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**Colophon**

'Reuvensdagen', 40th Annual  
Conference on Dutch Archeology  
11 and 12 november 2010,  
De Doelen, Rotterdam,  
The Netherlands, organised by  
Erfgoed Nederland, Amsterdam.

© Erfgoed Nederland  
November 2010  
ISBN 978-90-78956-18-1

**Erfgoed Nederland**

*The Netherlands Institute for  
Heritage*  
Herengracht 474  
1017 CA Amsterdam  
The Netherlands  
[www.erfgoednederland.nl](http://www.erfgoednederland.nl)

*Design*

UNA designers, Amsterdam

*Print*

Drukkerij Mart.Spruijt,  
Amsterdam

*Illustrations*

Mats Vånehem 2010, from:  
Vånehem, Mats. *Hitta Historien*.  
Stockholm: Bonnier Carlsen, 2010

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# Search the past — find the present

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The value of archaeology for present-day society

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## Abstract

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**Archaeologists are widely regarded as searching in our present reality for traces of the past. However, in this lecture I argue that archaeologists searching for the past will instead find their present. In reviewing the relations between archaeology, heritage and present-day society, I argue that the remains of the past which archaeology studies cannot be seen only as a record of past human realities that were substantially different from our own. Instead, I propose that archaeological objects and practices can be conceived of as media of social practice. They assist us in negotiating our very own social realities and our understanding of what it means to be human. It is this quality that archaeology and heritage should mainly be concerned about in contemporary society. This perspective can considerably increase the value and significance of the discipline and practice of archaeology in present-day society.**

## Author

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Cornelius Holtorf (b. 1968) studied Archaeology, Ethnology, and Physical Anthropology at the Universities of Tübingen, Reading, and Hamburg. His MA degree was finished with a thesis on the contemporary meanings of megalithic monuments, followed by a Ph.D. (1998) at the University of Wales, Lampeter, entitled *Monumental Past: Interpreting the meanings of ancient monuments in later prehistoric Mecklenburg-Vorpommern (Germany)*. After research and teaching stints at Göteborg and Cambridge, he moved in 2002 to Stockholm where he was employed at the Swedish National Heritage Board and studied the portrayal of archaeology in contemporary popular culture. From 2005 until 2008 Holtorf was an Assistant Professor at the Department of Archaeology and Ancient History at the University of Lund. In 2007 he became a Docent, and since 2008 he has been working as an Associate Professor (Universitetslektor) in Archaeology at the School of Cultural Sciences at Linnaeus University, Campus Kalmar, with main responsibility for the undergraduate programme in Heritage Studies.

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I would like to begin by showing you an image that is full of pertinent details. This picture will accompany us during the rest of the lecture. It was drawn by Mats Vänehem, an illustrator and archaeologist at Stockholm County Museum in Sweden. I am very grateful that he gave me permission to use his work in the present context. The image is taken from Vänehem's book *Hitta historien*, published earlier this year (2010) by Bonnier Carlsen, one of Sweden's leading publishers of children literature. In English, the title of Vänehem's book means as much as 'finding the history'. Alternatively, it could also be understood as a request to 'find the history!'

Vänehem's book consists for the most part of ten large images, each one stretching across a double page. They depict snapshots of Swedish prehistory and history, from the Ice Age to the present:

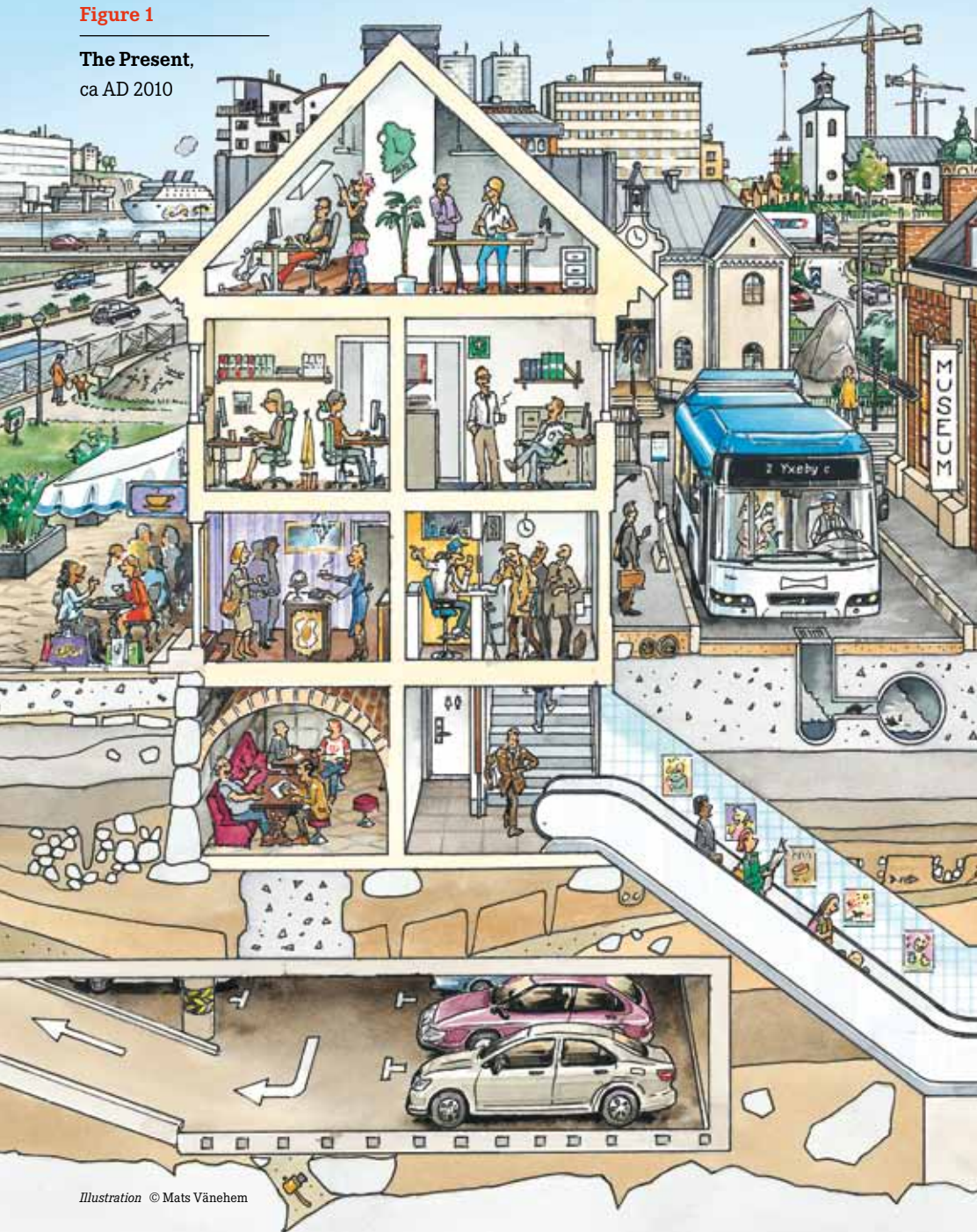
- **the Ice Age** (ca 10,000 BC),
- **the Mesolithic** (ca 8,000 BC),
- **the Neolithic** (ca 3,000 BC),
- **the Bronze Age** (ca 900 BC),
- **the Migration Period** (ca AD 400),
- **the Viking Age** (ca AD 1,000),
- **the Middle Ages** (ca AD 1350),
- **the Age of the Swedish Empire** (ca AD 1690),
- **the Industrial Age** (ca AD 1890), and
- **the Present** (ca AD 2010), which is the image you see here **Figure 1**.

