

## The Global Economic Crisis – a Multiple Risk Factor for the Archaeological Heritage?

Risks to the archaeological heritage are not only due to more or less localised natural disasters, nor are they limited to particular sites, regions or materials. They can also be wider-ranging in nature and more insidious, and have to do with the structural and operational capacities of the archaeological discipline as a whole to accomplish its objectives, namely to protect and enhance the archaeological heritage while generating and disseminating scientific knowledge about the past. The human-induced risks to be addressed here derive from what has been called since the fall of 2008 "the global economic crisis": the sharp downturn following the subprime financial fiasco in the USA, which has been spreading severe and still ongoing shockwaves of recession throughout the economic system of the western and developing worlds. This crisis touches of course each and everyone of us, as working, voting and taxpaying citizens, but it also affects in specific ways archaeological practice and heritage management. While the multiple impacts of the economic crisis on archaeology may seem at times indirect, or intermeshed with other ongoing patterns and factors, they will probably be felt worldwide for some years to come. This assessment results from a study launched in the framework of a European Commission-funded project "Archaeology in Contemporary Europe. Professional Practices and Public Outreach" (ACE) whose areas of concern include the contemporary contexts and prospects of the discipline. An international session organised on this topic at the annual conference of the European Association of Archaeologists (EAA) in Riva del Garda in September 2009 resulted a year later in a freely downloadable publication entitled *Archaeology and the Global Economic Crisis. Multiple Impacts, Possible Solutions*.<sup>1</sup> This volume includes a dozen of well informed (but not necessarily official) reports and analyses from various sectors and countries affected by the crisis, including Ireland, the United Kingdom, Spain, the Netherlands, France, Hungary, Poland, Russia and the United States.

To understand the effects of the crisis on archaeology – and thus to identify and eventually counter or contain the risks to the archaeological heritage that it might pose or exacerbate – some preliminary considerations are in order. First, to avoid misinterpretations, it is important to recall and reiterate that quite a range of processes and patterns related to archaeology and heritage have been at work prior to and independently of the crisis in the various countries and sectors concerned. Likewise, not only do each of the countries in question have their own administrative and financial systems of archaeological research and management; it is also likely that these initial conditions will crucially influence their degree of vulnerability or resistance to the impacts of the crisis. Finally, it is noteworthy that the notion of "crisis", much as it conveys a quantifiable economic reality, has also become from the very onset something of a collective representation, a shared mantra and slogan, strategically invoked to legitimate decisions or delay actions, indeed to posit that various political and economic objectives – including policies concerning heritage management and protection – are rendered unavoidable or on the contrary unattainable because of the "crisis". Taking all these caveats into account, several major themes or impact-areas have been identified where the global economic crisis is leaving its mark on archaeology, either directly (through the recession itself) or indirectly (through various countermeasures, stimu-

lus packages and relaunch plans). These impact-areas – research funding and priorities, professional employment, conservation and public outreach, heritage management, policies and legislation – are briefly discussed and illustrated here with reference to the case studies and analyses presented in our publication.

The pattern is probably most striking and contrasted so far as *employment* is concerned, especially in the archaeological heritage management sector. Given their economic structures, the Atlantic fringes have been the hardest hit. In the United Kingdom, the reduction of developers' demand for archaeological work has led several commercial units to the brink of bankruptcy (to the extent that special advice was issued for liquidators and administrators of archaeological companies) and left several hundred archaeologists out of job. This 15% decline in employment in commercial archaeology since 2007, severe as it is, pales in comparison with the astounding 80% recorded in Ireland – a downfall that must however be related to the pre-crisis "overheating" of the Celtic Tiger economy. So far, the trend perceptible in the United States appears a little more moderate: by 2009, job positions deemed non-essential have been largely eliminated from cultural resource management consultancies, and also from state agencies, including universities, museums and parks. In other countries surveyed, including the Netherlands, France, Poland or Russia, employment in heritage management and preventive archaeology appears to have been relatively unaffected so far by the crisis. This is either because archaeologists are better protected from the vagaries of the market as state or public employees, or because work expectancies are bolstered by long term infrastructure developments and the archaeological protection measures they require – be they instigated as a reaction to the crisis (i. e. TGV lines in France) or independent of it (i. e. the Poland-Ukraine 2012 European Football championship).

These crisis-induced job losses have clearly negative repercussions on the profession as a whole, including the *skills*, standards and aims of archaeological practice and heritage management. Among those made redundant are a number of fairly specialised archaeologists whose full employment depends on a certain scale and turnover of data-generating archaeological activities. If dispensed with, their hard-earned expertise will prove difficult if not impossible to replace, let alone to recover. The same applies for the cohorts of field-workers and technicians shed by archaeological operators. There is a risk that with them will also go a range of practical know-how and tacit knowledge, in terms of operational on-site interventions, desk-based and post-excavation skills which are essential to maintain an adequate grasp on the entire archaeological process, from initial evaluation and research design, through data-recovery, analysis and interpretation, to publication, conservation and public outreach.

These risks are compounded by the crisis-magnified stress currently prevailing across the *academic sectors* of higher education and research. For some time already, academic archaeology and heritage management have been drifting apart in many countries, with masses of fieldwork data becoming worthless for lack of proper analysis and publications. With the recession, cash-strapped operators are increasingly tempted to skip costly analysis and publications. Academics for their part feel the burden of the so-called "knowledge economy" with its emphasis on practical training and marketable outputs. In some countries the university and research sectors seem as yet unaffected and student numbers remain stable, but elsewhere the situation is changing fast. In the United States, alongside an injection in research funding, several anthropology departments and museums have already reduced staff, mirroring the worrying decline in public education generally. In France, structural

reforms including the granting of "autonomy" to universities and the quest for better placement in international rankings will soon be leading to a two-tier education system and to the gradual downsizing of public research. In the United Kingdom, the imminent cuts to higher education and research promise to be of unprecedented severity: with whole departments set to close and tuition fees to be multiplied, the social sciences and humanities will be even more at loss to prove their marketable or vocational relevance.

