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THE PUBLIC AND THE PAST IN AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND

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Introduction

Archaeologists have become increasingly aware that their constructions of the past play a real role in contemporary society - the knowledge gathered is not confined to academic forums. There is, for example, growing appreciation of how the past functions in the formation of national identities and in the fulfilment of political agendas (Kohl and Fawcett 1995). Consideration of these things, and more broadly of what the public knows and thinks about the past, is grouped into the sub-discipline of 'Public Archaeology'.

Books, articles and commentaries about Public Archaeology are numerous, yet discussions about the 'Public' are frequently characterised by the personal opinions of archaeologists often claiming insight into the mind of the 'average' person, backed up by the personal views of other archaeologists (e.g. Connah 1997; Cunliffe 1981; Megaw 1997; and see discussion of this in Merriman 1991). Given that Public Archaeology is broadly concerned with the community's use and knowledge of archaeology and the past, it is surprising that society's opinions and attitudes feature so little in its debates (Prince and Schadla-Hall 1985).

Some archaeologists question the need for the gathering of data about society's views of the past and claim that evaluating community awareness will not produce information that benefits either archaeologists or the public. This viewpoint assumes that public knowledge, and by implication public interest, in the past is both low and static through time. The unstated but clearly present sub-text is that the study of the past, whether prehistoric or historic, is carried out primarily for an archaeological audience. Attempting to bridge the academic-public divide is seen by some as an ephemeral exercise in public relations rather than a research duty or important field of

study in its own right (see also DeCicco 1988:840; Potter 1990). However, many archaeologists and associations have, over the years, identified the need to involve the public, at various levels and for different reasons, in their work (e.g. Green and Park 1976; Challis 1976).

This paper summarises some of the data that has been gathered about community attitudes to the past from various countries and discusses the degree to which archaeologists have managed to unearth the public mind. It is shown that in Australia and New Zealand there is still very limited information in the area. We suggest that there is a need for further work in the field of Public Archaeology and advocate as an initial and basic goal the gathering of baseline data through public survey. We note in passing that other sub-fields concerned with knowledge of the community - in the disciplines of health, law, science, and economics to name a few - conduct regular survey programmes and devote considerable resources to understanding the public.

Previous survey work

Table 1 provides a brief outline of some of the surveys that have investigated the public's attitude to archaeology and the past. Most of these have been small-scale surveys conducted by individuals, probably due to limited funding. These have either been in the form of postal surveys (Merriman 1991), telephone surveys (Hodge 1995), shopping-centre and street surveys (Emmott 1989; Prince and Schadla-Hall 1985; Stone 1989), or privately circulated questionnaires (Kottaras 1997).

In many cases only small numbers of individuals were surveyed and relatively few questions asked (e.g. Emmott 1989; Hodge 1995; Kottaras 1997; Prince and Schadla-Hall 1985). These factors limit the reliability and applicability of the information gathered from a statistical perspective, and make it both difficult and problematic to draw conclusions about Australasian attitudes from overseas work. The most successful surveys used large representative samples (usually 1000 or more responses), raised a wide range of issues and asked a considerable number of questions (eg. Durant et al 1989; Merriman 1991). The most effective survey methods, gauged from the number of responses and questions asked, appears to be the postal survey and personal interview.

Table 1. Surveys of public attitude about archaeology and the past discussed in the text.

Survey	Country	Survey Method	Respondents	Questions asked
Ascher (1960)	USA	Survey of stories about the past in <i>Life</i> magazine 1946-1955.	na	na
Durant et al (1989)	UK & USA	Interviews with adults over age 18 examining scientific literacy.	ca. 4000	ca. 50 questions and demographic data
Emmott (1989)	UK	Interviews (30 minutes) of school children examining how ideas about the past varied according to ethnic and social background.	117	20-30 questions and demographic data
Hodge (1995)	NZ	Telephone survey about the understanding of archaeology and its perceived importance.	100	7
Kottaras (1997)	AUS	Questionnaire gauging knowledge of the past. Results were compared to those from 1st Year archaeology students.	100	18
Merriman (1991)	UK	Postal survey of adults examining patterns of heritage visiting, images of the past and ways of experiencing the past.	ca. 1000	40
Prince & Schadla-Hall (1985)	UK	Street interviews about the appeal of museums in the local area, including comparative appeal of archaeological versus other museum types.	217	10-20 questions and demographic data
Stone (1989)	UK	Street interviews (30 minutes) at four urban centres examining the level of interest in archaeology and sources of information about the past.	301	10-20
Wright (1988)	NZ	Interviews with people over 15 years of age examining attitudes to heritage preservation and the perceived activities of heritage organisations. Questionnaire sent to members of the Historic places Trust. Asked same questions as interview and asked why members joined the NZHPT.	1000 & 559	21 & 40

