The Register of Professional Archaeologists' Standards are Volutary

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The Register of Professional Archaeologists' Standards Are Voluntary

But Volunteerism May Not be Sufficient for the Public

Jeffrey H Altschul
President, Register of Professional Archaeologists

While many professions have developed mechanisms to maintain standards of their members' conduct, anthropology as a whole is not among them. Professional societies, such as the AAA, Society for American Archaeology, Society for Historical Archaeology and the Archaeological Institute of America, are membership organizations and cannot expel members for ethical violations. However, it is precisely for this reason that these four organizations are sponsors of the Register of Professional Archaeologists (RPA). The problems and prospects of the RPA, both in the US and abroad, should serve as case study for potential broader applications to the profession of anthropology.

Jefferey A Altschul

COMMENTARY

RPA At Home

The establishment and acceptance of universal standards in archaeology is the fundamental goal of the Register of Professional Archaeologists (RPA). Unlike current discussions of standards in anthropology which center on techniques of recording human behavior, American archaeologists who fought for professional ethical standards in the 20th century focused less on how archaeology was done than on the behavior of those doing it. Continued failures to publish, curate materials, disseminate results, honor permits and value the rights of descendant communities led in 1976 to the adoption of a universal code of conduct and standards of research performance (see www.rpanet.org). The code and standards have not been substantively altered in 30 years.

There is only one way to demonstrate acceptance of RPA's code of conduct and standards of research performance: one must register. Registration is a voluntary act that recognizes an individual's personal responsibility to be held accountable for their professional behavior. Allegations about unethical behavior by an RPA are adjudicated through a quasi-legal grievance procedure. Allegations can be brought forward not only by peers, but also by descendant communities, government agencies, developers, professional societies and members of the general public.

Academic vs Applied

Given that American archaeologists have been fighting for the establishment of professional ethics and research standards for more than 85 years, one would expect that most professional archaeologists would be registered. Yet this is not the case—only about one-third of archaeologists eligible for RPA are actually listed. Most RPAs (about 50%) work in applied archaeology, better known in the US as cultural resource management (CRM), whereas less than 18% of RPAs are employed at universities. The dominant degree obtained by RPAs is an MA, whereas the dominant degree held by those chosing not to register is the PhD. It appears that while students are willing to be listed in RPA, their professors are not.

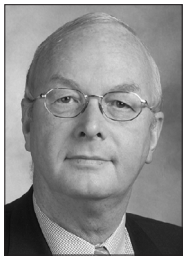
There are many reasons why academic archaeologists have chosen not to be listed in RPA. Some are philosophically opposed to having their professional activities judged by others. Some believe that RPA applies only to CRM practitioners and not to academic research (not true). Others believe that RPA is applicable only to archaeology in the US and not abroad (again, not true). Whatever the reasons, the failure of academic archaeologists to take ethics and research standards seriously has not been lost on others.

The inability of American professional societies to take action in cases of alleged improprieties gives the impression that archaeologists are not accountable for their professional behavior. States, government agencies and foreign countries are forced to devise their own ways of tying professional standards to permit requirements. More often than not these groups come to RPA. Academic archaeologists are well advised to heed the advice offered in the following piece by Willem J H Willems, the Netherland's Inspector General for Archaeology. Unless we demonstrate that we can successfully manage our own professional behavior, archaeologists should not be surprised when governmental agencies, in the US and abroad, take draconian steps to manage it for us.

RPA Abroad

Willem J H Willems, RPA
Inspector General for Archaeology in the Netherlands

Archaeology in Europe has changed drastically over the past 15 years. Part of this change can be attributed to the adoption of a revised "European Convention on the Protection of the Archaeological Heritage," also called the Malta Convention after the island where it was signed in 1992. The convention is a voluntary treaty from the Council of Europe and has been signed by a majority of European countries; it includes a "developer pay" principle (see http://conventions.coe.int/treaty/en/Treaties/html/143.htm).



Willem J H Willems

Heritage Management

There are still vast differences between countries in the way that archaeological resource management is organized: in many it has remained exclusively in the domain of governance but in many others it is now regarded as a field for private enterprise as well, and legislation has changed accordingly. The Netherlands is among the latter. Commercial archaeology was introduced five years ago under a temporary decree that should be replaced by a new law this year. Since then, as in all other countries where the system has changed, quality assurance has become a major concern and various tools are being used to ascertain two main issues: not only that work is done properly, but also that it is relevant.

In the Netherlands, and indeed in most of Europe with the exception of the UK, strong ties are maintained between academia and heritage management. Initiatives such as the Irish Discovery Programme, or the Swedish program under which the State Antiquities Board finances research positions, aim to ensure that developer-led work remains relevant to research. Increasingly, research agendas are being written as guidance, and almost everywhere formal "briefs" or "project outlines" are used that state the research questions. Normally, these come through state, provincial, county or some other governmental archaeology service and for major projects university archaeologists are often involved. Of course the wide gap persists between those that believe there are "facts" out there to be recorded and archived for future interpretation, and those that insist that the questions asked determine to a large extent what can be discovered.

A second approach is to control work in the field. This is done either by maintaining a state monopoly for such work, or by elaborate and labor-intensive systems of fieldwork supervision by government organizations and in some cases by written standards for archaeological work. The two most elaborate ones are those developed by the Institute of Field Archaeologists in the UK (available at www.archaeologists.net/) and the Dutch standards (available—in English—at www.archinsp.nl/). Both have been written by the archaeological community; the major difference between the two is that working according to the standard is obligatory in the Netherlands. Everyone—whether private company, university department or government heritage service—needs a license, and working according to the standard is a condition that is enforced. The stan-

dard, by the way, includes the obligation to publish the result within two years, which is currently revolutionizing Dutch archaeology and is expected to have a major impact on research.

