

THE WORLD ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONGRESS

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Abstract

The World Archaeological Congress was founded to provide an opportunity for the discussion and exchange of information about research and methodological issues that traverse international boundaries. It was also created to establish a forum where the politics adversely affecting heritage conservation, influencing public education about the past, and constraining or limiting archaeological research, could be openly discussed and, hopefully, mitigated by professionals in all branches of the discipline. This paper provides an overview of the goals and objectives of the World Archaeological Congress, and addresses some of the results of WAC activities over the past 15 years.

Résumé

Le World Archaeological Congress a été fondé pour permettre les débats et l'échange d'information sur la recherche et les questions de méthodologie qui transcendent les frontières des états. Il a également été créé pour permettre à tous les spécialistes des différentes branches de cette discipline de discuter librement des politiques qui nuisent à la conservation du patrimoine, influent sur l'éducation du public quant à son passé et limitent les recherches archéologiques, ainsi que d'agir éventuellement sur ces politiques. L'auteure donne ici un aperçu des objectifs à moyen et long terme du World Archaeological Congress et expose les résultats de certaines des activités du WAC au cours des 15 dernières années.

I have been asked to offer some commentary on the role, mandate and future plans of a unique organization — the World Archaeological Congress. Perhaps the most self-consciously political of the professional societies, the World Archaeological Congress was founded to provide for the discussion of international issues relating to the use — and potential misuse for the purposes of dominance and oppression — of information about the past in the present. It was designed to offer a forum for the exchange of heritage data based on a thematic and comparative, rather than geographic, geopolitical or temporal, approach to archaeology and related disciplines. Finally, it was created with an explicitly educational intent, and welcomes members who are dedicated to enhancing public understanding of the results of archaeological research on a global scale.

The World Archaeological Congress (WAC) is an international non-profit organization, which provides a forum for debate for anyone who is genuinely interested in, or has a concern for, the past. WAC is based on, and campaigns for, the need to recognize the historical and social role and the political context of archaeological inquiry and the need to make archaeological studies relevant to the wider community.

The World Archaeological Congress was established in 1986 amidst a storm of controversy, and the role and mandate of WAC remains hotly contested in some circles even today, some 14 years later. In 1982 the British representatives of the permanent council of the International Union of Prehistoric and Proto-historic Sciences (IUSPP) accepted an offer to hold the Eleventh Congress of IUSPP in Britain in 1986. After much debate Peter Ucko (now Director of the Institute for Archaeology at London) agreed to take on the role of Academic Secretary on a number of conditions. Most important of these were:

1. that the Congress be a truly WORLD meeting with funding being found for those colleagues usually unable to attend major conferences because of lack of financial support;
2. that those who were not academic specialists but who, nevertheless, had a genuine and legitimate interest in the past, should also be allowed to present their views;
3. that the congress be organized around wide ranging themes (see below) rather than narrow chronological or geographical sessions;
4. that a special effort be made for students to be able to attend the meeting.

The intention of this was that anyone from anywhere could present a paper in a theme on, for example, 'urbanism' and that a theme drawing on examples of urbanism from the Bronze Age, Aegean, Colonial America, industrial Britain, and fifteenth century Africa would really tackle issues pertinent to all urbanism.

The International Executive committee agreed to these (and other - mainly financial) conditions but even at this early stage its members were nervous about some of the implications for the academic style of the meeting. Ucko also raised the issue of the UN Academic boycott of South Africa but was told that South Africans should be allowed to register.

Planning for the congress was well underway, some 4,000 people had registered interest, and 2,000 expected to attend the Congress, which was to be held in Southampton and London. The meeting was identified as the 11th Congress of the IUSPP but had a second name — The World Archaeological Congress (WAC).

In 1985 the South African government declared a State of Emergency and the already appalling Apartheid laws were strengthened. The Southampton students union checked with the organizers that — in line with the UN's total academic and cultural boycott of South Africa — no South Africans were coming. At this stage 26 South Africans and one Namibian (also under the UN boycott) were registered. Student union concerns were echoed by the city, the Association of University Teachers, and the Anti Apartheid movement. Ucko consulted widely among office holders of IUSPP, participants who were registered for the congress, other academics, the African National Congress and the representatives of the mass Democratic Movement within South Africa.

