

Working in Preventive Archaeology in Slovenia: A View from the Trenches

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Abstract

Slovenia kept probably the best organized and efficient heritage protection service in former Yugoslavia with a well developed regional network of heritage protection institutes. Transformation of old 'Yugoslav' system started early in the 1990s. Here, two major trends could be seen: a) positioning archaeology in obligatory procedures in spatial planning, and b) emergence of liberalized market of archaeological services. For the period 1994–2008 one could speak of a hybrid system of organization of archaeological preventive works with regional heritage protection institutes officially directing large scale excavations, but hiring private SME for the actual job in the field. The existing public institutions simply could not meet the requirements for fast and efficient archaeological preventive research. In 2008, the situation changed again with new Cultural Heritage Protection Act (which introduced the term preventive research) which limited the tasks of the Institute for the Protection of Cultural Heritage in preventive archaeology to issuing conditions for preventive research, and its monitoring, while the actual research was undertaken by private enterprises or public institutions which compete in the market. Such liberalization, on one hand, made the system more flexible and productive, and opened more jobs in archaeology, but, on the other hand, it demonstrated also several disadvantages, especially in the context of the recent economic crisis, which in Slovenia, indeed, affected the most the investments in spatial development, and consequently, also all 'players' in preventive archaeology.

Keywords: *Slovenia, rescue archaeology, preventive archaeology, private enterprises*

Povzetek

Slovenija je verjetno imela najboljše organiziran in učinkovit sistem varstva kulturne dediščine v nekdanji Jugoslaviji z dobro razvito mrežo regionalnih zavodov za varstvo kulturne dediščine. Spreminjanje "jugoslovanskega" sistema se je pričelo v zgodnjih devetdesetih letih. V tem procesu sta bila vidna dva glavna trenda: obvezno vključevanje preventive arheologije v sistem prostorskega planiranja in postopen razvoj prostega trga arheoloških storitev. Za obdobje med 1994–2008 lahko rečemo, da je bil zanj značilen

“hibridni” sistem, kjer so regionalni zavodi poslovno vodili velike izkopavalne projekte, pri tem pa kot podizvajalce najemali zasebna arheološka podjetja, ki so opravljala večino terenskih del, saj zavodi enostavno niso imeli dovolj kapacitet (osebja, opreme...), da bi lahko hitro in učinkovito opravljali preventivne raziskave. Razmere so se spremenile z novim Zakonom o varstvu kulturne dediščine iz leta 2008 (v tem zakonu se prvič pojavi termin preventivna arheologija), ki je naloge zavodov na področju preventivne arheologije med drugim omejil predvsem na izdajanje kulturno-varstvenih pogojev in strokovni nadzor arheoloških raziskav, same terenske raziskave pa so postale storitev, za katero so na trgu prosto konkurirala zasebna podjetja in druge javne arheološke ustanove. To je sicer pripeljalo do bolj fleksibilnega sistema in tudi povečanja dela v arheologiji in povečane produktivnosti, po drugi strani, pa so se sčasoma pokazale tudi pomembne pomanjkljivosti. Te so bile še posebej izrazite v času ekonomske krize, ki je v Sloveniji najbolj prizadela prav gradbene investicije in s tem tudi vse arheologe, ki so delovali na področju preventivne arheologije.

The aim of this paper is to briefly present the current stance of preventive archaeology in Slovenia as seen from the field, through the eyes and experiences of an archaeological entrepreneur. Being fully active in preventive archaeology over the past 20 years, that is, during the establishment and development of an actual system for preventive archaeology in Slovenia, places me in a privileged position of being a rather well informed ‘participant-observer’. To begin, some basic information will be relayed which can greatly contribute to a better contextualization of my personal reflections on preventive archaeology in Slovenia.

Slovenia extends over 20.000 km², and has a population of 2 million people, the average density being 100 inhabitants per 1 km². At present, there are approximately 200 professionally employed archaeologists in the country, and some 120 are actively working in the field of preventive archaeology (ca. 50% in public institutions and 50% in private enterprises). The data may vary due to the rather rapid fluctuations and shifts in the market of archaeological services in preventive works, but the ratio stays more or less very similar. At present, there are 22 private enterprises of different legal statuses (LLCs and Sole Proprietors mostly) and 13 public institutions (museums, universities, and the Institute for the Protection of Cultural Heritage) actively engaged in preventive archaeology, and which compete in the market.