Some of the surveys summarised in Table 1 did not deal directly or exclusively with archaeology. One dealt with public attitudes to museums (Prince and Schadla-Hall 1985) and another with the level of scientific literacy in the UK and USA (Durant *et al* 1989). The surveys had varied goals and methodologies which limits a specific comparison of their results. Nonetheless, the information is interesting to consider and gives us a better idea of how to carry out effective surveys in the future. The results of these

surveys are discussed according to the following categories of information. Firstly, the sources of information about archaeology and the past available to the general public. Secondly, the level of knowledge that the public has of the past and of the activities of archaeologists and lastly, how the public considers the past.

Sources of information about the past

There is little reliable data about from where the public receives its information about the past, and just as little about the content and nature of these sources of information. The probable major sources include television, cinema, books, newspapers, magazines, radio, museums, schools and excavations. Kottaras' (1997) Australian survey suggests that television documentaries, newspapers and magazines are the biggest sources of archaeological information (see also Beveridge 1985; Taylor 1992). However, in the UK, few people appear to watch television documentaries because of their academic style (Stone 1989). The discrepancy here could be due to differing styles of documentary making or might reflect the problem of comparing data drawn from small population samples from different countries.

Stone also reported that about 60% of his respondents had seen one or more popular films about archaeology (such as *Indiana Jones* and *One Million Years BC*). Disturbingly, 42% of his respondents felt that films such as these gave a reasonably accurate picture of archaeology and of the past. *One Million Years BC*, featuring a bikini-clad Racquel Welch, has early humans fighting dinosaurs. Indeed, Durant *et al* (1989) reports that about 30% of people surveyed in a study of scientific literacy believed that early humans did live with dinosaurs.

Other information suggests that most people have never heard a radio programme about the past (Stone 1989), and less than half had read any books about the past. The most frequently quoted author of books about the past and archaeology was Von Daniken, who is known for his much published belief that extra-terrestrials affected the development of human cultures. Another finding was that people who do not visit museums generally perceive them as dull and are therefore unlikely to ever visit them (Prince and Schadla-Hall 1985). These scattered observations are drawn from a variety of sources and it is not possible to draw conclusions about who receives what information, especially given the lack of demographic data.

The archaeological themes contained in the information disseminated to the public have not been extensively studied. One interesting survey was of the archaeological content of *Life* magazine in the USA in the 1940s and 1950s, when it was the biggest selling weekly magazine in the country (Ascher 1960). Geographically, the Old World featured most prominently and four general themes were consistently represented in the articles. These were: the chance nature of archaeological discovery, the archaeologist as an expert, the techniques of archaeology and superlatives such as the oldest, biggest or first.

A look at current newspaper coverage of archaeology in Australia would suggest that this is also the case today, and that there is still a bias towards the reporting of finds in the Near East (considering the small area and time period that these remains cover) compared to the prehistory of Australia (Clark unpublished data). It would seem that popular reporting is the source of most people's knowledge of archaeology and the past. However, it is still unclear where and how archaeological information is disseminated and importantly, why different media appeal to different demographic groups.

How much do people know about the past?

Given that most people's knowledge of the past appears to come from the popular press and television, it is useful to consider survey results about the level of knowledge the public has about the past, of archaeology and the work of archaeologists. The general trend which emerges from the surveys examined is that most people have a desire to associate with the past and think that the past is worth knowing about (Durant et al 1989; Merriman 1991; Wright 1988). This trend is spread fairly evenly over all age groups and socio-economic backgrounds.

