from the record before it is destroyed. In this view, it is clear that archaeological heritage management has two aspects, preventive management (Präventivpflege) and management by research (Forschungspflege) which constitute the interrelated, interactive and mutually dependent elements of the management cycle. The difference between research in heritage management and 'pure' academic research is not a fundamental one. It is not related to the kind of scientific research, for there is only one, but rather to the point of view from which it is initiated: in one case it is started to save information about our past, in the other to acquire such information.

It is essential to realize this basic fact for what it is, namely, a second fundamental cornerstone for a successful archaeological heritage management. Apparently, however, this fact is not self-evident because it is frequently overlooked in discussions about the distinction between archaeological heritage management and the academic discipline of archaeo-

logy. On the one hand, there is the academic community where research is often understood, if not as something better or higher, then at least as very different from heritage management research (for example Cleere 1989, 16). On the other hand, the administrative and technical aspects necessary for legal procedures, planning policies and the like, which are essential elements in heritage management, are seen as the central elements, without due regard for the fundamental research questions involved: in other words, 'how' becomes more important than 'why' and important processes such as 'selection' become increasingly bureaucratic.

In the Netherlands, not the academic community but the present administration has initiated discussion about the role of selection in cultural resource management. It started with the museums, which receive extensive new funding to initiate backlog programmes for the registration and conservation of their collections, following an alarming report from the General Audit Office on the state of the nation's collections. On the other hand, these collections are subjected to a process of selection, to set priorities but also to prevent new problems in the future. The same has happened with the archives, the historic buildings and the archaeological heritage (9).

For archaeology, one aspect of this new policy is that the state, which by law owns most of the material from excavations, will demand a conscious selection policy where finds are concerned. It is no longer considered acceptable that after analysis all finds from excavations should be preserved indiscriminately and forever. The ROB and the

State Commission for Archaeology have been asked to develop such a policy.

Equally important, however, is the selection of sites for protection or, where that is not possible, for excavation. There is an increasing awareness that selection for protection, in particular, is one of the most critical tasks for archaeological heritage management in the near future. Traditionally, a lot of attention is paid to selecting sites for excavation. Since the early 1970's, the ROB has had a conscious policy to spend the limited funds for rescue excavations as much as possible on long term projects with clearly defined research themes and an emphasis on specific regions (Willems 1992, 308 ff.). This is one way that the relevance and output of the total excavation effort can be increased. Otherwise funds would be divided over too many incidental excavations scattered all over the country. There are obviously alternative means to select threatened sites for excavation, and the present policy may even need to be revised after two decades, but the major point is that we have a policy.

Such a policy is largely lacking where the selection of sites for protection is concerned. As in most other countries, the register of protected sites is heavily biased towards visible monuments so that for some periods mostly burial sites have been protected (e.g. tumuli), for others settlements, such as the coastal habitation mounds (Wurten), or fortifications, such as castles. There is some legitimation in this state of affairs, because such sites are relatively easily identified and also because, as mentioned above, they have other inherent values apart from being a future source of information.

On the other hand, and in the face of the enormous pressure on available space in a country such as the Netherlands, there is a need to develop better selection policies for all kinds of archaeological sites. Otherwise, future generations will have nothing left but a limited and very one-sided sample of their archaeological heritage. This means that programmes for inventories and evaluation will have to be increased and also that new concepts for effective and lasting protection need to be developed. In the Netherlands, as elsewhere, simple bureaucratic procedures for legal protection are insufficient to guarantee effective protection. Conservation measures to improve conditions so that sites may survive, or the purchasing of monuments by public authorities for the same purpose, may lead to a better guarantee for future survival, but the necessary funding prohibits large scale use of such instruments. They can only be used for carefully selected sites under special circumstances (10).

A more effective approach which is currently under debate (comp. p. 44), could be offered by the concept of the culture landscape. Government planning policy is increasingly directed towards conserving and even restoring important natural landscapes in the Netherlands. Although the ecological and environmental approach to landscapes tends to be rather a-historic and one shudders to think what new activities such as 'landscape-building' may imply, there is a general trend whereby cultural values are increasingly taken into account. When natural landscapes (for which the legal and financial framework is organized by the Ministry of Agriculture) can be linked to valuable cultural landscapes

in which archaeological monuments are important elements, this context will provide the foundation for an improved and effective long-term protection of the cultural heritage. At the same time, archaeological heritage management in such a context will provide the historical dimension of the environment (Kristiansen 1990) and serve to establish or intensify badly used connections with the green movement.

Notes:

- 1 This article is an abbreviated and slightly adapted version of the paper which was presented (in German) during the conference at Rolduc;
- 2 For a recent overview, see Willems 1992. Additional and detailed information is provided by Van Es 1972 and Brongers 1976;
- 3 The map also covered present-day Belgium, which became independent in 1830;
- 4 Notably those from Groningen (BAI), Amsterdam (IPP) and Leiden (IPL), but also a small excavation unit from Nijmegen University;
- 5 These permits are normally permanent although they can be revoked when the recipient no longer meets the requirements. Separate permits are only required in (rare) cases when excavations in scheduled monuments are planned;
- 6 Such a system may actually arise in England (English Heritage 1991, 27f.). One can only hope this will prove to be a short-lived excrescence of Thatcherism and will not spread widely in Europe;
- 7 Compare, for example, the original European Convention (London 1969) with the revised one (Malta 1992). The changed attitude towards archaeological heritage management is evident from recent publications such as

Cleere 1984, the reports of the Florence (1987) and the Nice (1989) colloquies of the Council of Europe, or the IUSPP symposium on cultural resource management at Southampton (Cleere, ed., 1989);

- 8 See Reichstein 1984, 41, on the demands of the German State Archaeologists Association regarding the establishment of independent offices for archaeological heritage management in all states of the federation;
- 9 See the government publication „Deltaplan. Preservation of Cultural Heritage in the Netherlands“, Ministry of Welfare, Health and Culture, Rijswijk 1992;
- 10 At the moment, the Dutch government has no budget for the purchase of archaeological sites. The megalithic tombs in the province of Drenthe which are state property, were bought at the end of the last century.

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