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Digging Holes Abroad: An Ethnography of Dutch Archaeological Research Projects Abroad

SUMMARY

Over the last few decades, western archaeology abroad has adapted increasingly to the interests and needs of others in society, specifically with respect to archaeological research, heritage management and collaboration. The way in which we deal with other peoples views and values in the interpretation and investigation of archaeological pasts and materials, the way in which we integrate our archaeological narratives and practices with other demands in the heritage field and with processes of heritage management, and the way in which we deal with power differences in both these processes; all remain as challenging issues when ‘digging holes abroad’. However, most of current archaeological and cultural heritage policies, methodologies and critiques have overlooked the complex relationship between project policy, discourse and practice. In addition, they have often focused on the issue of ‘indigenous community’ involvement in postcolonial contexts, and less upon the motivations, desires and values of ‘local communities’ and/or of a broader range of stakeholders in global, national and regional contexts. As such, this thesis paid more attention to analyzing the underlying processes by which archaeological research projects abroad are developed, negotiated and implemented, as well as to the impact of the agency and social position of archaeologists and other actors on project outcomes.

This study has brought forward an ethnographic approach as to investigate how archaeological research projects abroad work in their social context. It has done this by regarding the archaeological research practices of the Faculty of Archaeology of Leiden University as a ‘culture’ under investigation, specifically by taking the Deir Alla Joint Archaeological Project in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan (with additional research at Tell Balata in the Palestinian Westbank) and the Santa Barbara Project in Curaçao as case studies. The case studies combined fieldwork, participant observation, semi-structured and open interviews, as well as document analysis.

Within this ethnography, research projects have been approached as networks of actors, values, policies and discourses, that centered around a conception of ‘heritage’ sites as multi-vocal, multi-temporal, multi-spatial and contested sites of knowledge, practice and power. By bringing forward a ‘practice perspective’ towards project policy discourses, this study focused upon the ways in which interrelations between actors and discourses were created across time and space in multiple sites. The concept of ‘value’ has thereby been applied as an analytical tool that illustrated the intentions, desires and motivations of actors in relation to archaeological research, heritage, and collaborative projects. Taken together, this ethnographic approach investigated three specific research questions; 1) What are the values and discourses of actors in archaeological project policies with respect to research, heritage management and collaboration?, 2) How do archaeological actors negotiate these values and discourses in relation to those of others in society abroad?, and 3) What is the influence of this process of policy negotiation upon project outcomes?

The study identified the existence of a dominant archaeological discourse within the current policies and practices of the two case studies. This ‘authorized’ archaeology discourse effectively prioritized expert values, knowledge of a universally significant past, and objective scientific field research over alternative values when investigating and/or managing an archaeological site in a collaborative project. It is hereby important to stress that the discourse, as reflected in the project policies of both case studies, also encapsulated explicit intentions with respect to enhancing the social value of research, heritage management and collaboration. However, these policy intentions were not always in line with the values and discourses of other actors in social contexts abroad, as they sat in contrast with the view that the value of sites with material remains of the past lies in contemporary identifications and uses. For some, material remains were not ‘scientific data’, but rather someone’s ‘heritage’. For others, sites with material remains were a development burden, a source of income, a tourism asset, an educational tool, an opportunity for capacity building, or simply a place to have family picnics. Nevertheless, the scientific and archaeological values of practices of research, heritage management and collaboration came to be prioritized over other values through processes of project negotiation and policy implementation. This is because the policy goals and intentions of the two projects allowed for the formation of strong, temporary alliances with other partners in society – even without necessary sharing the same values and discourses with respect to research, heritage management and collaboration. The use of very condensed conceptualizations, such as ‘capacity building’, ‘community involvement’, ‘heritage’, ‘collaboration’ and/or ‘public benefit’, facilitated this. The successful translation of values was thereby influenced by the discourse, personal background and agency of individual actors, as well as to their need for maintaining institutional, political and financial support. Global access to potential financial resources for archaeological research also played a significant role in the formation of project networks and inherent power relationships between actors.

Ultimately, the projects did not (yet) fully succeed in implementing several policy goals and intentions in relation to the social value of archaeology, such as site conservation, site interpretation, the establishment of local museums, capacity building of local institutions, and/or the creation of educational and socio-economic benefits for host communities. In addition, this study identified an exclusion of local partners from project networks and benefits. This in turn led not only to the idea that most of the benefits from archaeological research projects abroad were geared towards (Dutch) archaeological researchers and academic institutions, but also to frictions between partners – most notably in terms of rather drastic different perceptions of success and failure of ‘collaborative projects’.

In summary, we can say that the unequal provision of project benefits to archaeological academic institutions, as well as an exclusion of several local partners, has been an (often unintended) result of a process whereby project policies, discourses and actor agencies together contributed to the prioritization of archaeological and scientific values, as well as to the attribution of expertise and ownership to archaeological actors. As such, critiques and representations that regard the social impact of archaeological practices abroad as solely the result of either (Dutch) project policies, (western) discourses or (archaeological) actors’ motivations, seem to fall short in their explanation.

Ultimately, archaeological academics play an important role in not only the investigation and exploration of the past, but also in the way in which archaeological collaborative projects are integrated with wider heritage issues and socio-political and economic concerns. This is because they are, whether they like it or not, often placed in positions of ‘gatekeepers’ of the past, whereby they are attributed the expertise and power to make decisions over management aspects of archaeological remains that have an important impact upon the needs and values of others in society. Accordingly, this means that archaeologists need to accept that material remains of the past are not solely an opportunity for research, and that they can no longer hide behind a notion of archaeological research as a neutral activity free from political and social responsibility. The discipline also needs to try and broaden the values and discourses of its current funding

and institutional frameworks, so that they better allow for the implementation, resourcing and evaluation of long-term, institutional collaborations in which conservation, presentation and capacity building elements are seen as a fundamental part of archaeological conduct abroad, and not as a well-intended afterthought.

In this sense, ethnographies of archaeological practices can play a fundamental role in the future. If a self-reflexive ethnographic approach is applied, right from the start, to the way in which archaeological research projects are developed, negotiated and implemented, it can not only shed light on the actual processes that underlie the outcome of archaeological practices abroad, but it can also contribute to actively engaging stakeholder participation by giving voice to their values and wishes in archaeological and heritage management processes. Integrating archaeological research with a value-based heritage management approach and with continuing ethnographic analysis, can as such contribute to more equitable, ethical and locally sustainable collaborative practices that are not only scientifically, but also socially relevant.

