

POST-CORONA ARCHAEOLOGY: CREATING A NEW NORMAL?

Cornelius Holtorf (cornelius.holtorf@lnu.se), UNESCO Chair on Heritage Futures, Linnaeus University, Sweden

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From studying the past to worrying about the future

Archaeologists study the past and its remains. But this year, all is different. The Corona Virus Disease that started in 2019 (covid-19 for short) has imprisoned all of us in the present, and we worry most about the future.

As always, archaeology cannot escape its present. The impact of the pandemic on our sector is partly economic. Archaeologists have been subjected to increased unemployment, layoffs and compulsory short-time work. As schools were closed in many countries and all citizens have been encouraged to practice social distancing or were essentially confined to their homes and workplaces over many weeks, many pedagogical programmes were cancelled and there has been a drastic reduction of visitors to archaeological sites and museums, with all the financial consequences this entails for the concerned institutions.

But what are the intellectual implications? What can archaeologists contribute to understanding covid-19? Museums have already started to collect items and stories that are intended to tell future generations of our current experiences – the hardship and creative adjustments. Post-corona archaeology may soon emerge as a form of contemporary disaster archaeology, focusing on the material evidence of the strange year of 2020 when a lot more suddenly changed in society and in people's lives than we previously imagined was even possible.

Mind you this was not the first global crisis for any of us. Many recall very vividly the events of 9/11 in 2001 and the subsequent rise of global terror linked to Islamic extremism. We recall the tsunami in the Indian Ocean at Christmas 2004 and the global financial crisis that started in 2007. We remember the nuclear catastrophe at Fukushima in 2011, and numerous earthquakes elsewhere that occurred over the past two decades. Last but not least, there were the recent outbreaks of SARS, bird flu, and Ebola. Covid-19 and its impact constitute yet another global disaster that archaeologists need to get their heads around.

Are there any lessons archaeologists can help society learn from the current crisis for the future?

We often claim these days to be working for sustainable development. What could this mean, considering the post-corona world? Archaeologists are well aware of the impact that historical disasters have had on social, cultural and economic development. But what will be – or should be – the long-term implications of covid-19? If any?

Perhaps most relevant in immediate post-corona society will be the question: which disaster will strike us next? What can we know about the future anyway? Do we have more to say than the fortune teller down the road?

As it turns out, the corona virus pandemic was not only foreseeable but also foreseen by relevant experts and even by some politicians. Indeed, we know much more about the future than we sometimes are prepared to admit. We know about

- ongoing climate change,
- the emergence of artificial intelligence,
- aging populations in many parts of the world,
- the demographic and economic rise of Asia,
- urban growth, and
- continuing global inequalities.

All these discernible trends will bring major changes to societies around the world over the coming decades.

Maybe the right question is not what we can know about the future (including any coming disasters) but rather how our knowledge of the future and the major changes that we see coming can best inform present decisions so as to minimize human suffering and maximize development for the better.

How to meet the needs of future generations has never really been properly asked in archaeology, despite it being wedded to the idea of preservation (Högberg et al 2017). How will the archaeological heritage actually benefit future generations for whom we preserve it, whether in situ or by record? We cannot just assume that what makes sense and is valuable in the present will continue to do so throughout the 21st century and beyond. Systematically addressing the question about the needs of future generations and letting the answers that emerge inform our actions in the present is one way of conducting a credible archaeology for the future (Holtorf 2020a; Holtorf and Högberg forthcoming).

There are of course many details about the future which we will not be able to anticipate, even when we have an idea about some more general trends that lie ahead of us. Uncertainty about specific future events may

be considered as a disabling barrier for successfully foreseeing and planning ahead, especially when the scope is longer than a couple of years. But this kind of uncertainty is also empowering. It enables us to make creative choices in the present. Perhaps more than anything else, it demands from us to assume responsibility for our own actions (Harrison et al 2020).

The uncertainty of the future poses an important question to us: what kind of new, post-corona normal would we like to create for archaeology and indeed beyond?

Here is a first lesson for a post-corona archaeology:

Let's take the future seriously and do our best to ensure that archaeology actually contributes to sustainable development that will benefit future generations in concrete ways.