Each image shows the same place from the same vantage point, although at different points in time and with significant historical changes occurring between one image and the next. The scenes depicted are all full of detail. You see human beings engaging with one another, you see their buildings, their material possessions, their material remains, as well as a good bit of geology. In the earlier images you also see a lot of flora and fauna. At the end of the book, Vänehem briefly describes each image, the historic reality it represents and the archaeological record left behind. There is also a chronological table. In this way, Vänehem does justice to the educational ambitions of the book.

The point of the book is that, by moving from one image to the next, you can trace every period's deposits in slowly accumulating and occasionally diminished layers. Pits, basements and even batchers reach

**Figure 1**

**The Present,**  
ca AD 2010







down and destroy older layers, as do modern underground tunnels and car parks. Some archaeological artefacts are later re-discovered, while others remain – for now – in their original positions.

*Hitta historien* – ‘finding the history’ – allows Vänehem’s young readers to observe how each period, in clearly stratified contexts, leaves its own distinctive material traces on top of those of earlier periods. It is about discerning how each period, including the present, transforms the landscape and builds a new layer of habitation on the existing archaeological record of earlier times. This corresponds nicely to the concept of landscape biographies, which has been applied and theorized particularly coherently in recent Dutch archaeology e.g. Roymans et al. 2009. History, according to this concept, is found by studying the variety of material traces from different periods that occur in the landscape.

‘Find the history!’ is a more urgent request to the reader, corresponding to what is commonly demanded of professional archaeologists. They are expected to discover the past by recovering and analysing its material remains. These remains are said to form part of the archaeological record, and to a large extent they are found underground. Archaeologists are obliged to describe and explain the course of human history by studying the archaeological record. This, then, is what the reader of Vänehem’s book is expected to do as well: ‘Experience, discover and become curious about the past – it is almost like being a real archaeologist’, as the back cover has it. Just do it – find the history!

In this view, there is quite clearly only one past, the past that really happened. Archaeologists search in the present for material evidence, which they then study in order to reconstruct that past and thus write history. But archaeology does not occur in a vacuum. In many ways, archaeology reflects and is embedded in present-day society Mongait 1985 [1963]; Himmelmann 1976; Keller 1978. There can be no doubt that for Mats Vänehem too, archaeology is a contemporary undertaking of eminent social significance.

Just look at the museum displaying ancient artefacts and Ice Age mammoth bones. The entire exhibit is inevitably very much of its own time, presumably depicting the history of one or more archaeological cultures and ethnic groups or possibly the origins of the nation. By the same token, the collection stored in the basement mirrors the present, not only insofar as it appears to be ordered systematically according to material and period of origin but also insofar as it is housed in those



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characteristic space-saving archive shelves and presumably kept in climate-controlled conditions which we believe benefit conservation.

And do you see that rock art site in the background neatly displayed as a heritage site, with a little information panel educating curious visitors about the past in which the rock art originated? I suspect that we all have seen many such sites ourselves. They attract tourists and inspire artists; they are the topic of popular books and are used in marketing campaigns; they are studied by professional and amateur archaeologists alike, in each case reflecting interpretive models of our own age.

If all this seems self-evident and you are wondering what I am getting at, let me now tell you that in my view, depicting history, archaeology, heritage and society in the way I just described is a mistake.

Society is not merely the contemporary context within which archaeology and heritage take certain forms and gain certain meanings in as much as they reveal the past. Present-day society is not merely the culturally and financially most suitable uniform or – depending on your perspective – most suitable straight-jacket of an academic discipline and its empirical data. In this view, archaeology and the material remains of the past are in their essences timeless and exist irrespective of the specific context of any one society e.g. Bazelmans 2010.