It should also be noted that the most important public institution in preventive archaeology is the Institute for the Protection of Cultural Heritage, which employs 13 archaeologists-conservators at 7 regional branches (Celje, Kranj, Ljubljana, Maribor, Nova Gorica, Novo Mesto, Piran), who are responsible for issuing ‘cultural protection conditions’; these are documents prescribing archaeological preventive research apropos of each individual case of development threatening the heritage. These ‘conditions’ list the most important research parameters: exact area, methods, techniques and types of sampling or testing to be implemented, and some other legal aspects relevant for the developer. In short, these conditions must be fully

adhered to by all archaeological researchers, preventive and academic. The Institute also employs archaeologists in its Center for Preventive Archaeology, but only some 20 – 30% of the jobs are funded from the state budget, and the rest needs to compete in the market.¹

From the economic perspective, the greatest deal of preventive archaeology is linked to the development and construction sector, which represents some 10% of the GDP (ca. 4.2 billion €). Though the size of the market in preventive archaeology varies (especially during the recent economic crisis in which it was the construction sector that suffered the most), it is safe to say that at least some 7 million € are spent annually on projects in preventive archaeology (0.17 % of the gross economic traffic of the construction sector). In simple mathematics, this would calculate to five research projects worth a total of 70.000 € per 1 archaeologist within a 20 km² area per year. In the recent years, approximately 500 permits for preventive research were issued annually. Mathematically, each archaeologist-conservator would monitor 8 archaeologists in the field or 3 private and 2 public organizations. Annually, the incomes of private and public sectors would be more or less equal, some 3.5 million € per year.

The figures presented above would seem perfectly reasonable were they more evenly distributed. They would suffice for the relatively healthy economic situation. Coupled with other incomes, budgets of public institutions, incomes from national and EU research projects, conservation projects, museum projects and similar, the situation in professional archaeology (preventive and academic) might even be considered relatively sound. But, as usual, the real situation falters in its shortcomings. Both public and private organizations suffered acutely since the emergence of the recent economic crisis in 2008. Private organizations experienced a radical decrease in investments in development and construction, while public institutions had to face equally fierce budget cuts forcing them to compensate with a more active engagement in the already shrinking market of preventive archaeology.

Slovenia, in the period between 1991 and until the adoption of the Cultural Heritage Protection Act in 2008, could be considered an emerging market in development-led archaeology. Since no law or executive document prohibited the involvement of private enterprises in archaeological research, or anticipate their existence for that matter, the first ones began to emerge in Slovenia already in the late 1990s.²

1 The reasoning behind the 'amphibian' nature of the Center for Preventive Archaeology lies in the law (Culture Heritage Protection Act from 2008), which defines certain works in preventive archaeology as the responsibility of the state and hence covered by state budget. For more details on the division between state and non-state funded preventive archaeology refer to the paper of Brišnik, Kajzer Cafnik and Novakovič (*this volume*).

2 Even prior to this period, during the Socialist political and economic system in Slovenia (and Yugoslavia), it was possible to engage as an individual, normally via a public institution that directed the research project. Numerous technicians,

