

# One World Archaeology Today

**Cornelius Holtorf**, Institute of Archaeology and Ancient History,  
University of Lund, Lund, Sweden

## ABSTRACTS

Resumen: Desde su aparición en 1986, el World Archaeological Congress ha defendido el desarrollo de una arqueología política y éticamente informada y desde una perspectiva global, que actualmente se conoce como "Arqueología de un único mundo". En este corto ensayo argumento que la "Arqueología de un único mundo" es la arqueología de la era de la globalización. Y como tal la "Arqueología de un único mundo" no debe ser más que una tentativa política y éticamente motivada de aumentar, con los medios de los que disponen los arqueólogos, la solidaridad entre los seres humanos de este planeta y de reducir las alarmantes desigualdades que existen entre ellos. Soy partidario de que los dos principios más importantes tanto para el World Archaeological Congress como para el trabajo que desarrolla sean la solidaridad y la inclusión. Este artículo contiene varias sugerencias sobre lo que debería implicar en la práctica.

Résumé: Depuis son apparition en 1986, le Congrès Mondial d'Archéologie défend une perspective informée des points de vue politique, éthique et global sur l'archéologie que l'on est venu à connaître sous le nom d' "Archéologie Mondiale." Dans cette courte présentation je discute le fait que l'archéologie mondiale est une archéologie au temps de la mondialisation. En tant que telle, une archéologie mondiale ne devrait être autre qu'un mouvement motivé par l'éthique et la politique avec pour fins d'augmenter la solidarité mondiale entre les êtres humains de cette planète et de réduire les inégalités grotesques qui existent entre eux. Je propose que les deux principes les plus importants pour l'Archéologie Mondiale et l'oeuvre du Congrès Mondial d'Archéologie devraient être la solidarité et l'inclusivité. Cette communication contient un nombre de suggestions pour la réalisation de ces idées.

Since its emergence in 1986, the WAC has been championing a politically and ethically informed global perspective on archaeology. WAC's first book series, originally conceived and edited by WAC initiator Peter Ucko, gave that

perspective a convenient shorthand name: One World Archaeology. As the large number of published volumes, their innovative topics, and the global spread of contributors' origins testify, WAC has achieved a great deal, often under difficult circumstances. In particular, a strong commitment to debating the politics of archaeology with a view to taking sides, especially in favour of the rights of some Indigenous groups, has become WAC's trademark. This road has not been without its pitfalls. More than once, WAC temporarily got lost in a jungle of political and ethical complications—for example, when its Third Congress, in 1994 in New Delhi, got mixed up in the bloody affairs of religious and political disputes in India and ended as an intellectual disaster, raising profound questions about WAC's management (Holtorf 1998; Rowlands and Furnari 1999). But a core of WAC members, as well as their elected representatives, has remained firmly committed to navigating the politics of archaeology. It will be important for the future success of WAC—and, indeed, its viability as a worldwide movement—to maintain momentum and continue pioneering an ambitious global approach in difficult yet changing conditions. What then, I ask, are the challenges for a One World Archaeology today?

It so happened that the invitation to write this essay reached me as I was reading Peter Singer's lecture series entitled *One World: The Ethics of Globalisation* (2004). To me, One World Archaeology is archaeology in the age of globalisation. As the political realities of sovereign nation-states are changing, the discipline and profession of archaeology, like so many other fields, are increasingly operating in a world in which everything depends on everything else. Whoever now acts in isolation risks ignoring important ethical responsibilities and also misses some huge opportunities. Although globalisation does have significant social, economic, and technological dimensions, the existing drastic differences in the quality of human life on Earth make the notion of "one world" a huge ethical challenge requiring urgent political action. As Singer (2004) reminds us, nearly half of the current global population live on less than US\$2 per day—that figure being already adjusted for differences in purchasing power. On 11 September 2001, close to 30,000 children under five died from preventable causes such as malnutrition, unsafe water, and the lack of basic health care—about ten times the number of victims of the terrorist attacks against the United States on the same day (Singer 2004). One World Archaeology today can be nothing less than an attempt at enhancing, through the means available to archaeologists, the global solidarity among human beings on this planet and helping to reduce the striking inequalities and differential privileges that exist between different people, simply on account of where on this planet they happen to have been born and whether or not they may have had access to (higher) education.

This bold commitment may mean putting a lot on the plate of the archaeologists. There can be no talk of archaeologists' single-handedly being able to solve some of the most profound global crises. Yet the recognition that our

commitment and effort are not a drop in the ocean but do count for something is precisely what the term *One World Archaeology* has always signified and what it must continue to signify now. One World Archaeology is thus more than simply an interest in archaeology worldwide or a world heritage, *more than an attempt to promote globally one Western agenda for the theory of archaeology or the practise of heritage management, and more than a belief that one particular (political) ideology could possibly serve archaeologists' and others' interests in whatever situation they are in.*

I am arguing that key elements that define One World Archaeology today must include solidarity and inclusiveness. This is my agenda for WAC.