I wish to disagree with this view. There is no single past waiting to be revealed by the practices of scientific archaeology and history. The material remains of the past do not mean anything in and of themselves. There is no archaeology and no data-set independent of culture, society, and its associated practices. The meaning of the past and its remains cannot be revealed objectively, but are always created in a given contemporary social and cultural context Barrett 1994: 168–170.

I wish to argue that the objective existence and character of the archaeological record below the surface is not the prerequisite for archaeology but, in fact, the precise opposite. The archaeological record as we know it today is a result and consequence of our way of practising archaeology. If you argue otherwise, as Vånehem does in visual form, you would simply be assuming that the majority of historians and archaeologists of our age are well advised to investigate past human lives through the medium of material culture, using notions like ‘objectivity’, ‘classification’ of artefacts and periods, ‘the stratigraphic method’ and ‘the archaeological record’. You would simply be assuming that it makes complete sense for highly specialized ‘experts’ to

reconstruct ancient ‘cultures’ and ‘landscapes’, to investigate the lives of past ‘human individuals’, to infer the larger and collective past of ‘ethnic groups’ and ‘nations’, and to worry about the ‘conservation’ of heritage and ‘educate’ the public about their findings. None of these notions are, however, either a given or self-evident Lucas 2001; Thomas 2004.

Who is to say that this entire archaeological way of thinking and working is indeed correct? Who is to say that it is not yet another historically situated attempt at making sense of the past in a given cultural context, and thus more a reflection of our own time than any past reality?

We cannot expect archaeology itself to offer proof of any of these assumptions and the underlying paradigm of modern archaeology. The evidence certainly cannot be derived from the results of a disciplinary practice that has been based on these very assumptions from its beginnings and is thus inclined to confirm them by way of circular reasoning.

Did not people in every age believe that they had figured out both the world and the human past? Did it not in each case subsequently emerge that perhaps they had not quite figured it out after all?

Arguably, if it was not for a particular way of thinking associated with modernity, the entire idea of archaeology as we know it may never have occurred to anybody Thomas 2004: xi. Archaeology is a phenomenon of modernity. The entire past needs to be understood from the vantage point of our own time.

This is why I am going to show only one of Vänehem’s beautiful drawings, the one depicting the present, our own time. I do not want to let you be seduced by a very evocative but misguided narrative of history and a misconceived notion of an objective and largely timeless archaeological record that is simply waiting to be discovered by modern archaeology.

So let us concentrate on this one image for a bit longer. I would like to draw your attention to some of its details.

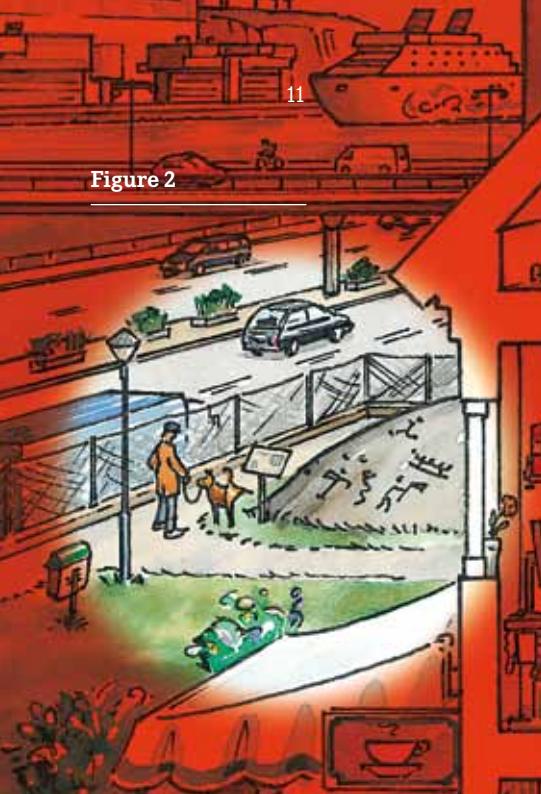


Figure 2

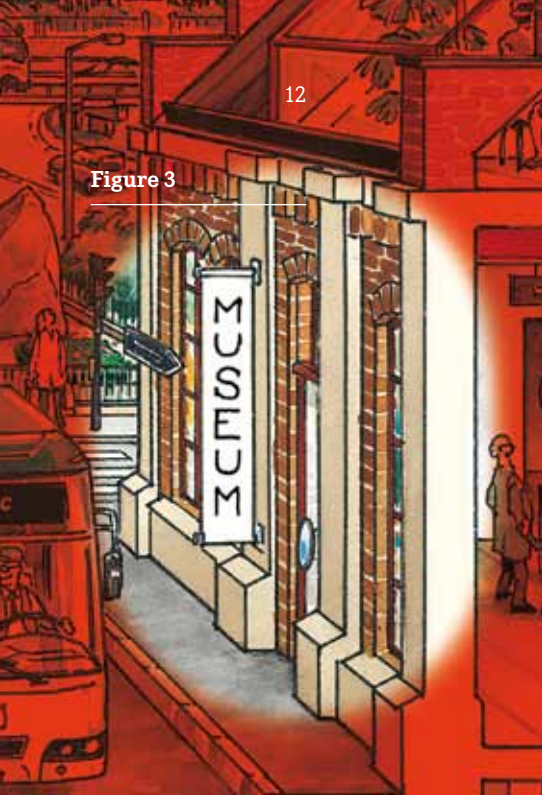
Here is a rock surface with carvings depicting human beings, an axe, and a ship, among other motifs. The information panel was put there by the museum around the corner. It explains that most of the carvings date to the Bronze Age and that archaeologists believe they are connected to ritual practices and Bronze Age cosmology.

