

Preventive Archaeology: Scientific Research or Commercial Activity?

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Abstract

Private commercial archaeology has developed considerably in Europe over the last three decades, due to European Union regulations concerning the free market economy and competition. Nevertheless, there were never any political debates in the EU about the necessity, or not, of privatization of the public services. Furthermore, the application of economic competition to preventive archaeology is based on a misunderstanding: economic competition is supposed to protect the consumer, but developers are not consumers of archaeological research. They have no direct interest in the results of this research, and their only concern is for their land to be released as quickly as possible and at the least cost. For this reason, since the 2008 economic crisis, one observes in many European countries a drop in the quality of commercial excavations, as well as a reduction in their cost. This situation endangers not only the quality of archaeological research but also the working conditions of employees. Thus there are still a certain number of major problems that require solving for the future of preventive archaeology in Europe.

Keywords: *preventive archaeology, commercial archaeology, state, legislation, cooperation, preservation*

Résumé

L'archéologie commerciale privée s'est considérablement développée en Europe dans les trois dernières décades, en principe à cause des règles de l'Union européenne concernant la libre concurrence. Néanmoins, il n'y a jamais eu dans l'Union européenne de débats politiques sur la nécessité de privatiser les services publics. En outre, l'application de la concurrence économique pour l'archéologie préventive repose sur une confusion. En effet, si la concurrence économique est supposée protéger le consommateur, les aménageurs ne sont pas des consommateurs de recherche archéologique : ils ne sont pas directement intéressés aux résultats de la recherche archéologique, mais seulement à ce que leur terrain soit rapidement libéré. C'est pourquoi, depuis la crise économique de 2008, on constate une nette baisse de qualité des fouilles commerciales, en même temps qu'une baisse des prix des entreprises privées, ce qui met en danger aussi bien la qualité de la recherche scientifique que la qualité des conditions de travail des employés. Un certain nombre de problèmes importants continuent donc d'être posés pour l'avenir de l'archéologie préventive en Europe.

Two visions of the society

The introduction of preventive archaeology in a competitive market was initiated in Europe without real debate, some countries not being immediately affected, while others considered it as inevitable fate (Oebbecke 1998). However, discussion of the issue has gradually organized, especially across multiple European agencies or programs. Two conceptions compete, reflecting two visions of the State. For one, in the tradition of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, the nation is a community of citizens, united by a common destiny, and which manages goods and services, among other elements. For the other conception, there is only a multitude of individuals-consumers, with no link one to the other, buying or not buying goods and services from producers in the competition. This conception is not very new, at least since Thomas Hobbes and “the war of all against all”, since Adams Smith and his “invisible hand” regulating the free market, and more recently since the social Darwinism and the economic school of Milton Friedman, for whom “the State is not the solution, but the problem”. This ideology, dominant in the Western Countries since the 1980’ and the governments of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, was not able to avoid the present economic crisis, and the States (that is the taxes of the citizens) had to give a lot of money to save the private banks.

For partisans of private, commercial archaeology, developers are “clients”, and to whom they need to be as efficient as possible. As well, this is why preventive archaeology is often referred to as ‘developer-led Archaeology’ or ‘developer-funded archaeology’ - as if it were the developer who decided on the excavation, still a scientific decision. It created a kind of archaeology allowing for the unprecedented development of our knowledge, sometimes viewed in some countries as a *Gold Rush*. At the same time, in an attempt to regulate the market of archaeology, it was appropriate that archaeologists organize themselves in professional associations, along with the model of the *Register of Professional Archaeologists* in the United States. This is, in fact, the case in the United Kingdom with the *Chartered Institute for Archaeologists* (formerly the *Institute of Field Archaeology*). A “Code of Ethics” is supposed to define the rights and duties of these archaeologists, including respect for the basic rules of scientific research. But “ethics” has not always the same meaning in various countries, and not the same, for instance, in the Catholic, and in the Protestant countries, depending also on the rate of usual bribery! A public authority is also to define “standards” (see Willems & Brandt 2004) and exercise “quality control”. This is, however, made difficult by the fact that control of archaeological work *a posteriori* is hardly possible since the excavated site no longer exists. This overall vision thus underpins the organization of archaeology in a number of European countries, and it has been explicitly defended in various articles (e.g. Aitchinson 2009; Carver 2007; van den Dries 2011; Thomas 2002; Wheaton 2002, among others).