Ultimately, it was decided to ban the 27 individuals from attending. This action was taken essentially as a statement of support for the Mass Democratic movement within South Africa which had asked the organizers to ban their countrymen. The U.K. organizing Executive informed the international IUSPP Executive of the ban. As a consequence, in January 1986, IUSPP dissociated itself from the WAC. A decision now had to be made to cancel the meeting or to go it alone. It was agreed to go it alone (a) as so many people had done so much work for the meeting in all parts of the world and (b) as a statement of support for the UN boycott and for those in South Africa.

In South Africa those banned responded in many different ways but a number said essentially "We really wanted to come to your meeting but thank you for banning us".

WAC went ahead and was a great academic success. At the end of the meeting, about 750 participants created a steering Committee to negotiate with IUSPP and, if negotiations failed, to set up a new international organization. In the developing 'spirit' of WAC this committee not only contained a number of the world's leading archaeologists but also representatives of indigenous communities, women and students.

IUSPP refused to negotiate, so at a meeting of the Steering Committee in Venezuela in 1987, WAC the organization was born. The organization was to be totally democratic with senior and junior representatives being elected by the membership, divided into 14 regions of the world. The organization was to be run by an elected president, secretary and treasurer.

WAC is unique in its democratic structure and organization. Its membership is drawn from all regions of the world and includes professional archaeologists, anthropologists, historians, heritage workers, and indigenous peoples. The principle decision-making body of WAC is its Council, elected from all of the members present at major congresses held every four years. Four elected officers and an elected Executive carry out the policy decisions of this Council between congresses. Given that WAC has a particular concern for the effects of archaeological work on indigenous people, it has reserved places for eight indigenous representatives on its Executive. For administrative purposes WAC has a Central Office at the University of Newcastle, U.K., run by an honorary Chief Executive Officer (CEO).

WAC has particular interest and expertise in the politics and ethics of inquiry into the past. This includes the protection of sites and objects of the past, education about the past, the relationship between archaeologists and indigenous people, the effect of archaeological and other studies on host communities, and the ownership, conservation and exploitation of archaeological heritage. In keeping with this, the first INTERCONGRESS was held in 1989 in Vermillion, South Dakota on *Archaeological ethics and the treatment of the dead*. Archaeologists, physical anthropologists and indigenous people from all over the world attended and debated the issue.

WAC-2 was originally to be held in Venezuela. In the late 1980s the Venezuelan economy collapsed and, at an Executive meeting at the INTERCONGRESS in Vermillion, WAC-2 was moved to Colombia where colleagues had offered to take on the organization and holding of the meeting. On leaving the USA after the INTERCONGRESS, the Steering Committee read newspaper headlines stating that the Colombian government had just declared war on the drug barons. Colombia had become too dangerous and, as the faltering Venezuelan economy was picking up, the meeting switched back to a different location in Venezuela. WAC-2 was held very successfully in Barquisimeto, Venezuela in 1990.

At WAC-2, Council passed the draft statutes and WAC formally came into being with Professor Jack Golson (Australia) as President, Professor Larry Zimmerman (USA) as Secretary, and Dr. Susan Bulmer (New Zealand) as Treasurer. Peter Stone agreed to continue to act as Secretariat, now CEO. An offer was accepted from Indian colleagues to host WAC-3 in New Delhi in December 1994.

In 1993, WAC's second INTERCONGRESS was held in Mombassa, Kenya on 'Urbanism'.

In December 1992 a Hindu mob demolished a Muslim mosque in the Indian city of Ayodhya claiming that the mosque had been built on a destroyed Hindu Temple, which had been built to commemorate the spot where the Hindu god Ram had been born. The question of the destruction of the Ayodhya mosque was of interest to many planning to attend WAC-3, not only as a specific case, but also as an example of the destruction of cultural property. Friction within India boiled up over the destruction and on the first anniversary there were riots in several cities with a number of people being killed in New Delhi.

In the weeks leading to WAC-3, the Indian government minister responsible for overseeing the congress called on the organizers (who were in the main, Hindu) and encouraged them to accept a number of moderate Muslim academics on the organizing board.

When Jack Golson arrived in India a few days before the conference was due to start he was led to believe that the government had forbidden discussion on Ayodhya during WAC-3. It later became clear that this instruction probably did not come from government but from senior Hindu organizers of WAC-3. After conferring with Indian colleagues, senior WAC members arriving for WAC-3, and local members of the diplomatic corps, Golson reluctantly accepted this instruction as (1) the second anniversary of the destruction fell with the week of the congress and there was a very real concern for participants' safety; (2) participants were already on their way from all over the world; (3) it was believed the instruction had come from the Indian government.