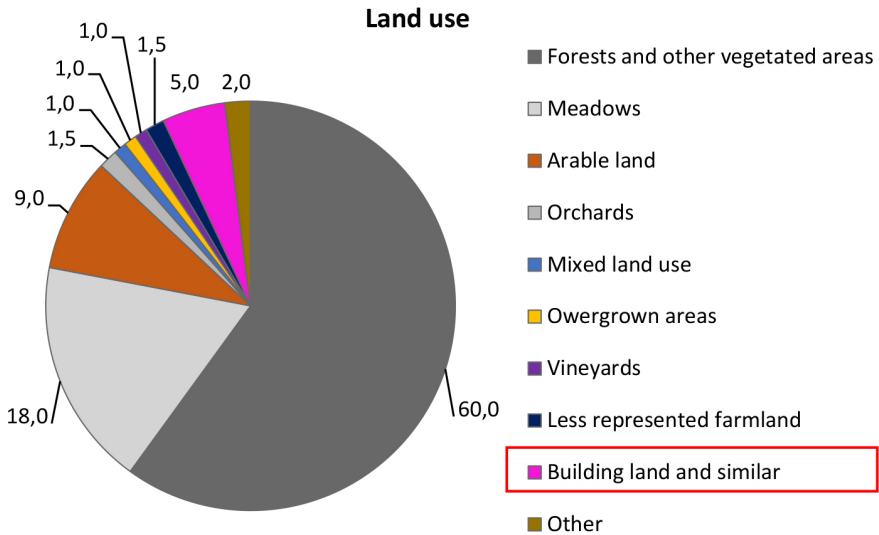


Fig. 1 Land use in Slovenia. Basically, all preventive archaeology is carried out on 5% of the land (Building land and similar; ca. 5.000 square km).

Major systemic changes then transpired during the course of the next decade. Four major, far-reaching factors influenced the transition from traditional rescue archaeology to modern preventive archaeology:

- The ratification of the La Valletta Convention in 1999 and the subsequent introduction of archaeological impact studies as obligatory in spatial planning procedures.
- The rapid growth of the archaeological profession and private enterprises due to the intensive construction of highways (1995-2008).
- The centralization of the Institute for the Protection of Cultural Heritage; semi-autonomous regional offices were joined together, which considerably strengthened the authority of the Institute and enabled more 'standardized' practices in heritage protection.
- The adoption of the Cultural Heritage Protection Act in 2008.

draughtsman, and similar profiles were engaged in this way. However, prior to the 1990s and the abolishment of the Socialist system, no private archaeological enterprises were able to engage (which explains why they did not exist yet), while in other sectors of conservation private enterprises participated in a number of different endeavors. There are many cases of smaller building enterprises, which worked on reconstructions of monuments, architectural studios making plans for restoration works, etc. Actually, there was no real legal base why archaeology was exempted from this practice, at least as sub-contractors. The main reason actually lay in the popular perception of archaeology and its social role. In many respects, archaeologists considered their role as a sort of 'mission', a highly ethical endeavor towards preserving the heritage and uncovering knowledge of the past (see in Pintarič & Novaković 2008: 101-103). Any professionalization, particularly working in archaeology for a profit, was simply not considered appropriate.

The major modification in terms of institutional powers, compared to the period prior to the year 2000, regards the much stronger role played by the Institute for the Cultural Heritage Protection. At present, the Institute employs 13 archaeologists-conservators who are in charge of issuing 'cultural protection conditions' and monitoring all the research in preventive archaeology. In addition to this, the Institute has another archaeological unit (Center for Preventive Archaeology), which has no executive powers but is responsible for research associated with larger evaluation projects in the spatial planning procedures (regarding organization and tasks of the Institute, see more in Brišnik, Kajzer Cafnik and Novaković, *this volume*).

The impact of the 2008 Act was also significant. Together with the Rules on Archaeological Research (adopted in 2013), it not only clearly specifies the public service, but also all the components and phases transpiring in the archaeological research process, standards of archaeological research methods and recording, the deadlines for reports and post-excavation processing, responsibilities of all involved parties, as well as rules for handing over the site archives. In this sense, the 2008 Act can be considered a cornerstone of modern preventive archaeology in Slovenia, it has also placed preventive archaeology on the free market and allowed private enterprises to be directly contracted by developers. Prior to 2008, the existing law listed the Institute as the sole researcher in development-led archaeology and private enterprises were only able to work as sub-contractors of the Institute.

However, while the 2008 Act had the best of intentions and was able to assist in resolving some very acute issues (e.g. unpublished site archives), it was adopted at the most inopportune moment: at the beginning of the global economic crisis. Slovenia was strongly affected, and soon enough, very demagogic claims appeared in public that our country could not afford luxuries such as archaeology at a pre-crisis scale. The archaeological profession faced several major problems, among them also the need for better promotion and the enhancement of public awareness concerning the value of cultural heritage. As it would be, time and money were too short, fewer and fewer large-scale projects were available, and predatory pricing emerged. The invisible hand of the free market showed its claws.

