

10 years

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FORUM:

CHATTING ABOUT THE FUTURE OF PUBLIC ARCHAEOLOGY

With the tenth anniversary of the journal we wanted to take a deep breath and look into the future.

This forum consists of short pieces from colleagues around the world that discuss general and specific issues regarding public archaeology in the coming years. We asked for an open format, trying to grasp a fresher approach than the one usual academic writing permits.

As with other forums in the journal, we will keep it open from now on in case any of you want to participate too. It is a good occasion to debate the current and coming role of public archaeology and we hope this selection of papers helps to foster it.

We originally invited 50 people to participate. However, these difficult times made it difficult for some to do so. Nevertheless, we have a good set of contributions that will be of interest to you all.

Enjoy it (and participate if you feel you have something else to say).



Laugh now,
but one day
we'll be
in charge.

BONESY

FORUM: Chatting about the future of public archaeology WHEN DIVULGATION REACHES US

Jaime DELGADO RUBIO

In 2018, Mexico held its presidential election; its results soon clearly indicated that the left-wing candidate, with a degree in political science and a fierce critic of the ruling political system, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, would become President. Following his triumph, many cultural organizations, unions and employees of the field jubilantly celebrated what they thought would mean a strengthening of cultural policies and a kind of return to the years of President Lázaro Cárdenas del Río who put archeology, indigenism and culture at the heart of his government policies.

Everything looked perfect for the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH, *Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia*), an institution responsible by law of conserving, researching and divulgating the archeological and cultural heritage of Mexico. Soon, however, and I mean very soon, these celebrations waned as the President, a few months after his inauguration, announced substantial cuts to scientific, technological and cultural funding all over the country, arguing that all federal public services ought to go through a period of republican austerity, dearly affecting their budgets and expenses.

But the worst would come a year later, when, in addition to this sweeping budget policy, the INAH would suffer a further 70% cut as it was deemed that most of its activities favored the elites instead of aiming at improving the quality of life of the most disadvantaged classes. The President declared that he would personally make sure that this budget was directed to more largely impactful cultural projects such as the works in the *Bosque de Chapultepec* in Mexico City, a vast park visited by millions of locals every year.

In other words, not only did the federal executive leave the INAH to fend for itself, but it also turned it into a shell of its former

self, not unlike what Jaime Almanza, director of this publication, told us during an interview for Mexico: "In Spain, the eventual privatization started with a progressive dismantling of public archeological institutions" (personal correspondence, November 2020).

But before alluding to a possible privatization of Mexican archeology, I would like to pause for a moment so that we can understand the repercussions of these facts and what they have to do with the situation of thousands of young archeologists who are still waiting for a job opportunity at the INAH or, even worse, who haven't graduated yet. This situation, though complex, can be explained in the following fashion.

The INAH has always been a rather important national institution, even if its human and financial resources may not have reflected it. Its hiring policy was based on a system of "open" exams alongside an eventual hiring structure that, although precarious and illegal, used to be its control valve to provide jobs to recent archeology graduates. A delicately balanced work ecosystem.

With the institutional dismantling that we examined, the cohort of young unemployed archeologists became more visible and revealed the general ageing of the people employed by the INAH, a situation that created a hiring bottleneck hindering the dreams of new young graduates of securing a decent position along with employment benefits.

In order to picture the number of professionals who graduate each year with a degree in archeology, we must remember that it can be pursued in such important universities as the UNAM (*Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México*, National Autonomous University of Mexico) in Mexico City, the ENAH (*Escuela Nacional de Antropología e Historia*, National School of Anthropology and History) and its local branches in Chihuahua, Tenancingo, Yucatan, University of Veracruz (*Universidad Veracruzana*), University of the Americas in Puebla (*Universidad de las Américas Puebla*) and others, from which literally hundreds and hundreds of young archeologists graduate each year.

The cohort of young unemployed archeologists as well as the current hiring bottleneck in the INAH, but above all the abandonment of scientific and cultural public policies of this presidency, will

result in the creation of large lines of unemployed archeologists whose only sin has been to listen to their internal voice urging them to study this wonderful field in such a country as ours.

Based on what we presented, we must ask ourselves: is there a solution to this issue? What strategies can we imagine so as to deal with this situation? Should we wait for large government reforms so that we can obtain decent jobs and salaries? The difficult situation that the young will face will require all their ability, imagination and creativity to create their own field of employment, even if it means going against the grain of the government.

The field of divulgation

In Mexico, archeological remains are considered by law as public property of general interest and are managed by the government through the INAH, meaning that any operation possibly impacting them is to be expressly authorized by the Archeological Council (*Consejo de Arqueología*). Given these legal considerations, any archeological excavation or preservation of findings naturally require a professional license of archeology.

However, one of the activities not necessarily subjected to the aforementioned legal considerations and therefore exempted from government approval are all divulgation endeavours, *i.e.* interpretation processes through which professional archeologists act as translators of specialized information for the benefit of different sectors of Mexican society as a whole.

At the same time, we must remember that this activity that could today become our lifeline has traditionally been scorned in Mexico, and even treated as an underdeveloped field of professional archeology despite contributing to materializing the social and public interest towards our heritage by offering people from different sectors of Mexican society fundamental elements to analyze its present and anticipate its future.

Nevertheless, it is common knowledge that, in the field of professional divulgation, there exist consolidated multimedia markets in North America such as the History Channel that report considerable earnings and employ masses of producers, graphic designers, historians and archeologists. Additionally, these programs diversify

their products through apps and games offering their audience historical documentaries liberally peppered with historical fiction and exoticism.

Facing this, young divulgators from Mexico will need to not only develop programming, graphic design and digital animation strategies (unprepared as they were by university), but also to perform real feats of management, networking and leadership to get to produce and broadcast high quality educational programs distinguishing themselves through innovation and creativity, their main particularity being their archeological component.

Why should we embrace divulgation?

However, beyond the employment point of view, we would like to defend the necessity of divulgation from a deeper and more intellectual position; if we reflect on it, Mexico has been an important figure regarding archeological remains and research throughout its territory by creating and maintaining its museums, libraries, archeological sites, archives and heritage, which enables us to declare without a doubt that there is in Mexico a strong research platform to create innovative, creative and original products of divulgation.

On the other hand and paradoxically, the recent publication of the findings of an *Enlace* survey from 2013 reveals the sad reality that the majority of the Mexican girls and boys who were tested severely lacked an elemental knowledge of Mexican history and that, even worse, many of them consider this subject boring.

From this perspective, divulgation should be an ethical act on the part of any professional archeologist or anthropologist with the aim of using any new data, interpretations and findings to shape the views of any and all kids and adults in Mexico on how they construe their present, know their community, their history, and anticipate their future. This would be justification enough to continue using taxes to fund public archeological research.

Based on this point of view, we consider that in the era of divulgation, young Mexicans will start to mobilize in every way to generate high quality educational contents that will end up creating economical value through the internet, videogames, apps or any

other medium, exploring and developing new languages and new meanings compared to other divulgation experiments that dominate the commercial market nowadays.

Finally, let's keep in mind that the divulgation field will be a highly competitive area that will test every technological, epistemological and ludic ability of the young archeologists of Mexico, whose success will depend on how creative, original and innovative they can be in order to face the trying times of the next few decades.

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