

ARTICLES

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SOME OBSERVATIONS ON CONTEMPORARY TEACHING OF ARCHAEOLOGY IN UNIVERSITIES

ABSTRACT

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This paper reflects on the study of archaeology in central Europe, where recently this discipline, in countries such as the Czech Republic, has spread extensively within the university environment. This process shows the need to consider not only why this is happening, but also how this process should be directed and how far the archaeology curricula in individual university departments should diversify from their traditional focus. It has been suggested that contemporary archaeology has a unique opportunity to attract young people interested both in humanities and, ever more frequently, also in natural science due to the strong links between these disciplines.

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1. INTRODUCTION

There can be no doubt that the most important attribute of the human past that encourages attempts to understand it is the uniqueness of what happened to past generations and what was experienced by individuals and whole societies. It is not so much this uniqueness that arouses such interest, but the interpretive openness that encourages explorations

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of past events, social and economic structures, cultural contexts and individual destinies. This openness enables every individual, according to their level of experience or training, to create individual interpretations and synthesis of (a particular segment of) history (this concerns non-professionals), or enrich the generally accepted and publicly disseminated version of the past, which is recognised by the scientific community or society as a whole (professionals).

It is this openness that brings a large number of undergraduates to the study of the human past. These undergraduates, more than others, desire that in their future path to knowledge and the fulfilment of their individual spiritual needs, a university education should provide them with the skills to approach an authentic past as closely as possible. In the words of M. Bloch (1967, 16), these individuals, unlike readers of historical novels, use the study of history to prepare for the experience of true things (more on this topic Gojda 2000, Chap. I.1).

Teaching archaeology at universities is a topic that tends to be given less attention than it deserves. In the European context, the credit for long-running discussion of this area is due to Professor J. Collis of Sheffield University, who, since the foundation of the European Association of Archaeologists in the 1990s, has encouraged round-table discussions among university lecturers on general as well as specific problems. Thanks to Collis, we have had a long-term opportunity to learn about the problems encountered by lecturers in various European countries, thus being able to confront them with our own experience. This European forum played an important role in dealing with problems faced by the founders of new archaeological establishments after the fall of communism or by those reforming already established institutions.

After a long hiatus, opinions on the current problems of university archaeology have recently appeared in the specialized Czech periodical *Archeologické rozhledy* (Neustupný 2005; Beneš 2006; Bouzek 2006; Matoušek 2006). These papers clearly show disagreement on the basic questions of direction, aims and strategy for archaeology against the backdrop of current trends in university teaching of humanities. These disagreements are undoubtedly a reflection of both individual views and differing perceptions of changing contemporary society.

Indeed, I am even concerned that the vigour and dynamics of change make it difficult for individuals to hold a clear-cut and coherent attitude. In the past decade, the study of archaeology at Czech universities has undergone a relatively dynamic development. While in the former Czechoslovakia archaeology was taught at three universities (Prague, Brno, Bratislava), the formation of the Czech Republic saw an increase in the number of university departments and institutes providing archaeology at Bachelor, Master or Doctoral levels (České Budějovice, Hradec Králové, Olomouc, Opava and Pilsen) and at which the purpose, aims and form of university archaeology teaching began to be discussed, both from general and particular perspectives.

2. SOME BACKGROUND IDEAS

Let us start by asking what has brought archaeology to the university environment, in what social context this happened and how attitudes towards the past and monuments have changed? The answers are not as easy as might be expected. Some motives for elevating antiquarian interest to the level of a scientific discipline studied at universities can be traced in countries that contain the remains of classical antiquity, while others can be found in 19th century global colonial powers (i.e. the colonial power spreading its own cultural norms in confrontation with native cultures), and in others still nations undergoing so-called revival, which involve looking deep into the past in search of the roots of a nation. Certainly, we will not be far from the truth if we stress three important aspects of the process in which archaeology became established as a university discipline: the aesthetic, the national and the related political/ideological. Should contemporary archaeology (namely in EU countries) wish to focus on topics based on these national, political and ideological points of departure, it would undoubtedly expose itself to ridicule as a scientific discipline and would also, in all likelihood, lose its institutional basis. Times have changed, but archaeology remains in university soil. How to explain this?

Like the majority of disciplines concerned with mankind and its culture (e.g. cultural anthropology, ethnology, ethnography, history, cultural studies, art history, etc.) archaeology serves to satisfy the spiritual needs of humans. What this discipline brings and how it enriches individuals as well as society is not, from a general point of view, indispensable to physical existence (more strictly speaking, for the survival of a human individual as well as humankind as an animal species). This is where archaeology, along with other above-mentioned humanities (*soft sciences*) differs from the majority of natural and technical sciences (*hard sciences*), whose (above all) applied research is primarily aimed at care of the physical body (health and nutrition) and meeting practical daily material needs (especially housing and communication). To these, it is necessary to add such fields as economics and law, which ensure the practical functioning of society. While being aware of this “handicap” of archaeology (unlike e.g. medicine, mankind can dispense with it), one key fact must be mentioned. Although the field serves “only” the broadening of knowledge (of life in the past in particular) and, for people today this knowledge has an individual rather than a universal importance (as could have been the case in the period of national revival), its permanent inclusion in the state-directed educational process (as part of history at primary and secondary schools and as an independent discipline at universities) is a solid proof of the universally maintained awareness (respected by the establishment/government) of its importance for the development of mankind’s spiritual sphere.