For those who oppose the development of private commercial archaeology, developers are not “clients”. They are companies whose projects are often designed to make money and who endanger the archaeological heritage of the citizens of a nation. This is why they must pay a tax, designed to help pay for the destruction and preserve part of the archaeological information. It is, therefore, the State – as an emanation of the community of citizens and not as an abstract entity – which must organize these preventive excavations through public research institutions responsible for defining national research programs and publishing the results of the excavations. Indeed, the development of preventive archaeology is due to the reinforcement of State legislation and has nothing to do with it being carried out by private companies. The *Codes of Ethics* have no binding value.

It should be remarked that there has never been anything in the nature of a public debate or consultation within the European Union regarding these two different economic and political ways. For instance, it is possible to imagine and bring into being a common European public service in such fields as railways, postal services or electricity provision – just as there now moves towards a common European airspace, or, more topically, a common banking supervisory mechanism. Such an approach was never really considered. In almost every field of economic and social life, the option of a generalized commercial competition was the one taken, as if as a matter of course.

Commercial competition in archaeology as a misunderstanding

The notion of commercial competition in archaeology is based on a fundamental misunderstanding. In fact, developers do not want to buy the best archaeology possible but seek only the company that will release their land as soon as possible and at the least cost. If competition exists in the scientific field, it is not to produce the cheapest research possible, but the best research possible. And if private research exists in general, on the one hand, the quality of its production (a drug, an aircraft, a weapon, etc.) can be controlled *a posteriori*; on the other hand, private research tends to focus on more profitable products. This is why private pharmaceutical research, for example, focuses on the profitable diseases of rich countries – at the expense of unprofitable diseases in poor countries.

Note as well that the excavations of private companies are rarely published – if at all – and that, for example in the United States, the private archaeologists of Cultural Resource Management, which perhaps account for over half of the approximately 12,000 professional archaeologists in the country, very rarely attend scientific meetings such as the *Annual Meeting of the Society for American Archaeology*. One can also be surprised about the term “Professional archaeologists” that private archaeologists

give themselves - as if academic archaeologists were not “professionals”. Furthermore, the purely economic logic of private archaeological companies makes them sensitive to economic fluctuations. As such, hundreds of British archaeologists have lost their jobs due to the global financial crisis started in the fall of 2008, as have 80% of private, Irish archaeologists, and a significant number in Spain (Schlanger & Aitchinson 2010). In contrast, national public institutions allow for the practice of homogeneous scientific standards, for the study and publication of excavations, and offer a guarantee of employment. This is therefore why the model of private commercial archaeology has been criticized by a number of archaeologists (Cumberpatch & Blinkhorn 2001; Demoule 2002a; 2002b; 2011; Chadwick 2003; Kristiansen 2009; Schlanger & Salas Rosenbach 2010). In any case, it seems impossible to separate the real practices of archaeology from their ideological backgrounds (Pluciennik 2001; Hamilakis & Duke 2007; Bernbeck & McGuire 2010; Kolen 2010).

In France for instance (see also Salas-Rosenbach *this volume*), since the economic crisis, most of the private commercial companies have reduced their prices for 40% in average. This is, of course, damageable for the quality of the excavations, but also for the conditions of their employees. The control of the French Ministry of Culture is quite insufficient, because of the small number of its staff. There are known cases of private companies which, having won their contract by proposing lower prices, went to the developer to renegotiate and increase the price on the pretext that the diagnostic did not fully reveal the extent and complication of the surface to excavate. In other cases, some private companies simply ceased excavating as soon as their margin of revenues was reached, while others applied far more summary (and cheaper) methods than initially commissioned.