Without a strong research sector to set objectives and *quality standards*, archaeological heritage management will be left to the sole considerations of delays and costs. Without proactive steps, further concessions will probably be made regarding the quality of the research and heritage protection work undertaken, its contribution to knowledge and benefits to society. Such a decline is already perceptible in Poland, for example, with less analyses, lower standards of archaeological documentation, and little investment in post-excavation studies and publications. Similar concerns over quality maintenance are expressed in Russia, with the rise of tax-aided private operators and the reduction in the numbers of reports produced; in France, where the reduction of time for archaeological operations and control (voted into the Heritage code as part of the "relaunch" plan) risks encouraging compromises and "blind eyes"; and in Hungary, where the devolution of preventive excavations from the abruptly dissolved state operator to the regional museums will most probably impact on the quality of the work produced. It may be worth recalling that high quality work, that is work that represents real value for money in the full sense of the term and for all concerned (and not only the contractor and property developers), is not only in the professional interest of all practicing archaeologists, but also part of their deontological commitments, as expressed in various codes of conduct at national or continental levels.

Indeed *heritage management* policies and legislation are also being affected by the crisis, and mainly by various attempts to relaunch and facilitate economic and entrepreneurial activities. Either piecemeal or by design, there appears to be some planned or implemented dilutions in the obligations of the countries concerned to ensure adequate measures for monitoring and protecting the archaeological heritage. In Hungary, to favour developers, a new legal definition of an archaeological site was proposed which would effectively apply to and protect only a fraction of known archaeological occurrences. In Russia, attempts have been made at the parliament to curtail the law on cultural heritage sites, so as to dispense altogether with the obligation to undertake archaeological evaluations on land scheduled for development. These proposals have of course each their specific backgrounds and dynamics. Some are related to straightforward short term financial considerations, and other have to do with ideological repositioning regarding the role and responsibilities of the state in matters of heritage and culture. In the United Kingdom today, the coalition government has already cut funding for English Heritage and reviewed its role and remit, while at local government level reduced resources will directly threaten the provision of proper archaeological protection and management. In France, on the other hand, something like a Faustian bargain is being pressed, whereby more resources and opportunities are made available provided that delays are shortened, operations accelerated, procedures lightened, and compromises accepted – the same goes for the curbing of state architects' responsibilities regarding classified urban zones, and that of environmental protection agencies regarding polluting installations. Whatever the motivations behind these cuts – some, having

to do with prior reforms, clearly use the "crisis" as a smokescreen – the law has been modified without sufficient prior political scrutiny and public debate. After all, to use a clinching argument, heritage, history and culture are surely one of the prime reasons why over 50 million tourists choose to pass by every year, even in times of crisis, to spend money, see the sights, and visit Lascaux II.

The various information and analysis presented here are of course preliminary and partial, and the more pessimistic scenarios may yet (hopefully) be proven wrong. It is in any case intended to produce a follow-up volume with updated information and analyses on the crisis and its effects (those interested are invited to contact the author). Already now, however, some tentative conclusions can be proposed. For one, it is quite clear that the crisis has been having different effects in various countries, such that it functions as a sort of litmus test or philosophical stone with which to reveal the structural properties and resilience of different systems (whatever their other qualities). In systems where archaeological heritage management and protection are provided through free market offer and demand, the crisis seems to have hit particularly hard. In systems where archaeology is considered a public service, or where Keynesian investments in infrastructures and developments have been more forthcoming, the discipline, its practitioners and its goals seem to have fared rather better.

Even when the economy returns to normal, and both funding and employment levels increase, the impact of the crisis may still leave some lasting marks on archaeological research and heritage management, and affect in the long term our ability to identify and to protect our cultural heritage at risk. Besides such causes for concerns as the loss of skills, or the recognition and enhancement of public outreach measures, possibly the most worrying issue surrounds the question of legislation. The general trend of the past decades – with notably the UNESCO World Heritage Convention (1972), the ICOMOS- ICAHM Charter (1990) and the Council of Europe's European Convention for the Protection of Archaeological Heritage (Malta 1992), the European Landscape Convention (Florence 2000), and the Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society (Faroe 2005) – has been towards the increased capacity of implementation and control of valorisation and protection measures for archaeological, historical and cultural heritage. Either as a genuine need or as a contingent excuse, the "crisis" may well represent something of a watershed point in the roles and responsibilities of the state towards the weakening of protection measures and the lightening of procedures, allowing less time and resources for quality control and assurance, and indeed for public outreach and communication. This is a development we should be aware of, if only to better stand firm to defend our objectives.

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<sup>1</sup> Nathan Schlanger and Kenneth Aitchison (eds.), 2010, *Archaeology and the Global Economic Crisis. Possible Impacts, Multiple Solutions*, ACE project/Culture Lab Editions. Freely available for download at <http://www.ace-archaeology.eu/fichiers/25Archaeology-and-the-crisis.pdf>

Archaeologists demonstrating for higher education, research and employment, Paris, January 2009 (Photo: Nathan Schlanger)