But the man reading the sign while his dog is engaged in other business knows that there are archaeologists who have other views, for he recently took a distance-learning course on Rock Art in Northern Europe. Dating rock carvings is notoriously difficult, and there are a number of competing interpretations as to their meaning and function. Are these carvings part of hunting magic or are they the ancient graffiti of enterprising youngsters or bored shepherds? Were they carved, known and appreciated by the entire community, or were they off limits for all except a social

elite or ritual specialists? Should at least some of the motifs be seen in relation to initiation ceremonies, possibly depicting the initiates' trance experiences? Are they expressing territorial claims, not entirely unlike the way the dog marks its territory at significant places? The carvings could also depict the totems of various clans which gathered in the neighbourhood. Or perhaps they are some kind of symbolic writing, telling stories, real or imagined, about daily life or unique adventures.

There is no definitive answer, as the man was told in the course. He wonders whether rock carvings are enigmatic precisely because they resist our desire to gain certainty about them. They invite us to pause and consider different interpretations. They are a mirror in which we see our own categories and understandings of society reflected back at ourselves. As much as we pose questions about the origins and meaning of rock carvings, they pose questions back at us humans: Who are you? Which society do you live in? How do you make sense of the world around you? Whose interpretation of us do you trust?

Figure 3



The local museum first opened in 1912 and was long a dusty affair, visited mainly by school children who were dragged there by their teachers. However, in recent years the local council launched a campaign to reinvent the town as a centre of culture for the entire region. Among others measures, they acquired copies of national archaeological treasures for display in the museum and they also employed an additional archaeologist to write a new guide-book. The Council also saw to it that the bus line leading to the zoo has a stop right in front of the museum building. It was hoped that all this would achieve two aims: increase the town's attractiveness as a tourist destination, and make the town more attractive for new inhabitants (and prevent existing residents from moving away).

The Council also contracted an advertising agency to come up with a more attractive

town branding, ideally by linking it to notions of a splendid past and a promising future. In addition, the agency was asked to overhaul the webpage for the museum, making it more interactive and featuring an online exhibition. All this work has begun to pay off. Now local residents often bring friends and visitors to the museum, proudly showing off their archaeological treasures and local history. Several have commented in the visitors' book that they had no idea that a little museum like this one featured an entire mammoth skeleton and that this alone had been well worth the visit. One 9-year old wrote that the mammoth made him want to put more effort into his school work so that he would get higher marks and could later become a paleontologist. He did not add that he got this idea from his favourite computer game, featuring mammoths, but the museum visit had nevertheless reinforced his ambition. Other pupils commented that they had most enjoyed the ice-cream in the cafeteria.

Figure 4



In the house opposite is a publisher's office. The copy editor on the left and an intern on the right are putting the final touches to a manuscript for a new non-fiction book to be published next year. The title will be *The Mystery of the Megaliths Revealed*, and the volume will be richly illustrated. The author lacks academic credentials, and the readers (one from the museum and one from the university in the capital) who were asked to go over the argument were fairly critical. But the publisher has gone ahead with it anyway because the sales estimates are promising. Publication is scheduled to coincide with the release of Dan Brown's new novel about the secret mystic rites at the Irish site of Newgrange. Given the likely interest in megaliths this will create, chances are that the book will sell well to historically minded tourists, to a curious local community, and not least to visitors of the local museum. The museum director is also pleased when books sell well in the gift shop.

Approximately five years after publication, the publisher will try to sell the same book to the big department stores of the region as a special edition, seemingly at bargain price and thus attractive to Christmas book shoppers. Sensational and controversial revelations about the past tend to galvanize public attention. Just like archaeologists, everybody wants to know what it all means and where it will all end, hoping to gain some peace of mind in a confusing world <sup>Holtorf 2007a: 141</sup>.



Figure 5



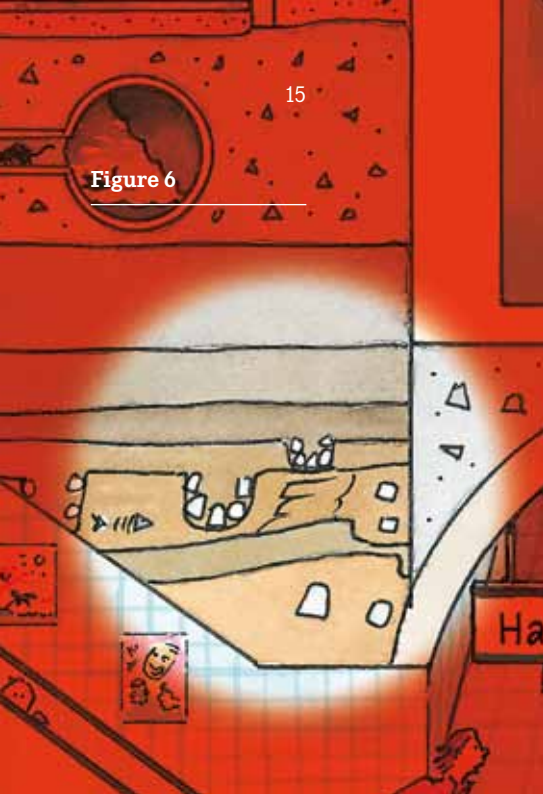
Last year there was a huge argument in the Town Council. Some of the elected members had questioned whether it was worth spending the tax payers' money on the museum's collection of 80,000 artefacts from prehistory, many broken and most likely never to be included in an exhibition. Whereas some members objected that they had a responsibility to preserve local heritage for future generations, others reminded the assembled politicians of the existing holes in the budget and the promises made during the last election campaign. Were they not supposed to improve day care facilities, build that new sports hall and renovate the nursing home? Precisely how much was the museum's prehistoric collection worth to the town? In the end they decided to postpone a vote on this tricky question until after the next election.