The significance of networking

The European Association of Archaeologists (EAA) has been promoting networking and collaboration since its first beginnings in the early 1990s. This was a time when the Iron Curtain had fallen but Europe was still very much divided into East and West. Over the past two and a half decades, the EAA has been bringing together many professional archaeologists and people engaged in archaeology and the past, across all of Europe and increasingly beyond.

The EAA has been emphasizing our professional commonalities. Rather than celebrating (or bemoaning) the differences that exist in European archaeology, we have been welcoming each other as colleagues, not the least during the Annual Meetings that have been held in all parts of Europe (Figure 1), and their wide range of sessions, roundtables and social events.

It is clear: in the EAA we share so much more than what divides us. We all benefit from getting to know each other. In the process we discover not only shared interests and aspirations but also common problems and concerns. Not the least, we have been discovering our responsibilities for each other as fellow European archaeologists and indeed fellow human beings.

PAST EAA CONFERENCES

Please click the red dots on the map or check the link for more information or website of the particular conference. Downloadable programme or abstract books in pdf are available since the 2004 conference by clicking on the book cover.



Figure 1: Map of the locations of EAA Annual Meetings 1994-2020.
Source: EAA webpages

The Corona crisis has challenged much of this. We are not meeting physically this year, and after this lecture we are invited to attend a somewhat different welcome reception where we will talk to each other over a drink enjoyed from home.

This spring we saw how nations separated from each other, not only in terms of the spread of the pandemic but also in terms of border closures and in the spread of deeply felt sentiments on the merits of various national policies.

As somebody living in Sweden, it has been a shock to me to observe how fellow Europeans in other countries portrayed Sweden's corona strategy in very unkind terms that did not at all correspond to my own experience and knowledge of what was going on.

It was similarly surprising to observe how some rifts appeared between the Nordic countries and even within Sweden, when for a period Stockholmers (where the virus had spread most) were no longer welcome in their summer houses in other regions of Sweden. The resulting calls for increasing national and perhaps regional self-sufficiency are very worrying.

Although we are all affected differently, and some a lot more than others, the corona crisis is a crisis that we are faced with collectively as human beings on this planet. It can only be overcome through collaboration, solidarity and trust between people, whether that is

- in public transport,
- at the workplace,
- in national parliaments,
- in meetings among the European Heads of Government,
- in the United Nations Security Council,
- in vaccine research – or, and not the least
- in our direct relations with people and societies in other parts of the world.

Unfortunately, archaeology has a long tradition of emphasizing differences rather than similarities. We are good at drawing boundaries on maps. We distinguish between different types of material to discern different human traditions and behaviour, and how they changed over time.

Indeed, we speak of something called 'material culture' when we mean things – as if things can be meaningful only insofar as they represent specific cultures.

Archaeology has also engaged extensively with all kinds of social hierarchies and patterns of conflict between different groups of people.

It is fair to say that from the very beginning of our discipline, there was a concern with differentiation in the masses of material that archaeologists investigated.

In recent decades, cultural heritage issues came increasingly onto the agenda of archaeology. As heritage, archaeological sites and objects became significant indicators of unique cultural identities in the present. Every cultural group had their own heritage and seemingly needed their own archaeology, separate from that of their neighbours.

On the global level, the World Archaeological Congress and UNESCO have been among those emphasizing the need to preserve cultural diversity, which arguably now constitutes their main paradigm concerning cultural heritage.

But cultural diversity implies difference and encourages perceptions of “us and them”, both in the past and in the present. Perceptions of “us and them” do not always bring about trust, solidarity and collaboration between humans around the world. Instead, they cement divisions that can make understanding difficult and may encourage mistrust and even hostility between people, prefiguring rifts, such as those that covid-19 has resulted in globally (Holtorf and Bolin 2020).

I would like to suggest that perhaps the value of emphasizing differences and recognizing diversity has at times been overstated.

- Maybe the time has come to focus more on what people have been sharing with each other all along.
- Maybe we should study more often how people collaborated and indeed collaborate with each other now, both within any one society and between them.
- Maybe it is time to put existing differences and inequalities to one side and make more of the many ways in which we all, as human beings, are equal and pretty similar really.

Networks like those encouraged by the EAA are one important way for archaeologists to meet and connect with each other, overcoming differences and finding common ground.

