

PROTECTING THE PAST, PROTECTING THE FUTURE

Events in the Balkans were an important turning point in our understanding of the complexity of cultural heritage issues. Now, at a certain distance from the conflicts that created a new geopolitical map, there is the possibility to look back and analyze the longer term consequences - both intended and unintended. That is what the papers in this session are intended to do. Looking back does not supply us with easy answers but confirms that the challenges of dealing with our past are firmly rooted in our present.

Cultural heritage is both multi-vocal and politically powerful. This, of course, has always been the case, but for many archaeologists this realization came about as a result of the wars in the Balkans. Possibly no region in modern times has better expressed just how many faces heritage can have. Similarly, the power of heritage was nakedly revealed. It can (all too easily) be structured to support a nationalist or imperialist or ethnic agenda. It can be selectively preserved to ensure that only certain historical narratives survive or have legitimacy. This realization - so obvious in retrospect - had a marked impact on many areas of archaeology. For the first time many archaeologists became conscious that what they did was not objective and detached from modern life, but deeply conditioned by it.

I have mentioned how politically powerful heritage can be, but of course, that is only true if society believes it so and not all societies have thought that. Yet any review of the last fifty years reaches the inescapable conclusion that it has become increasingly important to our sense of identity. What is it about our own contemporary society that makes it so interested in, even dependent upon, heritage?

Heritage appears to have a particular appeal in rapidly changing societies. Social scientists, such as Paul Connerton [\[1\]](#), have pointed to the cultural amnesia of contemporary society created by the demands of an industrialized economy. Whereas pre-industrial societies gained their sense of identity from being socially embedded in a fixed status hierarchy and living in a bounded and largely unchanging landscape, contemporary societies have none of these set points of reference. From

the classical period up until the end of the 18th century the physical environment that formed the backdrop to any individual's existence was sufficiently contained and static for it to be used as an *aide memoire* when memorizing long speeches or prose. Contemporary environments are characterized by sprawling megacities that are impossible to memorize or see in their entirety from any one spot, mechanized travel which insulates the individual from direct environmental contact and fragments the visual image, and buildings that have a lifespan much shorter than the average human lifespan. The factors combine to erode a sense of identity based on place. This can operate on a societal level influencing group identity, but also on an individual level undermining personal memories upon which self-identity is based. However, notwithstanding the forces of contemporary society which conspire to confuse and disrupt our collective and individual memories, the desire for a physical sense of belonging remains. It is to this need that heritage speaks.

This paper is entitled 'Protecting the Past, Protecting the Future' because I want to emphasize that the future will be influenced by our perceptions of our past and we ignore that fact at our peril. In some respects, archaeologists are not well prepared to confront these challenges. Many archaeologists and heritage professionals have found that their work is becoming the subject of wide and increasing interest, and that not all of the judgements on them have assumed that they are objective and politically neutral. In the second half of the 20th Century large scale development led to a growth in rescue archaeology with a concomitant expansion in the ranks of professional archaeologists. Many who entered the profession at this time self-identified as counter-establishment: they were university educated and could have opted for more secure and lucrative professions but chose to devote themselves to archaeology, which offers neither. As public interest begins to focus more on their activities they have found themselves perceived by some as representatives of the establishment supporting an oppressive metanarrative.

Heritage is no longer the preserve of professionals and academics. It has a crucial role to play in collective and individual memory and people access it in many different ways. It will become increasingly important in the future and increasingly complex. As the pace of social change picks up so will the need for alternative sources for collective and individual memory. Multi-vocality will inevitably increase and contested heritage with it. Archaeologists and heritage professionals will be required to navigate the demands of a growing band of diverse interest groups.

The cultural landscape in which we operate is not static, the goalposts are moving all the time. So I return to my opening statement which I hope is not seen as negative: analysis of decisions made in the area of the Balkans since World War II will not provide us with a blueprint of how to confront such situations in the future, but it will provide a deeper understanding of the challenges we are likely to face.

[1] P. Connerton, *How Modernity Forgets*, Cambridge 2009.

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This article should be cited like this: V. Higgins, *Protecting the Past, Protecting the Future*, *Forum Archaeologiae* 55/VI/2010 (<http://farch.net>).