The lead-up to WAC-3 was characterized not only by the Ayodhya controversy, but also by an outbreak of plague, followed by a variety of other contagious diseases in India. Hence, there remained a fair amount of administrative detail that still needed to be addressed. There are stories about participants arriving three days before the conference to find two young Englishmen in the basement of the Taj Palace Hotel putting together all the organizational components of the conference at the eleventh hour. A group of other early arrivals pitched in, and no one slept for the next 72 hours, as everyone from senior US government officials to exhausted graduate students worked feverishly to create a conference before some 1,500 people arrived Friday morning. They accomplished their goal.

Personally, I always thought it was a good thing most participants in WAC-3 had at one time been field archaeologists, however long ago. Who else could or would have thrown on their most casual clothes, lived on tea and cookies for three days, and actually pulled off an entire, huge, international conference in a different country with few resources and no sleep? It was really a credit that even the most senior of our international colleagues pitched in to make it a success. Fortunately that hurdle was passed and the World Archaeological Congress is now firmly on its feet. We expect no more New Delhis. But that experience forged a very strong fellowship amongst the proponents of the World Archaeological Congress, and demonstrated the commitment of many, many professionals from all over the world to the ethical treatment of heritage information in the modern world.

WAC-3 took place under a political spotlight because of the Ayodhya issue and under a good deal of local administrative difficulty. It did however take place, and a number of very productive sessions were held. This was the only archaeological congress that I have ever attended where the conference results and discussions were published daily in all three national newspapers. The WAC Council instructed officers to arrange an investigation into what happened in the build-up to WAC-3 and to arrange a meeting to be held as quickly as possible where the destruction of cultural property including the Ayodhya issue could be debated freely. This debate took place during WAC's third Intercongress entitled the "Destruction and Restoration of Cultural Property" held on the island of Brac in Croatia in 1998.

By the time WAC-3 was held, Apartheid had been struck down in South Africa, and colleagues from South Africa were formally allowed to join WAC. A representative from South Africa joined the Council and the officers gratefully accepted South Africa's offer to host WAC-4.

WAC's *First Code of Ethics* acknowledges the obligations of professionals in archaeology and heritage management to indigenous peoples. This involves the recognition of the importance of indigenous cultural heritage (sites, places, objects, artifacts, human remains etc) to indigenous people and also, that this heritage rightfully belongs to them as their cultural property. As such, WAC maintains that equitable partnerships must be established between such groups and those who study, curate and manage this cultural

property. All members of WAC agree to adhere to a set of rules on good practice in their work with host communities, particularly with regard to dialogue and informed consent for such work.

The *Vermillion Accord on Human Remains* was passed by the Executive of WAC at the first WAC Inter-Congress on *Archaeological ethics and the treatment of the dead* held at the University of South Dakota, Vermillion, USA, in August 1989. It states the following:

1. Respect for the mortal remains of the dead shall be accorded to all, irrespective of origin, race, religion, nationality, custom and tradition.
2. Respect for the wishes of the dead concerning disposition shall be accorded whenever possible, reasonable and lawful, when they are known or can be reasonably inferred.
3. Respect for the wishes of the local community and of relatives or guardians of the dead shall be accorded whenever possible, reasonable and lawful.
4. Respect for the scientific research value of skeletal, mummified and other human remains (including fossil hominids) shall be accorded when such value is demonstrated to exist.
5. Agreement on the disposition of fossil, skeletal, mummified and other remains shall be reached by negotiation on the basis of mutual respect for the legitimate concerns of communities for the proper disposition of their ancestors, as well as the legitimate concerns of science and education.
6. The express recognition that the concerns of various ethnic groups, as well as those of science are legitimate and to be respected, will permit acceptable agreements to be reached and honored.

In recognition of the International decade of Indigenous Peoples and the year of the 50th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, WAC supports the established text in Part III, Articles 12, 13 & 14 of the United Nations Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People.

