The Global Economic Crisis – a Multiple Risk Factor for the Archaeological Heritage?

Risks to the archaeological heritage are not only due to more or less localised natural disasters, nor are they limited to particular sites, regions or materials. They can also be wider-ranging in nature and more insidious, and have to do with the structural and operational capacities of the archaeological discipline as a whole to accomplish its objectives, namely to protect and enhance the archaeological heritage while generating and disseminating scientific knowledge about the past. The human-induced risks to be addressed here derive from what has been called since the fall of 2008 “the global economic crisis”: the sharp downturn following the subprime financial fiasco in the USA, which has been spreading severe and still ongoing shockwaves of recession throughout the economic system of the western and developing worlds. This crisis touches of course each and everyone of us, as working, voting and taxpaying citizens, but it also affects in specific ways archaeological practice and heritage management. While the multiple impacts of the economic crisis on archaeology may seem at times indirect, or intermeshed with other ongoing patterns and factors, they will probably be felt worldwide for some years to come. This assessment results from a study launched in the framework of a European Commission-funded project “Archaeology in Contemporary Europe. Professional Practices and Public Outreach” (ACE) whose areas of concern include the contemporary contexts and prospects of the discipline. An international session organised on this topic at the annual conference of the European Association of Archaeologists (EAA) in Riva del Garda in September 2009 resulted a year later in a freely downloadable publication entitled Archaeology and the Global Economic Crisis. Multiple Impacts, Possible Solutions. This volume includes a dozen of well informed (but not necessarily official) reports and analyses from various sectors and countries affected by the crisis, including Ireland, the United Kingdom, Spain, the Netherlands, France, Hungary, Poland, Russia and the United States.

To understand the effects of the crisis on archaeology – and thus to identify and eventually counter or contain the risks to the archaeological heritage that it might pose or exacerbate – some preliminary considerations are in order. First, to avoid misinterpretations, it is important to recall and reiterate that quite a range of processes and patterns related to archaeology and heritage have been at work prior to and independently of the crisis in the various countries and sectors concerned. Likewise, not only do each of the countries in question have their own administrative and financial systems of archaeological research and management; it is also likely that these initial conditions will crucially influence their degree of vulnerability or resistance to the impacts of the crisis. Finally, it is noteworthy that the notion of “crisis”, much as it conveys a quantifiable economic reality, has also become from the very onset something of a metaphor – a shared mantra and slogan, strategically invoked to legitimate decisions or delay actions, indeed to posit collective representation, a shared mantra and slogan, strategically invoked to legitimate decisions or delay actions, indeed to posit collective representation, a shared mantra and slogan, strategically invoked to legitimate decisions or delay actions, indeed to posit collective representation, a shared mantra and slogan, strategically invoked to legitimate decisions or delay actions, indeed to posit collective representation, a shared mantra and slogan, strategically invoked to legitimate decisions or delay actions, indeed to posit collective representation, a shared mantra and slogan, strategically invoked to legitimate decisions or delay actions, indeed to posit collective representation, a shared mantra and slogan, strategically invoked to legitimate decisions or delay actions, indeed to posit collective representation, a shared mantra and slogan, strategically invoked to legitimate decisions or delay actions, indeed to posit collective representation, a shared mantra and slogan, strategically invoked to legitimate decisions or delay actions, indeed to posit collective representation, a shared mantra and slogan, strategically invoked to legitimate decisions or delay actions, indeed to posit collective representation, a shared mantra and slogan, strategically invoked to legitimate decisions or delay actions, indeed to posit collective representation, a shared mantra and slogan, strategically invoked to legitimate decisions or delay actions, indeed to posit collective representation, a shared mantra and slogan, strategically invoked to legitimate decisions or delay actions, indeed to posit collective representation, a shared mantra and slogan, strategically invoked to legitimate decisions or delay actions, indeed to posit collective representation, a shared mantra and slogan, strategically invoked to legitimate decisions or delay actions, indeed to posit collective representation, a shared mantra and slogan, strategically invoked to legitimate decisions or delay actions, indeed to posit collective representation, a shared mantra and slogan, strategically invoked to legitimate decisions or delay actions, indeed to posit collective representation, a shared mantra and slogan, strategically invoked to legitimate decisions or delay actions, indeed to posit collective representation, a shared mantra and slogan, strategically invoked to legitimate decisions or delay actions, indeed to posit collective representation, a shared mantra and slogan, strategically invoked to legitimate decisions or delay actions, indeed to posit collective representation, a shared mantra and slogan, strategically invoked to legitimate decisions or delay actions, indeed to posit collective representation, a shared mantra and slogan, strategically invoked to legitimate decisions or delay actions, indeed to posi...
reforms including the granting of "autonomy" to universities and the quest for better placement in international rankings will soon be leading to a two-tier education system and to the gradual downsizing of public research. In the United Kingdom, the imminent cuts to higher education and research promise to be of unprecedented severity: with whole departments set to close and tuition fees to be multiplied, the social sciences and humanities will be even more at loss to prove their marketable or vocational relevance.

