COMPARATIVE ARCHAEOLOGICAL STUDIES IN THE WORK OF THE WORLD HERITAGE COMMITTEE

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Abstract

Since the Convention for the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage was adopted in 1972, 630 properties have been inscribed to the end of 1999 on the World Heritage List in 118 countries. Of these, 480 are cultural sites and 22 are mixed (natural and cultural) sites. The large number and diversity of sites, coupled with an increasing number of submissions to the World Heritage Committee and its official advisor for cultural heritage, ICOMOS, has made the task of determining value and evaluating the representativity of sites increasingly difficult. In the 1990s a "Global Strategy" was designed to ensure better representativity on the World Heritage List and enable properties of a similar type to be evaluated. Experts were commissioned to produce comparative studies on specific topics ranging from historic railways to the urban architectural heritage of Latin America, fossil hominid sites, and Islamic military sites in southern and central Asia. Archaeological sites are no exception to this trend: some one-third of the cultural sites inscribed are archaeological in nature. Little work has been done to establish a comparative framework for archaeological sites, although there is a growing need for this to assist managers in their evaluation process.

Archaeology has taken a different turn in the past twenty years: we can even assert that it has been forced to do so. A new specialization, archaeological heritage management, has emerged as a result of increasing pressures exerted by development, tourism, and urbanisation. It has branched off from the traditional discipline of archaeology and claims to have stronger ties with everyday social, economic, and political realities. Nevertheless, it remains very close to the essential principles of its parent discipline, regarding the study of material culture, function, and context. It now serves as a bridge between archaeological theory and practice and modern social developments and concerns.

One of the more concrete examples of the application of archaeological heritage management is illustrated in the context of UNESCO's World Heritage Convention. From its creation in 1947, UNESCO positioned itself as one of the prime guardians and advocates for the protection and preservation of cultural properties. As such, it undertook the task of recording outstanding examples of cultural properties across the world. To accomplish this task, it has called upon the expertise of professionals in such diversified fields as architecture, history, anthropology, art history, engineering, and archaeology.

Before dealing with the specific case of archaeology, it is useful to detail the workings of the World Heritage Convention and of the evaluation process, including comparative studies.

The World Heritage Convention

In 1972, the General Assembly of UNESCO adopted the Convention for the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, commonly known as the World Heritage Convention. It is one of the major landmarks in the international reflection concerning the protection of heritage, founded on the principle defined in its Preamble that "the deterioration or disappearance [of heritage] constitutes a harmful impoverishment of the heritage of all nations of the world". To give substance to this principle, UNESCO decided

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to draw up a list, known as the World Heritage List, which enumerates and categorises cultural and natural sites across the world whose outstanding universal value should be preserved for the benefit of all humanity.

The Convention's aims are implemented by the World Heritage Committee, composed of an elected body of 21 countries that are State Parties to the Convention and advised by three international organizations. These are the World Conservation Union - IUCN for the evaluation of natural sites, ICOMOS (the International Council on Monuments and Sites) for the evaluation of cultural properties, and ICCROM (the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property) for the technical evaluation of cultural site preservation and for training.

The evaluation procedure is detailed in the *Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention*. This document is a working tool for the two NGOs responsible for evaluating the annual nomination proposals (IUCN and ICOMOS): it defines the different categories of heritage, specifies the criteria (six for cultural, four for natural properties) used to determine outstanding universal value, sets guidelines for assessing authenticity and determining integrity, and specifies requirements relating to management plans and protective measures.

Up to the end of 1999, 630 properties have been inscribed on the World Heritage List, of which 480 are cultural sites and 22 are mixed, recognised as possessing both natural and cultural values. These properties are situated on the territories of 118 State Parties, which have committed themselves to the universal objectives of the World Heritage Convention in protecting their heritage. However, the diversity in nature of their heritage and in the means used to protect it reflects the wide spectrum of human groups.

The World Heritage List, "Global Study" and "Global Strategy"

Prior to the submission of a nomination dossier, each State Party is required to provide the World Heritage Committee with a tentative list of properties it considers to be eligible for the List. In a sense this constitutes a short-term forecast of the different State Parties' submission rate; it indicates the type, nature, characteristics, and value of each property, thereby helping heritage managers at both national and international level to appreciate the quality and diversity of cultural properties. The tentative list is an assessment of national heritage with the aim of eventually providing, by means of the World Heritage List, an evaluated landscape of the world's cultures and their achievements.

In the late 1980s the World Heritage Committee recognised that there were some major imbalances in the List. Most obvious was the over-representation of properties located in Europe, in the form of historic towns and religious buildings. Christianity was over-represented by comparison with other world religions; a majority of properties belonged to the historical period; and elitist architecture, such as monuments, was infinitely better represented than vernacular architecture. Some statistics are extremely telling: 44% of all the cultural and mixed properties on the List are located in European countries, and properties located on the territory of half of the State Parties make up 62% of the total. Such findings called for an in-depth study of the situation and the design of a strategy to ensure better balance, more accurate representativity, and above all the List's credibility.

The initial approach adopted for what was known as the "Global Study" was to define "cultural provinces" and to carry out thematic studies based on these, focussing particularly on categories of property that are little or not at all represented on the List. By defining general areas and periods of cultural development, and by having a tri-dimensional perspective linking time, culture, and human achievement; it was hoped to

cover a larger spectrum of human history and provide a better representation for cultural groups from regions such as sub-Saharan Africa, Oceania, and parts of Asia and the Americas. Its aim was to consider a cultural property in its own context, meaning the cultural group that produced it, which defines its function and determines its specific nature.