The draft text of these articles reads:

Article 12

Indigenous peoples have the right to practice and revitalize their cultural traditions and customs. This includes the right to maintain, protect and develop the past, present and future manifestations of their cultures, such as archaeological and historical sites, artifacts, designs, ceremonies, technologies, and visual and performing arts and literature, as well as the right to restitution of cultural, intellectual, religious and spiritual property taken without their free and informed consent or in violation of their laws, traditions and customs.

Article 13

Indigenous peoples have the right to manifest, practice, develop and teach their spiritual and religious traditions, customs and ceremonies; the right to maintain, protect, and have access in privacy to their religious and cultural sites; the right to the use and control of ceremonial objects; and the right to the repatriation of human remains.

States shall take effective measures, in conjunction with the indigenous peoples concerned, to ensure that indigenous sacred places, including burial sites, be preserved, respected and protected.

Article 14

Indigenous peoples have the right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems, and literatures, and to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons.

States shall take effective measures, whenever any right of indigenous peoples may be threatened, to ensure this right is protected and also to ensure that they can understand and be understood in political, legal and administrative proceedings, where necessary through the provision of interpretation or by other appropriate means.

The fourth World Archaeological Congress (WAC) was hosted by University of Cape Town from January 10th -14th, 1999. It attracted nearly 800 participants from more than 70 countries. The Congress, which debated a wide variety of contemporary archaeological issues, addressed 14 parallel themes and consisted of more than 100 individual symposia.

Some of the themes addressed by WAC included identity, nationalism and local voices; archaeology and repatriation; heritage and archaeology; cultural resource management; education and the past; and the use of the latest technology and what that means for archaeology.

A public address by Dr. Ron Clarke, whose team is famous for a major early hominid find in the Sterkfontein caves in Gauteng, attracted approximately 800 members of the public, which is pretty good going for a public session at an archaeological congress.

Academic Secretary and Congress Convener, Professor Martin Hall did a superb job and the earlier difficulties of WAC were forgotten in the excellent organization that was the Cape Town experience. The academic sessions were very successful. WAC had concentrated on global archaeological issues, but many of the themes included a focus on matters relevant to the Western Cape.

“For example one group was involved in questions of identity which allowed local groups working with the issue here to meet other people involved in the same issue from different parts of the world. These included the Maoris from New Zealand, the Aborigines, the Saami from northern Scandinavia, the Sioux Indians, and the indigenous communities from Peru. The conference also provided a unique opportunity to develop new ideas around the question of cultural property - a major world focus in archaeology at the moment. This theme focused on the Middle East and brought Arab and Israeli archaeologists onto the same platform for the very first time,” said Martin Hall.

It was significant that this conference was held in South Africa. Delivering the opening address at WAC, Professor Kader Asmal, Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry, said history had inscribed a circle. “There is an obvious symbolism in holding this fourth congress here in Cape Town,” he said.

The last event of the conference was a highly significant and meaningful one. The Assistant Deputy Director of UNESCO held a special session at Robben Island, which was being considered for designation as a World Heritage Site. This is the island prison in Cape Town harbor where Nelson Mandela was held for more than 30 years as a political prisoner. Staffed now by former prisoners of the apartheid regime, Robben Island serves as a symbol of the New South Africa. The sessions at the island served as a forum to

launch the new World Heritage Site Curriculum created by UNESCO to enhance young people's knowledge of and access to World Heritage Sites in their respective nations.

At the end of the Cape Town conference, Dr. Hall was elected President of WAC for a four-year term. The next congress is to be held in Washington, DC. in June, 2003.

At its meeting in Cape Town the WAC Executive produced a document outlining WAC's objectives for the next four years:

WAC 's overarching objective is seen as the promotion of dialogues and debates among advocates of different views of the past, but more importantly its mission is to open debate and refute those views, often institutionalized, to serve the interests of a privileged few to the detriment of others. The most virulent of such views have been engendered by the recent colonial past and sustained by its aftermath of economic and political inequalities between and within nations. WAC should be combatting such views and institutional mechanisms that obliterate, smudge and distort accounts of the past, and those that marginalize the cultural heritage of indigenous peoples, minorities and the poor.