Without a strong research sector to set objectives and quality standards, archaeological heritage management will be left to the sole considerations of delays and costs. Without proactive steps, further concessions will probably be made regarding the quality of the research and heritage protection work undertaken, its contribution to knowledge and benefits to society. Such a decline is already perceptible in Poland, for example, with less analyses, lower standards of archaeological documentation, and little investment in post-excavation studies and publications. Similar concerns over quality maintenance are expressed in Russia, with the rise of tax-aided private operators and the reduction in the numbers of reports produced; in France, where the reduction of time for archaeological operations and control (voted into the Heritage code as part of the "relaunch" plan) risks encouraging compromises and "blind eyes"; and in Hungary, where the devolution of preventive excavations from the abruptly dissolved state operator to the regional museums will most probably impact on the quality of the work produced. It may be worth recalling that high quality work, that is work that represents real value for money in the full sense of the term and for all concerned (and not only the contractor and property developers), is not only in the professional interest of all practicing archaeologists, but also part of their deontological commitments, as expressed in various codes of conduct at national or continental levels.

Indeed heritage management policies and legislation are also being affected by the crisis, and mainly by various attempts to relaunch and facilitate economic and entrepreneurial activities. Either piecemeal or by design, there appears to be some planned or implemented dilutions in the obligations of the countries concerned to ensure adequate measures for monitoring and protecting the archaeological heritage. In Hungary, to favour developers, a new legal definition of an archaeological site was proposed which would effectively apply to and protect only a fraction of known archaeological occurrences. In Russia, attempts have been made at the parliament to curtail the law on cultural heritage sites, so as to dispense altogether with the obligation to undertake archaeological evaluations on land scheduled for development. These proposals have of course each their specific backgrounds and dynamics. Some are related to straightforward short term financial considerations, and other have to do with ideological repositioning regarding the role and responsibilities of the state in matters of heritage and culture. In the United Kingdom today, the coalition government has already cut funding for English Heritage and reviewed its role and remit, while at local government level reduced resources will directly threaten the provision of proper archaeological protection and management. In France, on the other hand, something like a Faustian bargain is being pressed, whereby more resources and opportunities are made available provided that delays are shortened, operations accelerated, procedures lightened, and compromises accepted – the same goes for the curbing of state architects' responsibilities regarding classified urban zones, and that of environmental protection agencies regarding polluting installations. Whatever the motivations behind these cuts – some, having to do with prior reforms, clearly use the "crisis" as a smokescreen – the law has been modified without sufficient prior political scrutiny and public debate. After all, to use a clinching argument, heritage, history and culture are surely one of the prime reasons why over 5 million tourists choose to pass by every year, even in times of crisis, to spend money, see the sights, and visit Lascaux II.

The various information and analysis presented here are of course preliminary and partial, and the more pessimistic scenarios may yet (hopefully) be proven wrong. It is in any case intended to produce a follow-up volume with updated information and analyses on the crisis and its effects (those interested are invited to contact the author). Already now, however, some tentative conclusions can be proposed. For one, it is quite clear that the crisis has been having different effects in various countries, such that it functions as a sort of litmus test or philosophical stone with which to reveal the structural properties and resilience of different systems (whatever their other qualities). In systems where archaeological heritage management and protection are provided through free market offer and demand, the crisis seems to have hit particularly hard. In systems where archaeology is considered a public service, or where Keynesian investments in infrastructures and developments have been more forthcoming, the discipline, its practitioners and its goals seem to have fared rather better.

Even when the economy returns to normal, and both funding and employment levels increase, the impact of the crisis may still leave some lasting marks on archaeological research and heritage management, and affect in the long term our ability to identify and to protect our cultural heritage at risk. Besides such causes for concerns as the loss of skills, or the recognition and enhancement of public outreach measures, possibly the most worrying issue surrounds the question of legislation. The general trend of the past decades – with notably the UNESCO World Heritage Convention (1972), the ICOMOS- ICAHM Charter (1990) and the Council of Europe’s European Convention for the Protection of Archaeological Heritage (Malta 1992), the European Landscape Convention (Florence 2000), and the Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society (Faroe 2005) – has been towards the increased capacity of implementation and control of valorisation and protection measures for archaeological, historical and cultural heritage. Either as a genuine need or as a contingent excuse, the "crisis" may well represent something of a watershed point in the roles and responsibilities of the state towards the weakening of protection measures and the lightening of procedures, allowing less time and resources for quality control and assurance, and indeed for public outreach and communication. This is a development we should be aware of, if only to better stand firm to defend our objectives.

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Archaeologists demonstrating for higher education, research and employment, Paris, January 2009 (Photo: Nathan Schlanger)