Note as well that the economic crisis since 2008, has shown the weaknesses of a model based solely on the market, and the need for State regulations. Moreover, some economists had already announced these weaknesses before the crisis (Stiglitz 2003), while, as early as 2004, some in the European Commission had become aware of the limits of the market for public services of general interest (Green Paper 2004), but without any real result. Ironically (or sadly), the main heralds of the “free market economy” in the former European Commission, the President and the Commissioner for Competition, had a strange destiny: the former became a member of the powerful Goldman Sachs Bank, the later, Neelie Kroes, was in fact secretly the director of a firm in a fiscal paradise (or “tax haven”) and works now for the Bank Merrill Lynch!

Tools for European coordination

In recent years, several research programs funded by the *Council of Europe* and the European Union have focused on the organization of archaeology in Europe, and

preventive archaeology specifically. In this fashion, the *European Preventive Archaeology Project* (EPAC), supported by the Council of Europe and the EAA, was held in Vilnius in 2004, at the initiative of the *French National Institute for Preventive Archaeological Research* and the *Hungarian National Office of Cultural Heritage*, as representatives of the major European countries (Bozóki-Ernyey 2007). The project *Planarch* (<http://www.planarch.org/>) brings together English, Belgian and French archeologists on the planning of preventive excavation in development works (Ghenne 2007). The project *Discovering the Archaeologists of Europe* (<http://www.discovering-archaeologists.eu/>) in the framework of the European 'Leonardo da Vinci' education project, has undertaken a survey of archaeologists and their profiles in different European countries. The project *Archaeology in Contemporary Europe* (ACE: <http://www.ace-archaeology.eu/>), led by the *French National Institute for Preventive Archaeological Research*, brings together participants from around ten countries on preventive archaeology and the social function of archaeology. The Epoch project (European Network of Excellence on the Applications of Information and Communication Technology to Cultural Heritage) also contributed to preventive archaeology (D'Andrea & Guermandi 2008 ; cf. <http://www.epoch-net.org/>), as did several recent other meetings (D'Agata & Alaura 2008, Gras & Liverani 2011).

This now-nearly permanent European cooperation is all the more necessary since some countries are regularly tempted to reverse the gains of preventive archaeology, as was the case in France in 2003, and is currently the case in Hungary (Banffy & Raczky 2010; see also the papers of Bozóki-Ernyey and Czifra & Fábián, *this volume*).

We must nevertheless remember that Europe no doubt represents, with the United States and Japan (Okamura & Matsuda 2010), the regions of the world where preventive archaeology is the most developed. But entire continents (Messenger & Smith 2010), particularly Africa (Ould Mohammed Safe et al. 2008), in much of Asia, South America, and in New Guinea, etc., destruction without any real political rescue is multiplying.

Assessment and prospects

For the last four decades, thanks to preventive archaeology and growing legislative protection, Europe has gone through an unprecedented explosion of knowledge about its own past. It is estimated that 90% of the excavations conducted in Europe fall within the framework of preventive archaeology – to the point that some countries, like the Netherlands, do not allow other forms of excavation since only the excavation of threatened sites seems a priority. This explosion of data has also revolutionized the very approach of archaeology; as it is no longer the study of isolated sites, but the

study of whole territories, which allow for excavation prior to major development projects and sometimes involve several hundred uninterrupted acres (Brun et al. 2006; Blancquaert et al. 2011). Due to the amount of data to be processed and the necessary rapidity of action, preventive archaeology has indeed revolutionized the methods of this science.

This abundance of data has made it possible to increase public awareness, both through exhibitions (for example: Menghin & Planck 2002) as through accessible publications which take stock of the recent discoveries in each country (Demoule 2012; Demoule & Stiegler 2008; Raczky, Anders & Kovacs 2004; Visy et al. 2003; Darvill & Russel 2002, etc.), or in connection with each major preventive operation (for example: Djurić & Prešeren 2003; Chlodnicki & Krzyzaniak 1998; Balint & Winkler 2007; Lagatie and Vanmoerkerke 2005; Vanmoerkerke & Burnouf 2006, etc.). The public interest is indeed what makes archaeology possible. (Holtorf 2005; Jameson 2008).