However, the level of interest is not matched by the level of knowledge. People generally appeared to have a very poor knowledge of the past. Some survey work in the UK suggests that knowledge is greater among the young, among males and among the middle classes, although this is by no means conclusive (Merriman 1991). Kottaras (1997) reports a generally poor knowledge of Aboriginal culture and history in Australia. Of course, archaeology is not the only discipline that labours under public misapprehension. Whilst it has been noted above that 30% of respondents in a survey of scientific literacy in the UK believed early humans lived with dinosaurs, this was equal to the number of respondents who believed that the sun orbits the earth (Durant *et al* 1989).

Whilst it appears that the public has a poor understanding of the past, there is not enough information available to explain how this knowledge is structured according to social and economic background. In particular, Kottaras' Australian survey and Hodge's important New Zealand survey suggest a trend in these countries to perceive the past in an overseas context. This, and indeed the whole issue of the relation between the public perception and understanding of European and indigenous history, and of Australian versus Old World history, has not been studied in any detail, despite the way it appears to structure perceptions of the past in this country.

Similar trends appear in the public's knowledge of archaeology. That most famous and fascinating of Australia's prehistorians, Gordon Childe, wrote shortly before his death that he felt that neither he nor society could see any practical gain from studying the past, but that it may prove useful one day (Childe 1956:127). There is some truth to his statement in relation to society. When asked, the public seems generally supportive of archaeology but has very little idea about what it involves or what it is for. In Australia (Kottaras 1997) and New Zealand (Hodge 1995) there was a very poor knowledge exhibited of archaeological work, with over 90% of Hodge's respondents unable to name any archaeological work or sites within New Zealand despite the fact that the survey was carried out in Auckland, a city with spectacular and highly visible evidence for Maori fortification and occupation. This result appears to be related to a trend of seeing archaeology as an overseas activity (Taylor 1992).

Perhaps the most interesting results of survey work concerns how people conceive of life in the past. All surveys in which this has been examined display a great variety of responses. There appear to be strong correlations between attitudes to the past and current status (Merriman 1991). Hence younger or poorer people were more likely to emphasise the non-material aspects of the past, such as the absence of war and stress, and the establishment was more likely to view the past favourably as a time when everybody knew their place (Emmott 1989; Merriman 1991).

Advertising campaigns in the UK frequently use the past to capture audience attention and to help sell their products, anticipating that public feeling toward the past is positive and nostalgic. When tested, however, most people emphasised that their nostalgic leanings were tempered by a perception of the poor conditions, particularly in the areas of technological development, health and subsistence (Merriman 1991). It would be of interest to see whether this

result applies in Australia and New Zealand where similar campaigns are run but where the majority of the population consists of relatively recent immigrants who might be expected to have a more positive view of the past of their place of origin.

Conclusion

Overall, the survey data paints a picture of a public interested but poorly informed; a public which gains most of its archaeological information from a range of sources but is not able to retain or recall specific details. There appears to be considerable support for the investigation of the past; a support which derives from most people having a strong personal association with some aspect of the past.

These tentative conclusions must, however, be treated cautiously as the review shows that many attempts to quantify public attitudes toward the past suffer from small and unrepresentative population samples and have recorded limited data from respondents. Those which are reliable in sampling terms, such as Merriman (1991), are from the northern hemisphere and the results cannot be expected to apply to Australia and New Zealand where different cultural and historical factors apply. Indeed, initial work by Kottaras (1997) and Hodge (1995) suggests that substantial variation exists between antipodean and European perceptions but we are far from understanding the causes of these geographical differences in any detail.

Exploring community attitudes toward the past would contribute information of interest and utility in several areas. Some of these have been briefly touched on, such as the lacuna of data in Public Archaeology, and the public responsibilities of archaeologists (e.g. Stone 1989). Baseline population data would be of general interest to groups such as academic and contract archaeologists who would find it of use in working out strategies to better inform the public of their work and of the past, and Public Archaeology would have the substantive information it currently lacks. Such data would provide a useful tool in the formation of legislation and policy aimed at managing and protecting the material remains through which the past is known. Policy makers in education, along with archaeologists, would find it valuable to know the relative value placed on indigenous and European history. Primarily, the gathering of baseline data about public attitudes toward the past would bring the public back into Public Archaeology by allowing archaeologists to engage with the community on the basis of knowledge

rather than supposition.

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