Professional Codes of Ethics

However, as we all know, archaeological fieldwork can only to some extent be described in standards. Much depends on the qualifications, attitudes and ethics of the archaeologist in charge. In many countries, associations of archaeologists exist that sometimes have codes of ethics or practice; at the European level there is the European Association of Archaeologists (EAA, see www.e-a-a.org/), a counterpart of the SAA. The Dutch and British associations are similar to RPA, though perhaps more to what used to be the Society of Professional Archaeologists, because they have membership grades. The most important aspect, however, is that members can be held accountable for their work and in that, they are alike.

It may well be that upcoming EU legislation on competition between service providers will lead to more transboundary tenders for archaeological work. If that happens, Europe may need an RPA type of register (and why not RPA?), be-cause the national organizations with their grading systems cannot easily accommodate archaeologists from other countries. In addition, an RPA type of register would seem to suit the needs of international funding organizations such as the World Bank.

As far as I know, the World Bank's cultural policy already requires environmental impact assessments—including archaeology—for bank-financed projects. The bank does not yet require guaranties for the standard of work that is done or for the people doing it, but when it does, RPA may well prove to be a good solution. It is in fact already a desirable option for American scholars working abroad. After all: what better way to show your good intentions towards another nation's cultural heritage than by showing that you subscribe to an ethical code and can be held accountable for your actions as an archaeologist!

At the moment, RPA has already proven to be a good solution for a Dutch problem. The standard there requires key personnel to be members of an archaeological association with a code of ethics and a grievance committee. Under Dutch law, nobody can be forced to join a specific association, so joining the Dutch association of professional archaeologists cannot be a condition and RPA has become an officially recognized alternative.

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***Charles R McGimsey III** provided valuable comments, additions and corrections on the historical summary in the sidebar. Valuable comments on the text were received from Susan Gillespie and Stacy Lathrop. Errors are mine alone. You can email me at jhaltschul@sricrm.com.—JHA*

History of American Archaeology Research Standards

The issue of research standards has a long history in American archaeology. In 1920 the Committee on State Archaeological Surveys was formed, and until it was disbanded in 1937 gave considerable attention to establishing archaeological standards. The perceived shortcomings of many Depression-era large archaeological projects were partially blamed on the failure to produce widely accepted professional standards and the lack of enforcing those standards that did exist. In 1939, the Committee on Basic Needs in American Archaeology was established to define standards for archaeological research. In turn, the Committee for the Recovery of Archaeological Remains took up this mantle in 1945, ensuring that federal programs such as the River Basin Surveys maintained the highest research standards.

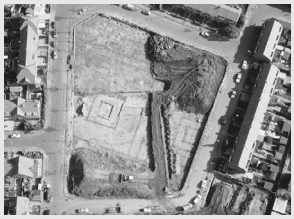
The passage of the National Historic Preservation Act in 1966, the National Environmental Policy Act in 1969, and the Archaeological and Historic Preservation Act in 1974 led to a tremendous increase in the amount of archaeological research. Almost immediately, the leaders of American Archaeology recognized the need for an explicit and enforceable code of archaeological ethics and standards. In 1976 the Society of Professional Archaeologists (SOPA) was created and a code of ethics and standards of research performance were adopted.

Unfortunately, SOPA was never widely accepted by American archaeologists. In part, this result was a function of SOPA being perceived as an organization focused solely on cultural resource management as practiced in the US. In 1998 the Register of Professional Archaeologists (RPA) was formed to take on the SOPA mantle. Although some assume that RPA is SOPA with another name, there are fundamental differences between the two organizations. RPA is not a membership organization; it is a voluntary listing of professional archaeologists who meet particular qualifications and agree to abide an explicit code of ethics and standards of research performance.

RPA is sponsored by the four major American archaeological organizations: the Society for American Archaeology, the AAA, the Society for Historical Archaeology, and the Archaeological Institute of America. As such, RPA provides the only grievance procedure by which archaeologists can be held accountable for their professional behavior by their peers and by the public. Beyond sanctions, RPA certifies that archaeological fieldschools meet professional standards, sponsor forums and roundtable discussions of archaeological ethics and intervene in public policy debates that impinge on the standards of archaeological research. Today, there are about 2,000 listed archaeologists in RPA.

The CRAR and the River Basin Survey Program begins in an attempt in Missouri to protect archeological materials from destruction by dam construction and flooding. Photo courtesy of NPS

The NHPA is enacted in response to the concerns about the adverse impacts of federal development projects on archeological sites and historic structures. At right is archeological field work at Gran Quivira National Monument. Photo courtesy of NPS



Excavation of two adjacent Gallo-Roman temples in the town of Nijmegen during urban renewal work. Photo courtesy of Willem J H Willems, 1994

1920–37: National Research Council Committee on State Archaeological Surveys

1939: National Research Council Committee on Basic Needs in American Archaeology established

1945: US Department of Interior Committee for the Recovery of Archaeological Remains (CRAR) established

1966: National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) passed by Congress

1969: National Environmental Policy Act passed by Congress

1974: Archaeological and Historic Preservation Act passed by Congress

1976–98: Society of Professional Archaeologists

1998: Register of Professional Archaeologists formed