Archaeology and Power

DGUF Conference, Berlin 5 – 8 May 2016: conference review and EAA – DGUF relations report

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At this years conference ‘Archaeology and Power’ of the German Society for Pre- and Protohistory (DGUF) in Berlin President Felipe Criado Boado and Executive Board Member Sophie Hüglin represented the EAA. This was to emphasize the importance of close relationships with Archaeology and Archaeologists in German speaking countries in general as well as with one of their politically most active archaeological organisations, the DGUF, in particular. To gain more influence on politics and society in order to serve the benefits of European Archaeology and Archaeologists, the EAA needs not only more members, but also strategic partnerships with other organisations with similar aims. In this case, EAA’s official presence helped to raise the level of awareness for DGUF’s conference which addressed aspects of power among archaeologists as well as the power-shift from professional to public in archaeology.

The DGUF – under President Diane Scherzler and Deputy Frank Siegmund – is making great efforts to internationalize the organisation. Consequently, webpage, publications and conferences become bilingual with more and more contributions being published in English. In line with this, speakers at the Berlin conference with no or little German were provided with bilingual assistants as well as texts and discussion groups in English.

The EAA on the other hand can learn from DGUF’s public relations activities which have been considerably intensified and professionalised under President Diane Scherzler, who is a project manager with the radio department of Suedwestrundfunk (SWR), a major German Public Broadcasting Company. Especially remarkable with regard to communication strategies is DGUF’s (almost) monthly newsletter, which has started with 400 subscribers four years ago and recently reached 1200. As subscription of the newsletter is not restricted to the – about 700 – members of the society, it is read widely amongst German speaking/reading archaeologists as well as by the interested public and even professional journalists. While the authors themselves stay anonymous to protect them from possible personal consequences, it is DGUF who prompts critical reports from insiders and takes editorial responsibility.

This years DGUF conference on ‘Archaeology and Power – Positionings for the future of researching the past’ was a follow-up of last year’s meeting in Tübingen which had resulted in the Tübingen Theses on Archaeology. The manifesto expresses values for professional archaeology in the current process of change especially in its relation to the public. The Tübingen Theses can still be signed.

In Berlin, more than 50 participants engaged with contributions of 30 speakers from seven countries during – inspiring, but also exhausting – three and a half days. The program addressed different aspects of ‘Archaeology and Power’. Here it will only be possible to give a short overview of the contributions and discussions evolving from them; moreover many of the contributions were filmed and are available on YouTube. The headlines were as follows:

1. History and stories of power – Past experiences
2. Creating archaeology near to the powers
3. Law and power in practical archaeology
4. Citizen Science and civil participation
5. Museums: Gatekeeper, debate setter, playthings?
6. Debates on power between discipline and civil society
7. Case studies: citizens make archaeology
8. Discourses on power in talking and writing about archaeology
9. Archaeology in the struggle for influence
10. Consequences of precariat and (economic) uncertainty
11. Research policy, national and European Agenda

The keynote speakers in part 1 looked back in history, in the case of Eike Gringmuth-Dallmer on the recent German past. He described how the ‘Wende’ – the political turnaround of the former German Democratic Republic and the subsequent unification with former West Germany – affected archaeological research institutions and the excavation sector of East Germany. Depending on the perspective it could either be called a disaster – for the Academy of Sciences – or a story of success, because legislation now following the so called ‘polluter-pays-principle’ created many temporary jobs on excavations. Coming from a Swiss perspective, Werner Stöckli made clear how much archaeological interpretation was and is shaped by current world views. In this way seemingly homogenous ethnic groups of the past like the Celts are recreated and act as constituents of positive self-identification in the present. Taking research history at Manching as an example, he showed what problems arise, when archaeological finds lead to the suspicion these praised ancestors could have been cannibals.

In his introduction Frank Siegmund reported on the difficulties to find speakers for the conference, because to his experience: „the one’s who have the power don’t want to speak about it and the one’s who haven’t are too afraid to speak about it.” While this silence is one of the constituents of power structures, Diane Scherzler pointed out in part 2 how institutional archaeology is actually rapidly loosing its influence on politicians, journalists and investors. Ignoring this process is one of the strategies with which official archaeology tries to secure is position, but actually what we see is an act of „planned lack of consequence and self-capacitation“. But „power is needed to protect the archaeological heritage“, Diane Scherzler stressed, because „power as such is not good or bad, but the purpose for what it is used“ (cf. Diane Scherzler in an interview by SWR2 Campus).

To stimulate discussion with the audience, the organisers introduced a new conference format: inserted after each block of three papers there was an interval of debates in small groups. For this the audience wrote questions and remarks written by on pieces of paper which were collected and grouped during the talks and consequently served the small groups as focal points of discussion. The results of the debates were documented on a flipchart and returned to the plenary by the group moderators. Citations and photos from as well as comments on presentations and discussions were shared online via Twitter and can still be found in form of an online diary. Jaime Almansa Sánchez, Geesche Wilts and Pascal Geiger posted in their private blogs on the conference.

