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Public Archaeology cannot just ‘fly at dusk’: reality and complexities of generating public impact

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In his debate piece, ‘The Brexit hypothesis and prehistory’, Kenneth Brophy foregrounds some of the possible consequences of archaeology’s media and public exposure. While recognising that (mis)appropriations of research for political purposes are nothing new, he stresses that these instrumental uses might have been amplified by a more interconnected Web. Brophy underlines that people are frequently presented with and consume archaeological findings in ways that relate the latter to contemporary social issues, such as Brexit, often inappropriately. His proposed solution to the problem is twofold. On the one hand, he recommends that archaeologists should ‘push back’ erroneous and hyperbolic accounts of their work featuring in the media and in public discussions online. On the other hand, he encourages them to ‘pre-empt’ such interpretations, also thanks to insights derived from social research aimed at understanding how individuals and groups interact with the past today. While I fully agree with the author that these measures are welcome and valuable, I believe that they cannot be, on their own, a ‘solution’. They are laudable from a deontological point of view, but do not take into account the full reality of the world of media and communications, nor the ways in which people actually leverage the past when making sense of situations that concern them. Here I will briefly expand on both of these two points and argue that the dynamics of generating impact are complex and lengthy. Bearing this in mind, being public opinion influencers requires more substantial and profound public engagement on the part of ‘public intellectuals’, as Brophy calls them, than what is suggested in his paper.

I have advocated myself for the need of a ‘sociological turn’ in Public Archaeology (Bonacchi, 2014) to acquire greater and deeper knowledge of public perceptions and experience of archaeology; I have taken forward this agenda with research that includes the study cited by Brophy, which examines uses of the Iron Age, Roman and Early Medieval past in political activism about Brexit on social media (Bonacchi et al., 2018).¹ This study shows that, when people invoke the past to relate to present-day issues, they mostly do so by referring to very simple images and myths, such as a direct parallel between the European Union and the Roman Empire; additionally, pro-remain and pro-leave camps often draw on the same repertoires to support opposite positions (Bonacchi et al., 2018). Moreover, ‘expert’ quotes and academic publications were virtually absent from the Facebook discussions about Brexit that were analysed, even though the legacy of scholarly work from previous decades did emerge, highlighting the *longue durée* of the public impact of expertise, and how this is filtered through education first and, thereafter, via mass media narratives and televised ones particularly (Hingley et al., 2018). Those who are not professionally trained in archaeology or history can draw on very consolidated and yet potentially sketchy ideas of certain

¹ This study was completed as part of the project ‘Iron Age and Roman Heritages: exploring ancient identities in modern Britain’ (ancientidentities.org), which is undertaken as a collaboration between the University of Stirling (CI Chiara Bonacchi and RA Marta Krzyzanska), Durham Archaeology (PI Richard Hingley and PDRA Kate Sharpe), and Durham Anthropology (CI Tom Yarrow), with funding from the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (AH/N006151/1 of £862,252).

past events or phenomena. 'Official' pasts can be variously amalgamated with 'personal' and 'family' pasts, forming the overall background experience that is leveraged in individual meaning-making processes. Such experience changes over time and may of course be influenced by academic research, but not through rapid and isolated interventions. Archaeologists should not abdicate their responsibilities and 'retreat in their ivory towers', as Brophy also points out, but, when 'pushing back', it is prudent not to expect any quick changes in audiences' understanding, attitudes or values.

Additionally, Brophy states that 'problems emerge when we reheat old ideas, simplify arguments, produce clickbait headlines and fail to adequately predict and pre-empt how all of this (archaeological findings) will be consumed'. If the noun behind the collective 'we' is 'archaeologists', and researchers more generally, then I believe that this statement does not entirely consider how media communications are operationalised. Whilst it is crucial to make every effort to ensure that the results of research are reported accurately by journalists, there are mechanisms that simply escape our control. Headlines in national newspaper articles, for example, cannot be negotiated by either journalists or archaeologists, as editors usually choose them independently and with precise marketing aims. Yet, these titles can orientate readers' focus towards specific interpretations of a piece, turning what was a marginal aspect into a central point. The article on 'The heritage of Brexit' mentioned above, for instance, was reviewed in *The Times* (Bridge, 2018). Following careful discussions with my (then) institutional media office at University College London, I personally liaised with the journalist, who ensured that no political spin would be given to the story. Although this promise was kept, the editor released the piece with the title of 'Farage is Boudica to Europe's emperors, say cyberwarriors'; a photo of Nigel Farage, who was in no way key to the research agenda and findings, was also added, together with an inaccurate *incipit*:

His chariot may be a Volvo and he possesses no great mass of tawny hair but Nigel Farage is a modern-day Boudica, standing up to Jean-Claude Juncker's Nero, according to some keyboard warriors.

What did the Romans ever do for us? Well, according to researchers, they've definitely fuelled fierce online arguments about Brexit. [...] (Bridge, 2018).

As a result of this, most of the comments written by readers underneath the article concerned the person of Nigel Farage.

Communicating via the national press brings the risk of skewed syntheses. The alternatives are to opt for other channels, or publish articles that we author personally - a possibility that, however, will be available to few and probably more established academics only. Even if we choose this route, 'the public' will still interpret what we say based on their own overall background experience, which may not (and in most cases will not) follow academic logics. The processes through which different people understand and live the past are much more complex than the sum of the reception of individual news items. If we truly wish to study these processes, as Brophy rightly invites us to do, then it is important to examine the interplay of sociocultural context, with dimensions such as family background, school education, personal interests and attitudes, as well as the combined effect of media exposure over the years. Influencing the public opinion is possible but not a quick result to achieve. Pursuing it entails being involved from the ground up, for example by reviewing school

curricula, which are sometimes focussed heavily on certain periods and concepts more than others, and can provide rather binary examples for teachers to apply (Hingley et al., 2018).

Public archaeology is not Minerva's owl and cannot just fly at dusk. If we want to try and make a difference, we should look for more all-rounded kinds of engagement with society, from education practice, to policy and including communication. It is not straightforward, but there are successful examples we can build upon and groups that can support these efforts, such as The All Party Parliamentary Archaeology Group or the Heritage Alliance, to name just two. The issue of the relation between academic research and evidence informed policy-making beyond rhetoric and wishful thinking, together with the role of archaeology in this context are further key topics that should be addressed to explore how best to produce concrete outcomes, but this would take us beyond the scope of this response and is left for future discussion.

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