The Global Study was enlarged in 1995, when the objectives were defined in more general terms as the "Global Strategy". Two categories were specified: the first, human co-existence with the land, focuses on movements of people, settlements, modes of subsistence, and technological evolution. The second, human beings in society, considers human interaction, cultural co-existence, and spirituality and creative expression. It has subsequently been acknowledged that the practical basis for this conceptual approach lies in the implementation of the mechanisms of the Global Study, although this term has been quietly abandoned by the Committee.

Comparative Studies

The essential building blocks of the Global Strategy are comparative studies of specific categories of cultural property. The extensive network of expertise offered by ICOMOS through its national and international scientific committees is an exceptional source for such studies. In addition to providing the World Heritage Committee with reliable evaluation tools, these studies are also of value to the international scientific community in giving an overview of the state of knowledge regarding different types of cultural heritage.

The comparative studies produced by ICOMOS are based on surveys of specific categories of cultural property from which criteria or guidelines are derived that make possible the characterisation of individual sites and the assessment of value. Most of these documents include as annexes lists of properties that might qualify for inscription on the World Heritage List, but these are no more than indicative and secondary to the main objective of defining criteria for evaluation.

A number of comparative studies have been produced over the past decade. They have covered, *inter alia*, castles of the Teutonic Order in central Europe, fossil hominid sites, prehistoric rock art, Islamic military architecture in southern and central Asia, the urban architectural heritage of Latin America, historic railways, bridges, and canals, 19th century "company towns", Roman theatres and amphitheatres, and the architecture of the Modern Movement. These studies have been carried out by scholars whose expertise in the field studied is internationally recognised. Some were prepared in collaboration with international organisations that deal with specific types of heritage, such as TICCIH (The International Committee for the Conservation of the Industrial Heritage) and DoCoMoMo (the International Committee for the Documentation and Conservation of Monuments and Sites of the Modern Movement). These studies are generally commissioned prior to the submission of dossiers; the emphasis has been put on foreseeing upcoming nominations instead of reacting to them, thus making the evaluation process more enlightened, more precise, and more selective.

Comparative Studies in Archaeology

Archaeological sites are dealt with in the same fashion. Contemporary archaeology favours a regional approach, focusing on the cultural identification of a landscape and the socio-economic interaction within this defined territory and with neighbouring groups. This is very close to the concept of "cultural provinces" put forward in the Global Strategy; it revolves around the ability to label periods in a cultural group's history,

to identify the territorial activity and influence of a particular community, and to determine the level and quality of interaction between groups.

A comparative archaeological study by theme is thus a logical step in the analysis of a site and in determining its context. A typical comparative study will include a brief history of the type of cultural property, detailing its structural and functional evolution through time, and a set of criteria to evaluate it according to its own specificities. The latter could mean isolating unique examples or models, considering multiple stages of construction, considering the ancient physical context, or the amount of documentation on the property.

Approaches to a comparative study will be slightly different whether the type of property belongs to the prehistoric or the historical period. Prehistoric sites call for a more functional perspective whereas historical sites require an approach that emphasises the link between territory, culture, and time. These three aspects mean that a regional approach will be taken to evaluate as objectively as possible, using comparable criteria, sites that might have a universal value not necessarily because they are a unique example of a human achievement, but rather because they represent an important aspect of a given past or still living culture. Comparative studies of this kind are carried out while keeping in mind that each cultural group and event has created a specific heritage whose existence is a witness to human achievement as a whole.

Conclusion: World Heritage and Archaeology

Archaeological sites make up about one third of the World Heritage List. This indicates that it is a recognizable and identifiable type of heritage. As a result, we can predict that more archaeological sites will be proposed for nomination in the next few years. Moreover, the discovery of new sites will also contribute to the increase of proposals.

Comparative studies thus help to monitor the type and quality of archaeological sites that can, or will, be proposed for nomination. The criteria they propose for each type of property refine the six criteria for the selection of cultural sites set in the *Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention*. The study of the tentative list can point out general themes of study and guide managers of the List in determining priorities.

Archaeologists contribute to the process of nomination in helping design the nomination dossier, the management plan, the independent evaluation of the site's qualities, and in the drawing up of a comparative framework for the evaluation of the property's physical and functional characteristics. Each step is made possible by the close co-operation between research archaeologists and archaeological heritage managers. It ensures a proper understanding of the site's history, function, characteristics and value.

Comparative studies assess this work and provide a global contextual framework. The international scientific committee of ICOMOS on archaeological heritage management, ICAHM, because of its international network of specialists and its regional structure, is a designated candidate to accomplish the task of producing comparative studies.

The building of the World Heritage List, a list whose objectives are to illustrate human diversity through its cultural achievements, is an ambitious and delicate task. It is a platform for a debate, often very passionate, about heritage, its function, nature, and form, and about cultural practices. These are on occasions in opposition with what one would call scientific practices in preservation, management, and presentation. It

simply illustrates the ever present need for thorough research to determine as objectively as possible the nature and value of cultural properties.

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Much relevant information on the World Heritage List and the evaluation process can be found on the Internet sites of the UNESCO World Heritage Centre (www.unesco.org/whc) and of ICOMOS (www.icomos.org)

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