This then is my second lesson for a new normal in post-corona archaeology.

Let's go beyond the notion of cultural diversity and focus on what people shared and indeed share, promoting trust, solidarity and collaboration between human beings on this planet.

The value of cultural heritage

Archaeologists and others have long been arguing that cultural heritage can make a wide range of important contributions to present-day society and societal development. There have been numerous papers at the EAA meetings and elsewhere about the significance of a variety of values associated with archaeological heritage in contemporary society.

Unfortunately, during the corona crisis it appeared as if much of this work has been conducted in vain. Archaeology, and indeed the realm of culture at large, were commonly reduced to the economics of lost income and job redundancies in the cultural sector on the one hand – and the compensation of hardship through enjoyable cultural distractions on the other hand.

UNESCO's Ernesto Ottone, Assistant Director-General for Culture, for one, stated prominently that “At a time when billions of people are physically separated from one another, culture brings us together. It provides

comfort, inspiration and hope at a time of enormous anxiety and uncertainty.” (<https://en.unesco.org/news/moments-crisis-people-need-culture>)

This is actually a rather limited claim, selling culture and heritage too short. Forgotten are all claims that culture has the potential to contribute to a large variety of social, economic and environmental development goals. Culture is not just about money and comfort.

As recently as 25 May this year, the Council of the European Union made a remarkable decision committing to a much more ambitious agenda which is worth quoting at some length, as this is so new that not all of you may be familiar with it yet:

“Culture is intrinsically linked to all three dimensions of sustainable development (economic, social and environmental), and several fundamental objectives of cultural policies and measures at EU level converge with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and their targets, which form the backbone of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development: they include fostering inclusion, diversity, identity, participation, creativity and innovation. The impact of these policies and measures also fully complements the results of sustainable development: improved health and well-being, growth, innovation and job creation, and urban regeneration.” (<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/44118/st08271-en20.pdf>)

This wide-ranging potential of culture, including cultural heritage, is significant in the present context. Cultural heritage has the potential to address some of the rifts I mentioned that, as an outcome of the corona crisis, have emerged running through individual countries, the whole of Europe, and indeed the entire world (Holtorf and Bolin 2020).

Archaeology is not just about money and comfort, but it can contribute to promoting a culture of peace and understanding between the citizens of the world, promoting exactly the trust, solidarity and collaboration I was talking about earlier. This cannot, however, be achieved with national archaeologies or indeed national heritage, and the same applies for supranational equivalents such as the notion of a European heritage. Archaeology and cultural heritage must be forces of inclusion rather than exclusion.

The culture I am talking about can emerge from archaeological practice in two ways.

There is a widely shared interest in the past of humanity and how we got to be where we are today. This story can be (and often has been) told as a story of different civilizations and cultures that connect to various present-day nations and cultural groups. But it can also, and I suggest had better be told as a story of human beings that in a variety of conditions around the world led their lives together with other human

beings, going through a variety of hardships but also accomplishing many feats.

When engaging with archaeology and the past, we can relate to, value and learn from the stories of all these people in a number of different ways. We may, for example, find ourselves in the same places, practice related activities, encounter similar hardships, solve comparable problems, or accomplish equivalent feats as they did.

Equally important is the mutual professional understanding that manifests itself in the work of associations like the EAA. It matters how the two and a half thousand EAA members relate to one another, rely on each other and support each other. It matters how they communicate and collaborate with each other in various ways, overcoming the existing language barriers (Figure 1). Similar relations also exist among other groups of professionals. Together, the principles we practice may prefigure future society in Europe and beyond (Holtorf 2020b).

There is a famous claim in the 1945 Constitution of UNESCO: “since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed”.

Today we may talk about humans rather than men, but the logic still applies. In the middle of a global pandemic that has become a global crisis that has brought about a range of rifts and animosities between people in different nations, what could be a more honourable goal for European and global societies than working for peace?

This then, is my third and last lesson for a new normal in post-corona archaeology’ :

Let’s realise more often the value of culture, cultural heritage and archaeological practice to be inclusive and bring people together, promoting peace among humans both in society and between societies.

This seems to be as good a point as any on which to end. Thank you very much for your attention!

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