

# Preservation *in situ*

## Not an ethical principle, but rather an option amongst many

*Tim Williams*

Institute of Archaeology, University College London, United Kingdom

As Willem Willems stated, with his normal clarity, ‘preservation *in situ* has developed into a central dogma of western archaeological heritage management’ (Willems 2012: 1). Or rather more bluntly, ‘Preservation *in situ* sucks’ (his opening slide in a presentation at the 20th European Association of Archaeologists meeting in Istanbul, quoted in Anderson *et al.* 2014: 40). Willem, with his natural perspicacity, had once again challenged an uncritically accepted truism, in this case that preservation *in situ* is always the right response: ‘while surely useful and important in some situations, preservation *in situ* is too problematic in several ways to be acceptable as an ethical principle with broad validity’ (Willems 2012: 1).

The revised European Convention on the Protection of the Archaeological Heritage (Council of Europe 1992), commonly known as the Valletta Convention, aimed to preserve and protect archaeological heritage; created as a growing awareness that ‘archaeologists have become aware that their source material is rapidly disappearing while only a tiny fraction of the information can be recorded. We now know that its survival needs a different approach that requires communication with the outside world, influencing the political and socio-economic decision making process, and enlisting the support of the general public’ (Willems 2008: 284).

### Major concerns

There are obvious concerns about *in situ* preservation, despite the clear benefits that engaging with a preservation policy bring:

If archaeological remains are left exposed – to fulfil economic, social, educational or interpretative agendas – then degradation is an issue. Sacrificial materials, shelters, protective coatings, and the rest, have developed their own extensive literature – for example see the Preservation of Archaeological Remains In Situ (PARIS) conferences (Corfield *et al.* 1998; Nixon 2004; Kars and van Heeringen 2008; Gregory and Matthiesen 2012), or international journals such as the Conservation and Management of Archaeological Sites (CMAS: <http://www.maneypublishing.com/index.php/journals/cma/>). But these interventions are potentially costly and, depending upon the context and materials, inevitably a process of managing change. Nevertheless, one might argue, at least the archaeology is being used – interpreted, displayed, debated, engaged with – and thus this process of change or loss can be balanced against the impact it has

on contemporary society; it goes beyond simply ‘preserving the past for the future’ (e.g. Spennemann 2011).

If we implement mitigation strategies, where archaeological remains are reburied, or are left ‘undisturbed’, this sometimes leads to compromises resulting in attrition: for example, digging pile caps and peripheral walls, often with poor access and under difficult conditions. We are degrading the quality of the remaining resource in the very act of preserving it. Perhaps more significantly, do we understand what is happening to the buried resources? Is it stable or is it degrading? How will changing ground water, pollutants, compression, etc., impact upon the quality of the remains? Again, we have invested research into monitoring impacts (see CMAS & PARIS above), although not as much as we need to. However, the issue is that even if we are confident that the remains are stable, for these archaeological deposits there is no access (intellectual or physical), no contribution to understanding past societies, no benefit for contemporary society. So we need to be confident that they will ‘benefit’ future generations; and by ‘benefitting’ we must mean that we are not compromising their ability to make the decision to actually use, rather than simply preserve, the resource. This, of course, raises the question of when does the future become the present? When is it better to explore past societies, communicate values and engage communities through narratives, rather than preserve?

The above result in digging less, but as Willem argues, ‘fewer and fewer sites are excavated, which leads to less new knowledge and which in turn leads to fewer stories to be told and in the end the public is going to lose its interest in archaeology’ (Willem paraphrased by Anderson *et al.* 2014: 40). Rather, ‘archaeological monuments, in the sense of movable as well as immovable parts of the cultural heritage, are no longer seen primarily as objects of study but as cultural resources to be of use and benefit in the present and future’ (Willems 2008: 284).

How do we move forward? ‘One might look at combining the Valletta and Faro treaties – one calling for preservation, the other for communication and dissemination of heritage to increase value of life’ (Anderson *et al.* 2014: 40). Therein lies the rub. Most of the legislative and planning guidance that has come out in Europe, and been copied around the world, whether directly influenced by the Valetta Convention or not, places the emphasis on preservation, not on understanding, communicating, or contributing. As a result, heritage, and particularly buried archaeological resources, are often portrayed as in some way being in opposition to the needs of 21st century communities: obstacles to development, not an asset for society.

### **Lack of critical engagement**

Willem rightly pointed to the growing disparity that has developed through this tension between preservation and research/communication: a tension between archaeological research and resource management, in which bureaucratization and commercialization have become the important drivers behind heritage policy (Willems 2012: 2-4). The declining opportunities for field archaeology to undertake substantive and complex research can be seen as a consequence of the

increase in development-led work on evaluation, monitoring mitigation strategies, and only excavating the archaeology no one deems important enough to preserve. This work, while potentially high in volume, is low in critical engagement. Will we develop a new generation of field archaeologists capable of pushing the discipline forward in such an environment? Ironically the failure of most states to have the political will or legislative tools to ensure preservation strategies are implemented in the face of commercial and political pressures, means that large-scale archaeological work does still take place; but more by luck than any coherent strategy.

' The future of archaeology must lie in demonstrating it has relevance to twenty-first century communities.'

The dislocation of our discipline between heritage managers and archaeologists, between academics and commercial archaeologists, remains a real cause for concern. Is archaeological work seen as research on behalf of the state or as a service, not unlike many other services that can be bought and sold (Willems 2008: 285)? Perhaps most significantly, 'does the state wish to control the quality of archaeological work or does it not?' (*loc. cit.*). The United Kingdom, for example, has never satisfactorily addressed these issues and desperately needs to consider a more sustainable response: currently too much depends on the relationship between developer, contractor and consultant, without effective quality control. The increasingly under-resourced country/city archaeological curatorial structure does not have the capacity, political will or legislative instruments to achieve this. (For general strengths and weaknesses of European approaches see for example Willems and Van den Dries 2007).

Anderson *et al.* argue that 'we need to discuss which sites can be preserved and which should be excavated' (2014: 39). We certainly do. By applying a simple 'one rule fits all' approach we compromise a society's ability to make informed choices. The problem is the 'polluter pays' principle. It does not encourage strategic thinking, but rather a plot-by-plot piecemeal response. This is hardly a new call to arms: the pioneering Scottish urban planner Sir Patrick Geddes (1915) argued that planning must be based on a thorough appreciation of context and a review of available data: and especially that it cannot be left to the casual dynamics of market forces or the improvisations of high-profile architects.

## **Demonstrating relevance**

Spennemann (2011) points out that the cost of archaeological preservation is incurred today and its benefits should also be clear today. So 'in order to be relevant for the world of today, archaeological heritage can contribute in various ways to the economic and social well-being of present-day nations or communities, it can be "a driver of development", a source of income through tourism and it can be used to provide identity and a sense of rootedness' (Willems 2012: 4). Furthermore, 'preservation in situ is either misused by uncritical application in situations where

research and other objectives might have been better served by proper investigation, or it is consciously misused to prevent additional costs and investment' (Willems 2012: 6). The future of archaeology must lie in demonstrating it has relevance to twenty-first century communities. In general, archaeology has enormous potential to create narratives that help to develop a sense of place and a sense of purpose. To achieve this we need to ensure the quality of the process: high quality excavation and properly funded research, clear and transparent decision-making on *in situ* preservation, creative strategies for on-site presentation, and valuing and developing interpretation. It is about enabling complex narratives to be developed that explore the historic landscapes, not isolate fragments of it, despite the fact that *in situ* archaeological remains, and archaeological excavations, will by their very nature, be fragmentary windows into these (Williams 2014).

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