Incidentally, the curator of the museum's bone collection was recently sent to Asia, where a major fire had destroyed a shopping centre in a big city. More than 130 people had lost their lives in the inferno, and forensic experts from several countries had been sent to assist with the kind of work that is carried out in the aftermath of any such catastrophe. Thanks to his osteological skills

and experience, the curator had been able to identify a number of individuals from the small burnt fragments that were left. In this way, he was able to help a number of anxious relatives whose loved ones were missing and who suspected, but did not know for sure, that they were among the victims. Now at least they had certainty.



Figure 6



This is a section drawing by a first-year university student who volunteered at the local dig during Easter vacation. His presence turned out to be very valuable. The archaeological firm awarded the contract for the excavation had been short of staff that week. But the work had to be completed before construction of a tunnel for the local underground train station. On the firm's final day in this particular section of the excavation, the supervisor suddenly realized that one part of the East-West section had not been documented, even though it had already been fully exposed for several days. So she asked the student whether he could quickly sketch it, approximately from the concrete foundations in the west to the stones that looked like a fish in the east. The result would be good enough for the report they were going to present to the company that paid for the work. This was commercial archaeology

after all, not a university research project. They were operating in the real world and had to be very pragmatic when the money ran out. Better a rough documentation than none at all.

The onlookers at street level who observed the archaeologists down in their trenches were fascinated by the picture of archaeologists at work. Both the supervisor and the student were wearing hard hats and safety vests. They were exploring the unknown, revealing and documenting stuff that had been untouched for centuries. What were they going to discover next? A skeleton? A treasure of coins? Whatever they found, every little detail contained information that allowed the specialists to piece together the puzzle that would eventually present a picture of past life. But as in any good mystery, it was not the solution to the case that this audience was waiting to hear. They had stopped to observe the detectives of the past at work, meticulously recording clues and collecting various kinds of evidence in order to reconstruct the past and write a chapter of human history <sup>Holtorf 2007a</sup>. And since that idea fascinated the onlookers more than anything else, they did not even notice the subtleties of the section being recorded in front of their eyes.

Figure 7

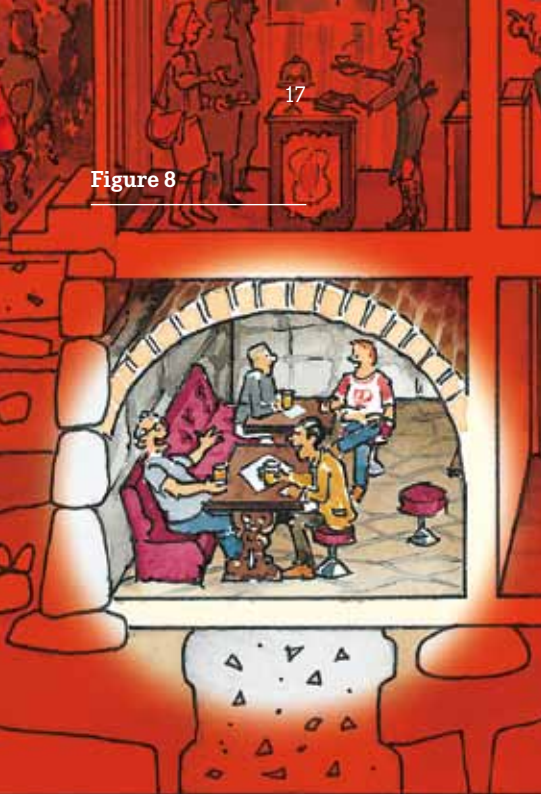


One passer-by paid particular attention to the archaeologists' finds. He is a pensioner and an amateur archaeologist, and last year also became the chairman of the local History Society. Based on what he saw, the man suspects that the layers at the bottom of the trench belonged to the Younger Stone Age and that excites him. Ever since he had had a minor stroke, he had been taking a medication that made him dream particularly vividly. Once he dreamt that archaeologists recovered a very well preserved stone-axe at the bottom of one of their trenches in town. The supervisor of the excavation had laughed when he first told her about his dream. Archaeology is a science, she had stated firmly, dreams have no role in it. But only two weeks later the museum director told the man – mainly to please him – that if a fine stone-axe was ever found in town and the museum accessioned it for its collection,

he might be prepared to lend it to the History Society's collection for display. That made the man very glad, for the Society's collection lacked a fine stone-axe found in the town.

Ever since the man's wife passed away three years ago, he has been devoting most of his time to studying the archaeology and history of his home town. His daughter and two grandchildren live far away and seldom visit, so he is glad that archaeology and history keep him busy and give his life a purpose. The meetings of the History Society are always engaging and enjoyable. The members also always make sure that the proceedings end in good time. The group usually spends the rest of the afternoon and the evening in a local restaurant together, reminiscing about their childhoods and the historical events they had witnessed during their lifetimes. They also allude regularly to their chairman's dream of discovering a very well preserved stone-axe in their town.