## Solidarity

One World Archaeology acknowledges that everybody carries some responsibility for the existing inequalities on this planet, whether they concern the working conditions of archaeologists, the rights of minorities, or peoples' general quality of life. It reaffirms the contribution that archaeologists can make toward offering support to people (archaeologists or others) who find themselves in challenging circumstances. From that follows that archaeologists are obliged to care whether or not their colleagues in poor countries have access to good academic libraries and to the Internet and whether or not their voices are being heard by their colleagues elsewhere. That might lead to renewed discussions about the most appropriate way to organise conferences and publish research results. Archaeologists are also obliged to consider how their work affects the legitimate interests and rights of underprivileged human beings, wherever they are. As a consequence, fieldwork procedures and ethics instruction in archaeological education may need to be reviewed with this obligation being taken more seriously. Finally, archaeologists are obliged to consider how they can best alleviate human suffering on this planet, whether that may be through proactive community work during fieldwork or through appropriate direct financial or other contributions to known people or projects.

Although none of these suggestions is entirely new and many archaeologists already try to act in solidarity with people in need whom they encounter, what I suggest is a sea change that would take this solidarity away from the sphere of individual charitable acts and put it right at the centre of what the World Archaeological Congress is all about. Singer (2004), for example, suggests that everybody should donate 1 percent of their annual income to overcome world poverty. Could that not also have validity for WAC's conference budgets, the retail price of its publications, or the project funding of its members? It also ought to be a matter of course that WAC's bank accounts are held with financial institutions that manage funds with ethical considerations in mind, such as the Co-operative Bank, and not with banks that indulge in the

excesses of global capitalism. Moreover, it is deeply ironic and ultimately damaging to its reputation if WAC works with international publishing companies that seek, with the help of WAC, to maximise their own revenues or share values, when nowadays a not-for-profit publisher, with a brand as strong as WAC, could deliver a similarly fine job. Frankly, the current prices of WAC's flagship book series *One World Archaeology*—often only available as hardbacks at prices well over US\$100 and going up to more than US\$200 per book—have long been discrediting the rationale of facilitating global debate in archaeology and seem to reflect instead the entrepreneurial ambitions of a few people in the West. To what extent this point applies even to the present journal I am in no position to judge as I write this.

Based on the principle of solidarity, it cannot be legitimate to promote specific Western policies and values of heritage preservation (as represented by the UNESCO and other bodies) against the expressed preference of the majority of the relevant local population or with likely consequences that would increase rather than reduce human suffering. It is people—and not artefacts or abstract values—to whom we are ethically accountable in the first instance (Hamilakis 2003; Holtorf 1998). It is legitimate that Western libraries, through book purchases from WAC, automatically subsidise free copies to be sent to institutions that would not be able to afford them otherwise and that WAC conference participants from affluent countries be asked to subsidise the travel costs of members from poor regions of the world—although in practise that has meant that many less-well-supported Westerners (like students) cannot attend, whereas an elite of favoured representatives from other areas of the world has almost come to take the free trips for granted. Cutting down the costs for these conferences by choosing cheaper venues and accommodations may be one way of addressing this issue. Scrutinising and acting upon suspicions of “First World” patronage in engagements with “Third World” colleagues may be another (Chakrabarti 2003:224).

### Inclusiveness

*One World Archaeology* welcomes everybody interested in archaeology among its membership and is proactive in reaching out to all people worldwide. There are no coherent globally acceptable criteria by which some approaches to the past, archaeology, or heritage might be found acceptable and others not. In an inclusive movement, there cannot be a code of practise that threatens to exclude some participants on the account of the majority on the day (see also Holtorf 1997). The same kind of democratic inclusiveness that has long characterised WAC's relationship to Indigenous archaeologies, even when it threatened academic research agendas, should therefore be extended to all archaeologies. If non-Western groups are made welcome to represent

their accounts of the past or archaeological sites according to their own epistemologies and intellectual traditions, it is difficult to see how the same courtesy could be denied to traditions, both within and outside the Western world, that may be similarly different from what is expected within the academic discipline of archaeology. One World Archaeology can know only one project of archaeology in which all those interested are united in their differences and enjoy equal rights. There cannot be various different worlds of Western and non-Western or hegemonic and suppressed archaeologies, and there can likewise not be different worlds of academic and amateur or orthodox and alternative archaeologies.