Here, it would certainly be possible to discuss whether archaeological sources could, after all, lead to a more complex understanding of the past that would enable generalization of past behaviour patterns and their practical application in solving the problems of

contemporary societies. What I especially have in mind is the social and cultural reaction of ancient societies to economic and environmental problems associated with settlement processes or, more precisely, with the exploitation of landscape. In this manner, archaeology would no doubt increase its public recognition, as it would offer concrete models by means of which the above-stated relationships were solved in the past (or attempts to do so were made) and which may serve as guidelines for dealing with similar problems in the present. However, it is obvious that any lesson learned from history (something historiography has been referring to since its origins in antiquity) is, especially from the universal point of view, unrealistic, not only theoretically (the problem of anachronism) but also practically (no society has yet managed to learn from its past, nor tried too hard to do so for what I believe to be understandable reasons). In any case, gaining knowledge of life and its rhythms in the past enriches people in a unique way, contributing significantly towards understanding the relationships within society as well as those between mankind and nature.

Besides fulfilling the aesthetic needs of humans through some (especially moveable) artefacts, it is the *openness of archaeological sources towards understanding* or, more precisely, towards *interpretation*, that arouses a need in a significant part of the population to deal with these sources, confronting the information about life in the past contained therein with the reality of today.

A minority of individuals are interested in archaeological sources in the hope of finding answers to the basic questions of life (i.e. who we are, where we come from and where we are heading? etc.). Similarly, others turn to written sources, and it is not important in this respect which of the two kinds of sources an individual prefers. It is the representatives of this part of population that, in my opinion, make up the most numerous group of people interested in university studies of historical disciplines. The study of the past based on archaeological sources, however, has one crucial aspect. It is the process of discovery, of uncovering something, which can be difficult to predict and which, generally speaking, brings a new quality to the process of gaining knowledge. It is in this openness that archaeology offers direct access to learning about people's lives in the past, something that current written history can offer only to a limited extent (most documents have already been discovered). This *aspect of discovery* offered by archaeology in the process of gaining knowledge (or, more precisely, in its heuristic part) plays a key role. It represents the very thing that motivates and attracts people towards a deeper interest in the past, leading them, eventually, to university study of archaeology. Let us, therefore, ask how best to set the structure of this study and how to cultivate the students historical awareness above the awareness of the majority of the population.

3. THE CONCEPT OF TEACHING ARCHAEOLOGY AT UNIVERSITIES

To make sure that future generations of the above-mentioned minority with a close relationship to the past have the opportunity to seek knowledge in archaeological monuments which inspires self-reflection and interpretation of mankind's history, the first and foremost task of university curriculum should be educating archaeology students in *active protection, monitoring, recording and documentation of archaeological heritage*. The basis of educating the novices of our discipline should be in *cultivating awareness of careful handling of this heritage*. Only known monuments can be of use to wide sections of society while also supporting research on scientifically founded interpretation of the past based on a concrete theoretical point of departure. Let us note that each of the potential theoretical points of departure will bring a more or less different version of the past. However, it is difficult to "objectively" determine which of these is closest to the reality of life in the past, as each stresses the importance of differing tools of analysis and synthesis leading to the resulting interpretation..

Archaeology stands at the interface of two groups of scientific disciplines taught at universities: firstly, those that must strictly observe a unified framework of theoretical foundations and, mainly, a canon of procedures or methods: a typical example being medicine), and, secondly those dealing with the spiritual needs of mankind. The reason to position archaeology at this interface is that, unlike most humanities which are principally desk-based, it is a discipline that (at least for the time being) conducts research or, more precisely, its heuristic part (data collection) in a way that cannot be repeated (removing sources from the environment or context in which they were found). If the correct procedure fails to be kept during research (geodetic, drawing and photographic documentation, verbal description of find situations, object fill floatation, collecting samples for scientific analysis, etc.) the result may not be fatal (as it might be in a *hard science*); nevertheless, society thus irreversibly loses information which may have enriched human knowledge (of the past). In this respect, archaeology differs fundamentally from history, philosophy, politics or sociology. What follows from this is that if we are looking for a necessary common focus of all university departments teaching archaeology, we find it here, in the methodology of field research (project strategy, survey, excavation), including its basic data processing. Each student, as a potential leader of field research, has to learn to work in accordance with an established and universally observed methodology, favouring careful handling of archaeological heritage and non-invasive methods, although most contemporary research, mainly in rescue and preventive contexts, is still conducted by excavation.