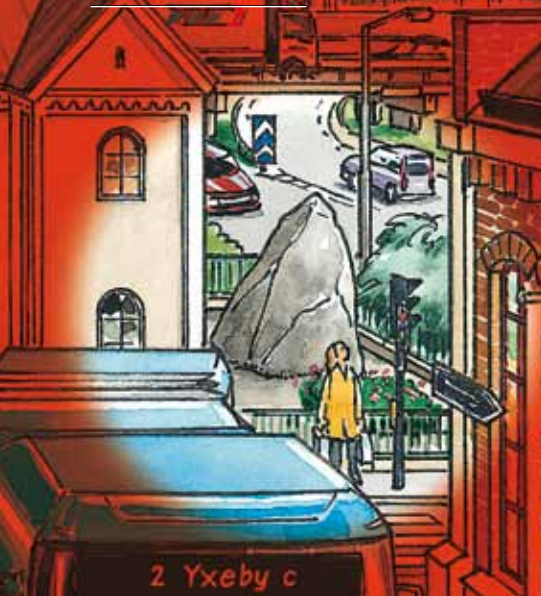
Figure 8



One of the places the History Society never goes is a basement bar in the centre of the town. This is where a group of former colleagues meet for a drink each week. They are all men. Ever since they were laid off a year ago, they have tried to keep up morale in their families, take courses to qualify for new careers, and apply for jobs. But on Wednesdays they take a break from all that and spend the evening together in the bar.

They often find themselves discussing the latest episode of the archaeological documentary series *Time Team*, which they watch on Discovery Channel. They all love the series and its charismatic characters. At the end of the first day, it usually looked like the project was stuck due to some major obstacle. But the team always battled on and by the end of day three the four heroes and their collaborators had, in one way or another, solved the historical problem they faced. These conversations not only entertain this group of friends but are also a welcome distraction from their worries, and perhaps even a form of therapy that helps them master their own challenges.

Figure 9



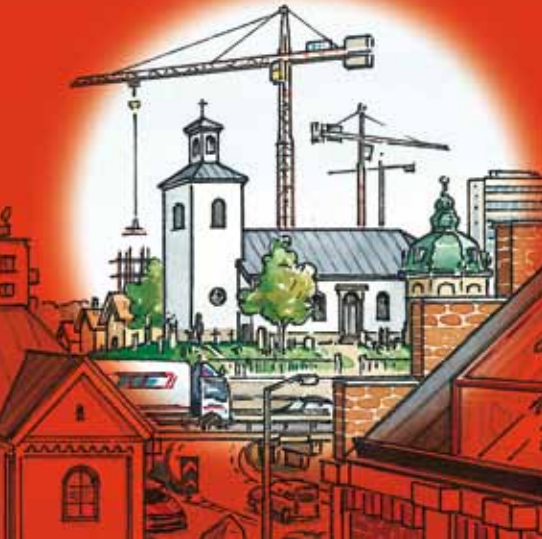
This is one of the megaliths discussed in the forthcoming book *The Mystery of the Megaliths Revealed*. The enigmatic standing stone is well known throughout town, mostly because of a long-standing conflict. The director of the local museum has for many years firmly rejected any notion that this stone has anything at all to do with prehistoric people. He is convinced that it is entirely natural and a product of the last Ice Age. In contrast, an elderly lady in town, until recently secretary of the local History Society, claims to know for certain that the stone was significant to prehistoric people too. Back in 1991, when she first became aware of the stone, she had immediately felt the special force generated by several significant energy lines in the earth intersecting at this spot. It was obvious to her that this stone had been placed in its exact location by prehistoric people who had felt the same energies. Reading up on such

Earth Mysteries in the vast literature about them, the woman had subsequently found local ley lines, geomantic patterns in the landscape, and even astronomical contexts which each gave the stone additional meaning.

The local newspaper frequently stirred up this old controversy between a local lady everybody respected and an established authority in the field of archaeology who had studied for at least a decade in the capital city. The museum director, on the other hand, took advantage of the conflict in his own way, first by presenting a paper at the Annual Meeting of the European Association of Archaeologists and later publishing it in the international, peer-reviewed journal *Archaeological Dialogues*, under the title 'Archaeology into the 3rd millennium. The value of archaeology and the usefulness of modern superstition'. In the paper he cites a Swedish colleague who once claimed that 'the significance of archaeology may lie less in any specific insights gained about the past than in the very process of engaging with the material remains of the past in the present. Archaeological readings of the landscape enrich the experience of inhabiting or visiting a place. Those readings may well be based on science but even non-scientific research contributes to enriching our landscapes' Holtorf 2005b: 548.



Figure 10

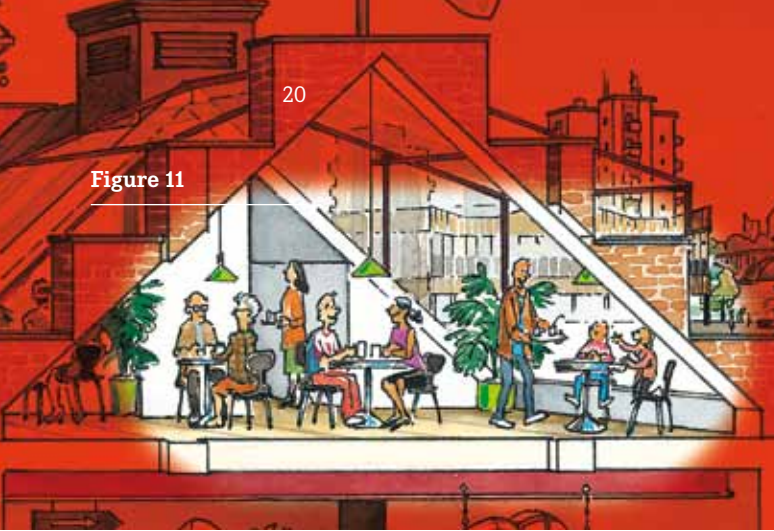


The local Christian Church has a fast-shrinking congregation of mostly elderly residents in the area. For them, the annual cycle of religious celebrations and Christian traditions brings stability to their lives. The congregation has lately been increasingly influenced by creationist notions, and there is a growing minority that takes the Bible literally. They are convinced that the rock art site in town was carved soon after God created the Universe, and that the mammoth skeleton in the museum, as impressive as it is, could certainly not be from the last Ice Age because that had never been. It turns out that the new priest has the same strong beliefs. Recently, he encouraged his congregation to lobby their politicians, the teachers in the local school and the museum staff to accept the Biblical creation story and represent it as one of several equally possible historical and epistemological

perspectives. Just like modern science, the Biblical truth, they said, depended on a number of assertions which in themselves could not be proven. Depending on which body of assertions you decided to accept as your own truth, a particular view of human history and the origins of life on Earth followed.