In order to achieve these primary objectives, WAC should focus on:

- *Public Education to raise awareness and provide communities with accessible information in order to engage them in the production of archaeological knowledge.*
- *Professional Education and Training in order to enhance the active and effective participation of archaeologists from communities, groups, and nations that are at present severely handicapped and disadvantaged because of the lack of or inadequacy of professional human resources and facilities.*
- *Action Research that addresses issues relevant to the emancipation, empowerment and betterment of indigenous groups, minorities, and the poor, as well as the conservation of archaeological and other Cultural Heritage.*
- *Conservation and Appropriate Presentation of archaeological and cultural resources especially these threatened by looting and vandalism, tourism, economic development projects, urban growth, war and other conflicts.*
- *Development Archaeology as a means of conserving, presenting and managing archaeological resources to ameliorate the living conditions of poor and disadvantaged communities. The long-term conservation of sites must include developmental programs to sustain and maintain a healthy environmental milieu.*
- *Trans-regional and Regional Societal Action Projects as a means of dealing with issues of critical significance to contemporary societies in a changing global context. Such issues include, for example, conflicts over water resources, droughts and food scarcities, population, ethnic and sectarian conflicts, nationalism and identity, and globalization.*

- *Action Theories as a means of exploring, debating, and formulating the ethical and epistemological theories and philosophies and principles of archaeological practices.*
- *Action Funding: WAC Charitable Company can serve as a vehicle for fund-raising, and WAC should facilitate access to information on grants and fund raising opportunities and to assist in submitting proposals on behalf of those groups that lack the capacity to do so. WAC should also encourage trans-regional action projects and seek funding for such projects.*
- *Organizational Changes are needed as WAC assumes a more proactive role in order to fulfill the above objectives, including the creation and funding of a central office.*

WAC meetings result in high quality academic publications. The One World Archaeology series now has nearly 40 volumes from the WAC meetings. I want to emphasize the fact that the money, which pays for developing world members of WAC to attend the conferences, comes directly out of the publisher's advances for these books. Peter Ucko, in 1986, arranged that the publisher would provide money before each conference, based on the guarantee of publications to follow. That money would be used so that participants from the poorer nations of the world could take part in the international meetings. Consequently, and directly for this reason, the World Archaeological Congress is a truly international organization, where everyone has a voice, and each voice can be heard in open and free debate.

WAC has developed increasingly close relations with UNESCO and at WAC-4 the Assistant Director General of UNESCO addressed the Opening Session and formally indicated that UNESCO would look favourably on WAC applying to become an NGO with UNESCO. The documentation for this application is being prepared at present. At that meeting also, Dr. Peter Stone, now of the University of Newcastle, was appointed to the position he had informally held, unpaid, for years — that of Executive Director of the World Archaeological Congress — still unpaid.

WAC is an international organization with a huge mandate and an incredibly small funding base. In keeping with its mission, the membership charges have been kept extremely low — students can join for the princely sum of \$10 US per year — and a proportion of memberships are given free to scholars from the developing world. All of the secretariat work is carried out on an honorary basis and WAC receives no funding for its core areas of work other than one-time grants for particular meetings raised from a variety of sources. Nevertheless, WAC has managed to:

- hold the above meetings,
- produce the One World Archaeological series,
- work with indigenous groups to catalogue collections of human remains in U.K. museums,
- train colleagues in education, interpretation and computing,
- collect and distribute computers to colleagues in the developing world, and
- lobby and influence a number of governments and international agencies on matters relating to international issues in archaeological preservation and the free exchange of information.

There is much more that WAC wants to do and the Executive developed a four-year program of objectives in Cape Town. How successful WAC is will depend on how much its members can do with the little free time and funding available.

WAC promotes and develops its interests through international congresses, task group recommendations, the work practices of its members, sponsorship of workshops and sessions at other meetings, advice to national and international agencies and governments, as well as the prestigious *One World Archaeology Series*, published by Routledge. The other publication of the organization is the *World Archaeological Bulletin*, back issues of which are available on the WAC web site. These publications have relevance for areas of public policy on the destruction, conservation, collection and restitution of cultural property, drawn from case studies all over the world.

In closing, I would like to state that the World Archaeological Congress is an organization which views the past, present and future as a continuum in which we all can and should be actors. Its objectives, mission, and accomplishments to date reflect a deep and abiding commitment to equity and excellence in the research, preservation and publication of information about past societies and cultures. The World Archaeological Congress stands sentinel against the corruption and misuse of heritage data. Its meetings and publications act as a forum where peoples of all nations and cultures can come together in free and open debate to ensure that information about our human legacy is not perverted to serve modern political purposes.