In addition to educating students in these areas, what can be regarded as a significant part of university archaeology teaching is preparing students for theoretically-based data processing, or, more precisely, for utilizing their information potential to address historical

synthesis. An important question is whether to emphasize one concrete theoretical starting point (usually regarded as optimal) or whether to work with others. While, it is unnecessary to elaborate on how to direct teaching at the Bachelor, Master and Doctoral levels as this topic has been sufficiently covered in the recent discussion in the Czech journal *Archeologické rozhledy*, it is worth making a few comments. The first level of teaching should provide students with the fundamentals of theory and methodology, giving them knowledge of artefacts and a systematic overview of the past (of a country) based on archaeological sources. For electives, students should have an opportunity to take at least one course aimed at a concrete field specialization and become acquainted with its general and specific problems. It is often these optional courses that inspire students and focus their attention in selecting the topic of their Bachelor's thesis. In addition, it is important that they should be trained in working with state-of-the-art archaeological equipment (computers or, more precisely, special software products, geodetic devices, photo technology) the mastering of which provides them with great opportunities for future careers in areas other than archaeology (e.g. in various sectors of state administration). It can be assumed that due to this trend, archaeology in this country will also gradually lose its air of exclusiveness, and the graduates (of the first level) of the discipline will not be seen as individuals who have no chance of employment other than in archaeology (cf. Neustupný 2005, 384; for the social evaluation of university-educated archaeologists abroad, see also Gojda 2000, 36). The follow-up Master's level should deepen knowledge of theory and methodology and their purposeful application (focusing the preparation of diploma theses, even when dealing with neutral topics such as processing and evaluating existing datasets), enhance knowledge of archaeological heritage to include the European area, deepen field specialization (from which a diploma thesis topic is selected), and training in building scientific projects. At Master's level, students should become (the resources of their departments permitting) at least partially involved in research topics, mostly in the form of grant projects, by their teachers. For doctoral level of study, I would only emphasize the importance of connecting the topics of proposed (approved) doctoral theses with long-term or, more precisely, current scientific projects of the departments concerned, or, at the very least, involving (especially fulltime) PhD students in the work on these projects (e.g. in the form of scholarships). At the same time, students should have the opportunity to co-operate on projects that are close to their dissertation. The significance of integrating teaching and practical research for the development of both the students themselves and university workplaces is obvious (for the current situation in this area illustrated by example of the Department of Archaeology in Pilsen — cf. Gojda 2008).

4. NUMBERS OF STUDENTS, SPECIALIZATIONS AND TECHNICAL EQUIPMENT OF DEPARTMENTS

As every university teacher knows well, the above seemingly independent topics are in fact closely related. The numbers of students studying archaeology is an issue that arouses controversy among the professional community (we can again refer to the recent debate on university archaeology in the journal *Archeologické rozhledy*; cf. also Tichý 2005). On the one hand, it is argued that the quality of teaching is decreasing (i.e. with large numbers of students teachers cannot pay sufficient attention to them in seminars). However, large numbers of students are only admitted to Bachelor courses, which are not based on a one to one individual approach to each student. As already stated (e.g. Neustupný 2005, 384–385), economic reasons (larger numbers of staff can be funded from the state budget as more students are admitted) and professional reasons (larger numbers of students provide better opportunities to discover talent) support a valid argument for raising student numbers. Furthermore, funds gained in this manner can help enhance technical equipment of university departments, for example enabling them to conduct basic and specialized laboratory processing of artefacts and ecofacts, and thus expand teaching into this area as well (e.g. soil floatation, botanical analysis, conservation of finds). In this context, for the development of technically rigorous research activities, departments need to continually utilize possibilities offered by grant-giving agencies, ministry of education and their own universities and repeatedly apply for funds for research projects.

In addressing the purpose of teaching archaeology at universities, there are occasional debates on how much individual institutes/departments should differ from each other in their orientation and specialization. Diversification, which is a manifestation of a great variety of archaeology-related topics, is certainly desirable. Departments gain their focus, above all, from the professional orientation of their academic staff. It is obvious, however, that while orientation permeates teaching on all three levels of university study, it will only be clearly manifest in the curricula of master's and doctoral studies. Thanks to the variety of courses offered by individual departments, applicants can select the university that best suits their ideas about archaeology and its contemporary purpose.

5. CONCLUSION

The unprecedented increase in the number of universities teaching archaeology in countries such as the Czech Republic is a reflection of the popularity the discipline enjoys with the general public. At the same time, it is due to the conviction of archaeologists themselves in recognising the need to establish the discipline at a larger number of universities than before, thus raising its social prestige and presenting archaeology as a viable

component of university-level education. The study of archaeology arouses increasing interest both among those who regard looking into mankind's past as a natural need of self-reflection, as well as among those attracted by the unique combination of humanities with disciplines that, traditionally, have very little common with them (natural and technical sciences). The knowledge and skill sets that archaeology can offer to students are a great asset that few other humanities can boast of. Further development of this trend remains something worth doing.

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