These ideas and activities in the Christian congregation had led to an outcry among the rest of the population, many of whom are nominally Christian as well. It became a high-profile controversy which even featured in the national press for some weeks. Similar conflicts had arisen elsewhere. The government had announced just last week that it had decided to spend additional money on improving science teaching in secondary schools throughout the country. Meanwhile, the priest said that he also believed in the historic truth of certain local folk tales. According to these tales, the Vikings had once built a temple to worship their gods at the location of the modern church, and before that there had been a prehistoric ritual site at the same location. Unfortunately no evidence for any of this has ever been found.

Figure 11



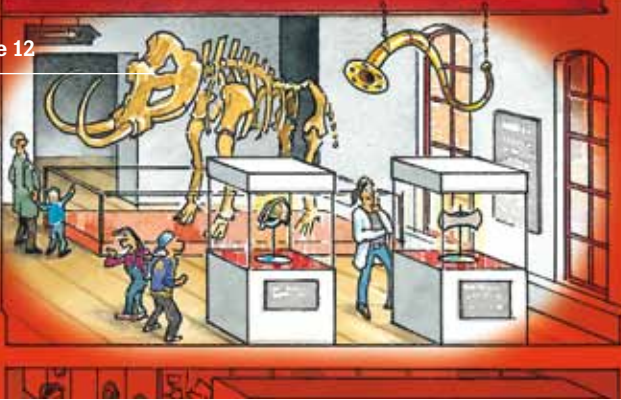
Visitors tend to flock to the museum on rainy weekend afternoons, often accompanied by their children. Many visitors take a break in the museum's cafeteria. 'Imagine if we were mammoth hunters,' says the boy enthusiastically to his cousin, who had come along to the museum while he stayed with his aunt and uncle. 'That would be so cool! Then we wouldn't need to go to school every day,' he continues. But his dad, who is just returning with two ice-creams and a cup of coffee, smiles: 'You may not have to go to school in prehistory but you would probably be helping your parents gathering fire wood every day, collecting berries, and helping with other chores in the house. There would certainly be days and weeks when you went to bed hungry. How cool is that?'

At this point the woman sitting at the table next to them turns around: 'You know what, I think I would still be ready to swap my time against theirs. I'm bored at my job, I've never had much use for most of what I learned at school, and I wish the children would help more with chores anyway!' They all laugh, imagining for a moment the bliss of being able to solve all these problems at once if they could only be beamed back to a Stone Age reality.

Their own lives would be much improved, and given their experiences in 21st century society, they are confident that they might be able to improve Stone Age life quite a bit, too.



Figure 12

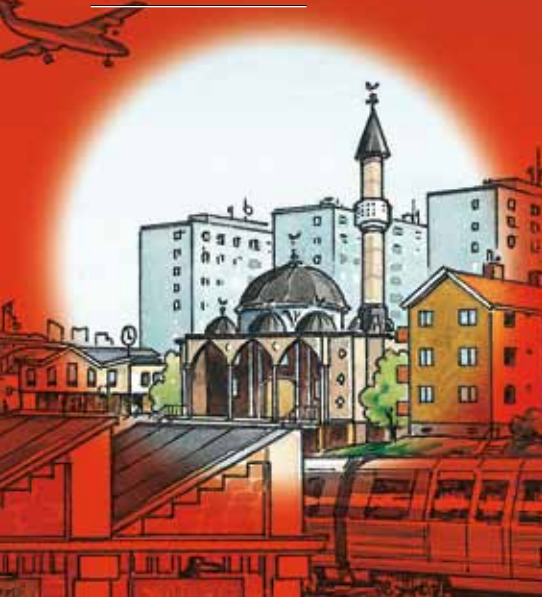


Most of the artefacts on display in the museum are actually copies of national archaeological treasures. It says so on tiny labels, but most visitors nevertheless admire the aura and amazing craftsmanship of each prehistoric masterwork. At the end of the day, the curator reasoned, museum displays had a didactic function about the past. It was the information they conveyed that mattered most, not whether the object was made of badly corroded ancient metal or of recent plaster. She had observed that the impact on visitors was biggest if she put these state-of-the-art reproductions behind glass in expensive-looking cases.

The mammoth is different. It had actually been found locally. Most of it had, however, been destroyed by the large mechanical digger the building company had been using that day. When the archaeologists arrived, after somebody had spotted the bones and rung the police, only part of the left front leg was still in its original position, with many other bones lying scattered in the pit. All work was stopped for a few days, much to the dismay of the building company, and the archaeologists were able to recover a good number of bones. Fortunately, the palaeontologist was able to piece together most of the mammoth

from those bones. The missing pieces he had reconstructed using as his model, a mammoth from Siberia that he had worked with previously. The result really brings museum visitors face-to-face with an authentic witness of their past. Even the director of the building company had come with his family and proudly showed them the mammoth he had found.

