



NEW ZEALAND
ARCHAEOLOGICAL
ASSOCIATION

NEW ZEALAND ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER



This document is made available by The New Zealand Archaeological Association under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

To view a copy of this license, visit
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>.

PUBLIC ARCHAEOLOGY IN CHILE

Andrea Seelenfreund
C/- Casilla 760
Santiago, Chile

Chilean archaeology was started by the interest of a handful of intellectuals in the middle of the last century. By 1842 the first archaeological society was established; its membership included doctors, lawyers, politicians and other prominent people of the small Santiago society. Their interests lay mainly in the well preserved archaeological remains found in the arid north of Chile and in the origins of the native Indian cultures.

At the beginning of this century, two scientists, Max Uhle and R. Latcham, arrived from Europe to initiate the first scientific archaeological research. Yet it was only in the late 1950s that anthropology and archaeology courses were first occasionally offered at university philosophy and history departments. Out of this grew the first departments of anthropology at the University of Concepcion and the University of Chile in Antofagasta (southern and northern Chile respectively) and, in 1970, at the University of Chile in Santiago. At present, however, anthropology is only taught at the University of Chile in Santiago.

The interest in the protection of archaeological sites in Chile started with the establishment of the first archaeological society. The first set of laws for the protection of archaeological sites were established as early as 1925 as part of the Chilean Constitution; it was never very effective. The present Chilean law regarding the protection of archaeological and historical sites dates back only to 1969, and replaces the earlier one of 1925. The aim of this law was the creation of a nationwide Council ('Consejo de Monumentos Nacionales') which would set under protection as National Monuments certain sites of special historic, cultural, natural or scientific value. It would also administer all research permits on archaeological, historical and palaeontological sites. At the same time it was to produce a register of all sites under its direct protection. Through the establishment of this law, any surface or subsurface remains of historic, archaeological, geological or special scientific-cultural value were to become state property. The National Council of Monuments was also to decide on the steps to pursue towards the restoration, conservation and proper identification of National Monuments, and to appoint some organisation to carry out these tasks.

The National Council is formed by representatives of the Ministries of Education, Interior, Defense and Housing, with



FIGURE 1. Orongo Village, Easter Island.



FIGURE 2. Orongo Village, Easter Island.

representatives of Scientific Societies (Historic Society, Archaeological Society, Writers' Association, Fine Arts Association), and representatives of the School of Architecture, University of Chile, National Museums and National Archives. The Council has the power to delegate to a competent organization any research work it considers necessary to be carried out.

The 1969 law sought to create a body with wide-ranging and flexible power for the preservation of Chile's cultural heritage. In practice, however, implementation of the law has run into serious difficulties. Firstly, it was never reinforced by any further government act which would provide the rules by which the Council was to act, the penalties to be imposed or a set of regulations for administering the law. Secondly, the National Council of Monuments does not have any funds of its own which could be used for granting surveys, for protecting sites, or even for forming an extensive Register of Sites accessible to the public or researchers. Thirdly, only sites that have been expressly declared a National Monument are by law protected from destruction, whether from private or public landowners, construction works or other development schemes. So far no prosecution has taken place. In fact, prosecution cannot take place if sites not specifically declared a National Monument are even wilfully destroyed. A sad example of this occurred during the construction of the Santiago subway system which destroyed the river defenses built during the late eighteenth century; only after a public outcry were some areas saved and a site museum built. Fourthly, the law does not require any prior investigations to be carried out to assess damages caused by proposed development projects. It neither requires evaluation of sites nor an archaeologist to be present during the work. In this way the salvage of sites depends exclusively on the good will of the foremen or engineers reporting the finds to the university or other public offices, such as the local museums. Even then, funds to finance this sort of salvage are usually not abundant and never come from the construction company doing the work.

Provincial government offices have been entrusted with the power to decide on the feasibility and priority of funding of preservation projects, archaeological surveys and historic remains in their areas. Site surveys are usually funded through university grant committees as part of research projects, but not as surveys in their own right for the register of the national cultural heritage. Surveys rarely are financed directly from government funds.

So far only 195 sites in all of Chile (in a period of approximately 50 years) have been declared National Monuments.

Only six of these are archaeological sites. These are the caves of Palli Aike and Milodon and their surroundings on the Magellan Strait, the rock art sites of Vilcaurani and Salar de Pintados, both in northern Chile, and two extensive areas: Easter Island (see Figs 1 and 2) and the Department of Arica in the extreme north of Chile. Both these areas were protected due to the extreme concentration, impressiveness and importance of their archaeological sites. All the other sites recorded as National Monuments are historic sites and nature sanctuaries. Historic sites include mainly colonial churches and houses along with forts and points of special interest to Chilean history.

Official excavation permits have to be acquired from the National Council; in fact though, this applies only to foreigners wanting to carry out research in Chile. No excavation reports are required to be handed in or to be published in local journals. In this way, the public and the scientific community in Chile often do not know of the results of these excavations or only learn of them long after they have been published in overseas journals and newspapers.

A few months ago a commission was established to propose a new law that would overcome some of the problems of the present one. It was formed by representatives of the National Council of Monuments, the Society of Chilean Archaeology and other institutions. The new law proposed was closely based on British law. This new proposal has not been approved and made into law, and now rests in some archive until a major problem arises which might see a new attempt at change.

Public awareness of archaeology, other than as a uncommon and fascinating sport of strange characters, is almost non-existent. There is little recognition of the need for a greater involvement in the preservation of our heritage. However, by publishing a series of booklets on the archaeology, history and cultural development of the different areas in Chile, the University Press has made an important start in public education. Newspapers occasionally print relevant articles, and lately a detailed description of all National Monuments has appeared.

A few organisations in Chile have been involved in the restoration of public buildings and archaeological sites with funding from UNESCO and the Chilean government. A wide range of prehistoric and historic sites have been restored; one of the first, a prehistoric fort at the 'Pucara de Lasana' in Antofagasta, was carried out by the University (Fig.3). A similar project is in progress now at the 'Pucara de Quito' in the vicinity of San Pedro de Atacama (Fig.4). Two archaeological sites recently restored and opened to the public are



FIGURE 3. Pucara de Lasana, northern Chile.



FIGURE 4. Pucara de Quito, northern Chile.

the 'Pucara de Chena' and the prehispanic burial mounds of Huechun, both in central Chile. On Easter Island, restoration work has been carried out over a number of years, financed mainly by the International Fund for Monuments and the government (Figs 1 and 2).

It is to be hoped that more restoration work will take place, since this approach will result in greater public benefit. However, the proposal for a new cultural resource management law which would result in the systematic recording, evaluation, registration, protection and conservation and, in general, implementation of proper management of and public education about archaeological sites and monuments will perhaps be passed in the not too distant future; hopefully, it will result in a more effective law than the present one.

Note: Recommendations to this effect, and especially for the proper protection and management of sites on Easter Island, were made at the First International Conference on Easter Island and East Polynesia which was held there in September 1984.