Those enterprises formed between the years of 1998 and 2008, and which comprised of a strong team of experts with know-how and quality equipment, were somehow able to withstand through to 2012. However, over the course of the last 7 years, one-half of all employees had to be laid off.³ The numbers of unemployed archaeologists increased also due to the influx of new graduates. The competition on the market became very harsh and prices in preventive works rapidly decreased. And once prices go down, it takes that

3 For the situation in professional archaeology in Slovenia see the national reports in the DISCO Project publications (Pintarič & Novaković 2008; Kompare, Lazar & Kocuvan Pintarič 2014).

much more effort to just maybe bring them back to a sustainable level. At the same time, some unfinished or bankrupt construction projects left a wake of debts also among such archaeological enterprises, and some very important site archives were left unprocessed.

Most of what took about 15 years to create simply crumbled overnight. As our old rock-and-roll singers seem to already know, the fact that there is '*a highway to hell*' and just '*a stairway to heaven*' says a lot about anticipated traffic patterns. It was precisely the highway (the motorways), just a decade ago, which enabled our fast – maybe too fast – progress.

And, then again, it can't be that bad. I believe we have actually reached the bottom in predatory pricing, and the market is slowly recovering due to some increase in investments in development. In the meantime, there are also other positive effects resulting from the Regulations on Archaeological Research from 2013. For instance, reports are equipped with accurate geo-referenced data, and site archives are processed and handed over to museums (this was, at least, a wake-up call to those in museum jobs). Various scientific analyses are increasingly affordable on the market. Prospective students have come to recognize that field archaeology is not necessarily the only way to make a living and they have begun to apply for various postdoc or specialization studies, such as in geochemistry, osteology, 3D processing, etc. And what they have learned is now available to us. The teams in the field now have higher profiles. In the past, fieldwork required hiring a lot of manual workers; today most of the work is actually carried out by archaeologists. Private enterprises also started to look for alternative sources. Instead of depending exclusively on the diminishing market with prices going down, enterprises, mostly those established prior to 2008, are now also competing in various national and European calls for bids.

Important relief also came from the two-year negotiations between the Institute for the Protection of Cultural Heritage and State Motorways Authority (DARS), which agreed to finance post-excavation efforts also for excavations completed before 2008.⁴ This considerably helped the private enterprises to stay afloat in business; however, more importantly, it saved numerous site archives from being left unprocessed or poorly processed. Recently, we have also learned another important lesson regarding the advantages of integration. Several times now while working on large-scale projects we have come to recognize how unnecessary it is that everyone plays their own box-of-tricks in solo mode; rather, by forming a consortia of private and/or public organizations, we, in fact, stand to benefit an increase in the efficiency of our work while still earning a decent income. I would also like to add that, in the meantime, a user-friendly registry of the cultural heritage has been established. Now every developer can attain immediate insight into the limitations and conditions that must adhere to prior to executing any intervention or construction.

4 The new Cultural Heritage Protection Act required developers to finance also the post-excavation works, which was not the case before. The agreement with DARS brought some 3-4 million € of work.

At the same time, the CPA (Center for Preventive Archaeology at the Institute for the Protection of Cultural Heritage) created an extremely useful and transparent GIS database of archaeological data reports, so now everyone has access to the archaeological data regarding any micro-location prior to the onset of their own preventive research.

Of course, some large issues remain unresolved, and they emerge during crises. One would definitely be a large number of reports that are of very questionable quality. While the mandatory structure and content of reports were indeed defined in the Rules on Archaeological Research (2013), time pressure, chasing one job after another, and the general lack of funds brought about the reality of these reports becoming simply a mass of data included simply in order to meet the obligations. This was made at the cost of the human factor, the knowledge that had the capacity to bring added value and depth through interpretation. And, yes, there is always the issue of how the free market affects how the people relate to each other, particularly in a small country with a very small market such as ours.

All in all, my conclusion would lean towards viewing the blow of 2008/09 as a sort of wake-up call. Who knows what kind of decadence might otherwise have enticed us? This way, what we ended up doing was reaching in for and finding our internal reserves. One could even say that we are now re-activated. The next time we need to find some other reserves, some of them may be temporarily beyond our reach and require large systemic changes. In the future, we will probably have to turn our attention to the agricultural land. In Slovenia, 9% of the land is intensively cultivated as arable land. At the moment, this land is not allowed to be developed (therefore it is not subject to preventive archaeology), and yet the archaeological remains do continue to get destroyed by deep plowing and spraying with pesticides. It is a challenge for our next crisis. Or, perhaps hopefully even sooner.

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