Nevertheless, a certain number of essential questions concerning preventive archaeology are still under debate:

- 1) Property and status of archaeological objects: Some countries, like Greece and Italy, most of the Central and Eastern European nations, and now France (since 2016), consider archaeological ground as national property. Others, such as England, consider that it belongs to the surface owner of the land (Carman 2005). Others still take an intermediate position: in the case of preventive excavations, half of the objects belong to the State, with the other half belonging to the owner of the land who has but one year to claim the objects. Uniformity of the EU legislation - if possible - seems paramount for the interests of the community and for archaeology.
- 2) The mode of discovery of archaeological sites: Some countries, like France or Germany, systematically carry out machine trenching on about 10% of the surface area of major development works prior to construction; others simply do an aerial or electrical survey and basic core-drilling. These latter methods, which are obviously preferred by developers, have seen improvements, but only lead to the discovery of smaller numbers of sites (Cowley 2011). It was demonstrated that, at least in France, five times more sites are discovered with real trenches, than with electrical survey.
- 3) Unsupervised destruction: Only rarely do we have accurate statistics on the areas affected each year by preventive excavations. The data for France (see www.inrap.fr) suggest that, with approximately 600 km² of the surface area developed each year, only 15% are subject to archaeological surveys - of which only 20% are followed up by excavations. Such information is not available for other European countries, and this is one of the aims of the previously mentioned project

Archaeology in Contemporary Europe. The wetlands are particularly threatened (Coles & Olivier 2001). More worryingly still is the destruction caused by agricultural practices (Trow et al. 2010), which deeply turn over the soil with heavy machinery; such destruction is not subject to any supervision, whereas we have been able to estimate that, in the Netherlands, agricultural practices constitute 60% of the destruction of sites. Added to this is, finally, the damage of armed conflict: it is estimated that there are at least one million mines buried in the soil of former Yugoslavia from the wars of the 1990s.

- 4) The necessary level of preventive archaeology: What, ultimately, is the right level of archaeology in a country? There has been no public debate between the scientific, political and economic actors of any European country. The level depends on three factors: the scientific standards (increasingly demanding over the years), a country's wealth and, finally, the cultural demand of the public (indeed – it is the weakness of this demand which led to all of the immediate, post-war destruction). This level should also be defined with respect to national scientific programs (see below).
- 5) Looting and metal detectors: Another point of concern is the destruction caused by illegal excavations, including those due to metal detectors, for which countries such as Britain seem overly tolerant (Thomas & Stone 2009; Barford & Swift 2013 ; cf : <http://heritageaction.wordpress.com/>), and, more generally, all forms of looting and trafficking (Renfrew 2000; Brodie et al. 2001; Brodie & Renfrew 2005; Atwood 2004; Flutsch & Fontannaz 2010; Compagnon 2010).
- 6) Preservation “in situ”: Some developers offer to archaeologists to conserve the site without excavating it by, for example, building from concrete pillars or by covering the site with a thick backfill. Such provisions are not very convincing but have not been to date properly evaluated (see Lucas 2001; Willems 2009).
- 7) Storage and Archiving: The accumulation of excavations has caused great problems for storage of the objects, as well as archiving, especially as IT programs and hardware are constantly changing, making stored data quickly inaccessible (De Grooth & Stoecker 1997; Merriman and Swain 1999; Schlanger & Nordbladh 2010).
- 8) The issue of scientific publications: There is a serious deficit in publishing in archaeology, and certainly a much higher deficit in private commercial archaeology (Kristiansen 2009), and which also affects research excavation. This deficit has been regularly reported (Fagan 1995; Shanks 1996; University College Dublin 2006; Watkinson 2008; Cherry 2010, etc). It concerns both the monographs of sites as that of regional syntheses (e.g. Collart, et al. 2004) or national ones (e.g. Bradley 2007; Trier 2003). The issue of a lack of publication leads to the next point.

- 9) National scientific agendas and assessments: One of the disadvantages of commercial archaeology practiced by many private companies is the difficulty in establishing national scientific programs ('agendas'). Yet, these are essential for a comprehensive research policy, including justification for the interests of archaeology to policymakers.

Indeed, it is through its ability to produce compelling and useful knowledge for our thought and reflection on trajectories of the past – as well as the futures of human societies – that preventive archaeology can justify its existence and the efforts made for its being.

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