Fig. 1: Discussion groups: Cyril Dworsky, Sophie Hüglin, Jaime Almansa Sanchez and Gerry Wait © DGUF/Daniel Stotzka
Discussing the current state of implementation of the 2005 Faro-Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society in the German federal states – with Katharina Möller and Raimund Karl – or Community Archaeology in Britain – with Hedley Roberts – in parts 3 and 4 made clear that the right to do research on the past or to decide what of it should be preserved cannot stay exclusively with the state offices, but increasingly will have to be negotiated amongst all stakeholders. For Switzerland, Thomas Reitmaier pointed out how many issues dealt with in recent referendums – like the land use regulation, the second home initiative or the energy revolution – have direct or indirect impact on archaeology. This is the reason why Swiss NGOs have formed ‘Alliance Patrimoine’ with more than 100,000 members which is able to lobby at national level. But doesn’t it need now an alliance of NGO’s to lobby at European and international level?

In part 5, Doreen Mölders, curator at the Archaeological Museum in Chemnitz, described how she increasingly has to concur with private museums that offer appropriate narratives to the growing right wing movement in East Germany. In German speaking countries archaeology and subsequently the stereotype of the archaeologist is still largely dominated by men, as Jana-Esther Fries rightfully pointed out. There is no male dominance in the subject in Spain was a remark by Jamie Almansa Sánchez; to demonstrate the underrepresentation of women in the Northern and Eastern Europe was also one of the core results of the project ‘Discovering the Archaeologists of Europe’. While the threshold between citizens, volunteers, hobby archaeologists and professionals seems to continuously break away, Gerry Wait from the Chartered Institute of Archaeologists (CIfA) offered a new way how expertise in archaeology can be tested and acknowledged beyond academia. While being well established in the United Kingdom, CIfA now promotes its model of accreditation internationally.

If we want to build real partnerships with citizen scientists, to overcome the obstacles of coded language in academic archaeology will be the way; this was pointed out by Carmen Löw in part 8. One of the most powerful ways to reach the public via the internet is to share knowledge on Wikipedia. But Wikipedia author and activist Marcus Cyron made clear: contributions to the online encyclopedia are not advertisements for the respective organisation or person, instead they must come from independent experts. In Sweden GRASCA, the new Graduate School in Contract Archaeology, gives contract archaeologists a possibility to go back to University. With this Cornelius Holtorf, Director of the program at Linnaeus University, intends to extend the services archaeologists can offer society.

In part 9, Patrick Schollmeyer provided striking examples of power play in Classical Archaeology. While 19th century protagonists – like Theodor Wiegand, Ludwig Hoffmann, Wilhelm von Bode and Ludwig Curtius – sought support for their careers and projects near the centre of power living a life of ‘fawning courtiers’ around the emperor, their 18th century predecessor Johann Joachim Winckelmann somehow the ‘founding father’ of Art History had done quite the opposite. By writing on Greek and Roman Art not in Latin – the learned language of his days – but in German – the language of the citizens he opened up the discipline. Well, what could that mean for communication in Archaeology today: English instead of German, online open access instead of printed books, pictures and films instead of texts, creative workshops and MOOCs instead of University curricula?

In the final part’s keynote, Liuben Tevdowski came back to core questions: to the quest of Europeans for their identity in periods of migratory movements, demographic change, social crisis and instable ideologies. After a process of self-reflection, he now expects Archaeology to provide new narratives fitting our time: stories of transformation, integration, multicultural and multifaceted pasts as well as the continent’s and the World’s astonishing ability of rebirth after periods of crisis.

Many of the conference presentations will be transferred into scholarly papers for volume 40, 2017 of DGUF’s journal Archäologische Informationen. President Felipe Criado Boado and Sophie Hüglin will follow editor Frank Siegmund’s invitation to contribute a paper on EAA’s position and potential in questions of power. EAA’s presence in Berlin was indeed very important for both societies – EAA and DGUF: it has intensified the partnership and lifted it to a new level of mutual support.
All in all, it was astonishing to hear about an atmosphere of intimidation that seems to prevail at least with some archaeologists when it comes to speak openly about politics and power in Archaeology in seemingly free and democratic countries like Germany, Austria or Switzerland. Looking back at our personal experiences we can confirm that – often quite surprisingly – actively engaging with organisations on European or international level like the EAA – quoting President Felipe Criado Boado – ‘opens many doors, but closes others’. Together with DGUF the EAA will continue to encourage archaeologists to think and speak free as well as to openly discuss and address the challenges of the 21st century amongst each other as well as with the public, because we believe Archaeology is a means to understand and even overcome them together.