That principle of true inclusiveness must be implemented in a twofold way: First, everybody is welcome to conduct any kind of archaeology from within WAC; second, WAC itself must seek to address (but not appease) any existing hopes and desires that people may have in relation to the past, archaeology, or heritage. Of course, this open invitation to all to join the One World Archaeology movement demands at the same time a willingness of all participants to apply critique to everybody according to the same standards and be critiqued oneself. One World Archaeology is neither a free-for-all, do-as-you-like assembly nor a pressure group for some Indigenous archaeologies but rather a community of those united by a desire to share their commitment to archaeology and to evaluate critically the strengths and weaknesses of different accounts according to any preferred standard. Only if that parity is guaranteed can the existing variety of global archaeology be adequately represented under one umbrella. That, too, is a challenge for One World Archaeology that deserves to lie right at the centre of the work done by WAC and ought to inform the editorial policies of this journal as well.

Occasionally within WAC, there may be a conflict of interest between a desire for global inclusiveness on the one hand and a desire for academic distinction that is necessarily based on exclusiveness on the other hand. A credible One World Archaeology must therefore be larger than the existing frameworks of academic elites and academic publishing, which also means that it must be larger than the existing criteria for tenure approval in the United States or research assessment exercises in the United Kingdom. In fact, One World Archaeology should not be about acquiring symbolic capital in academia by anybody, and maybe more of its work should be carried out in the names of collectives rather than be dominated by a few Big Men or Big Women.



My advocacy of solidarity and inclusiveness is not without its inbuilt challenges. It is no easy task to ensure that the best intentions do not lead to new inequalities or new exclusions. Even the very notion of “helping” those in need

may occasionally be little else than an attempt to pacify Western consciences so that life in the West can go on more or less as before. What is more, some always tend to be better at making existing rules and principles work for their own interests than for others. A few—in the West and beyond—might even deliberately try to abuse practises that were meant to provide the greatest benefit for the largest number of people. No system is safe from error or manipulation. Any such issues and incidents should concern us all. But at the same time they should not detract from the achievable benefits of being able to implement at least parts of a vision for making the world a little bit a better place.

What makes WAC special, in my eyes, is not the sheer excellence, according to fairly narrow Western criteria, of its academic conferences and publications, nor is it WAC's ability to unite all members behind particular theoretical approaches or political positions, nor is it the outstanding judgement and professionalism of its executive that became evident whenever it is engaging with complex political and legal issues. Much of the value of WAC rests instead in the shared culture of a One World Archaeology that has always been manifesting itself in the relations between the many people attending congresses and inter-congresses organised in the name of WAC. That culture is about inclusiveness and tolerance, about open-mindedness combined with open critique, and about solidarity and bottom-up democracy. As the problems of the world do not seem to become smaller but bigger, One World Archaeology and its culture must continue to thrive, engage with the challenges and contradictions that they run into, find new domains of application, and thus carry WAC as a credible and strong movement into its third decade.

### Acknowledgment

For critical comments about an earlier version of this text, I am grateful to Yannis Hamilakis and Reinhard Bernbeck. They may still not agree with all that I wrote, though.

### References Cited

Chakrabarti, D.

2003. *Archaeology in the Third World: A History of Indian Archaeology since 1947*. D.K. Printworld, New Delhi.

Hamilakis, Y.

2003. Iraq, Stewardship, and the "Record": An Ethical Crisis for Archaeology. *Public Archaeology* 3:104–111. Available at [www.arch.soton.ac.uk/Research/yannis/hamilakis.pdf](http://www.arch.soton.ac.uk/Research/yannis/hamilakis.pdf), accessed 20 April 2006.

Holtorf, C.

1997. Problems with an EAA Code of Ethics (with a Reply by Henry Cleere). *European Archaeologist* 6:10–12.

1998. Mehr über WAC, Politik und Archäologie. *Ethnographisch-Archäologische Zeitschrift* 39:291–295.

Rowlands, M., and P. Funari

1999. A Report to the Executive of the World Archaeological Congress. *World Archaeological Bulletin* 9:16–19. Available at [www.wac.uct.ac.za/bulletin/wab9/council3.html](http://www.wac.uct.ac.za/bulletin/wab9/council3.html), accessed 20 April 2006.

Singer, P.

2004. *One World: The Ethics of Globalisation*. 3rd ed. Yale University Press, New Haven, Connecticut.



*Cornelius Holtorf is an assistant professor in archaeology at the University of Lund, Sweden, and has been a member of WAC since 1999. His research interests include the relations between archaeology and contemporary popular culture, the archaeology of zoos, and the excavation of a megalith's life history at Monte da Igreja, Portugal. His recent books include Monumental Past (2000–2006), From Stonehenge to Las Vegas (2005), Archaeology Is a Brand! (forthcoming), and Contemporary Archaeologies: Excavating Now (coedited with A. Piccini, forthcoming).*