Figure 13



Another story altogether is the local mosque. Although only a few years old, the building has quickly become the centre of activities for the Muslim community. Shops nearby now sell halal meat and oriental food, there is a café on the corner, and various cultural associations have rented space for offices, meetings, and music and dance rehearsals. Recently, the leaders and representatives of some of these associations and groups joined together in writing a letter to the County Council pointing out that their mosque was a particularly fine building in architectural terms. Surely, they wrote, it deserved to be protected and preserved for the future, with the help of public funds, to the same extent as the local Christian church? This initiative had attracted a lot of media attention. The museum director had been quick to remind the waiting journalists that they were already working on

a special exhibition to be opened next spring on the historical links of the region to the Arab world. They had enlisted the support of a doctoral student from the capital city who had found new evidence that Muslims visited the area as far back as the Middle Ages and used a separate room in the basement of one of the excavated medieval houses as an improvised prayer room. This news had at first taken the local History Society by surprise, but they are now co-operating with the Muslim community and have recruited five new members from it. Both sides appreciate the opportunity to learn from each other and re-assess local history in the light of these new findings.

When the doctoral student's supervisor visited one day, she was struck by the extent to which some of the local immigrants she met had become interested in heritage and history. They had always borne responsibility for the mosque, but now they also wanted to know more about the entire town quarter behind the mosque. Many immigrants currently live in the modern housing blocks built in the 1970s, and they are increasingly convinced that this quarter is likely to become an important part of the town's Muslim heritage in the future. The professor recently read a book about Contemporary Archaeologies and in her spare time she is putting together a funding application. She wants to study the emerging interest in recent Muslim heritage and the resulting change in attitude in the immigrant community.

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I could go on and discuss further details in Mats Vänehem's image of 2010. As you will recall, I decided at the outset to focus on just this one drawing. I did not show you the other images depicting what the same place looked like in previous time periods. If you inspect Vänehem's book for yourself, you will find that some of the topics and issues I have discussed correspond to the other illustrations, but many do not.

The point is that the past is never a given. In every present, the entire past and what is taken to remain of it are open to argument and negotiation. In fifty years, Vänehem cannot simply add another image to his series but will have to start over from the beginning. Nothing, they say, is more difficult to predict than the past.

In this lecture, however, I would like to do more than remind all of you of the inevitable uncertainty of historical and archaeological research and the way it is always historically situated and culturally constituted. My lecture has highlighted a number of what I would like to call archaeological and heritage-related situations in the present. Each was significant not insofar as it exemplified the difference between scientific knowledge and public perception and interpretation, but rather insofar as it exemplified a significant phenomenon of contemporary *Geschichtskultur*. Let me explain what I mean by that.

Since the 1980s, German historians with a didactic focus have been developing the concept of *Geschichtskultur*, which translates into English as 'culture of history' or, more literally, a society's 'history culture' <sup>Füßmann et al. 1994</sup>. As defined by Jörn Rüsen, *Geschichtskultur* encompasses all the manifestations of an awareness of the past in contemporary society. It is thus an important part of what my German colleagues call *Vergangenheitsvergegenwärtigungskultur*.

Over the past two decades, the notion of *Geschichtskultur* has been adopted by numerous researchers who develop innovative approaches to investigating the past in the present. The notion is becoming increasingly popular outside of Germany as well <sup>e.g. Aronsson 2005</sup>. My time is too short here to give you a complete overview of this thriving field of research <sup>see Füßmann et al. 1994; Oswald and Pandel 2009a</sup>. I simply wish to emphasize several trends in relation to *Geschichtskultur* that I think can further illuminate what I have argued in this paper <sup>following Oswald and Pandel 2009b</sup>.

Firstly, *Geschichtskultur* encompasses a wide variety of representations of the past that permeate the boundary between academic and popular engagement. Documentaries, literary fiction,

Internet forums, computer games, living history, and so forth thrive in the *Geschichtskultur* of contemporary society. They all draw on academic work to a greater or lesser extent, but they are not derivatives of historical scholarship. These diverse manifestations of an awareness of the past follow their own logic and possess their own qualities. This affects historians and archaeologists in important ways. Academic credentials are not sufficient to give stories told by professional experts any special authority or privileged status in contemporary society. Academics can expect their audiences to be well versed in the various offerings of *Geschichtskultur*, and they know that this familiarity colours what the public expects of them. Needless to say, the academics themselves consume and may be inspired by popular culture and *Geschichtskultur* Holtorf 2007a.

Secondly, *Geschichtskultur* is characterized by increasing intermediality. Representations of the past in contemporary society may appear as films, cartoons, written books, weblogs, guided tours, role playing, site-specific performances, full-size reconstructions, virtual reality, and so on. More and more, these formats and genres refer to one another. There are guided tours on the film sets of historical movies, there are academic books containing cartoons, and there are weblogs about historic role-playing. One important consequence of this intermediality is that factual, fictional and simulated pasts, and the particular formats and genres in which each of them thrive, are increasingly being blended. Arguably, contemporary *Geschichtskultur* reflects a new approach to how many of us engage with the past today. *Geschichtskultur* is educational and entertaining, abstract and applied, immersing and interactive, all at the same time see also Holtorf 2007b. When historians and archaeologists today are satisfied with producing more academic literature and reports in traditional formats, they are effectively refusing to make use of many rich forms of expression that can reach broad contemporary audiences.

Finally, *Geschichtskultur* has become a part of everyday life, transcending the academic and political domains where it has long been significant. Today, heritage and the past are literally everywhere Lowenthal 1985, 1996; Schörken 1995. *Geschichtskultur* occurs in public places to the same extent as in the home; it occupies not only our spare time but increasingly what some of us do at work. Guidebooks to any part of the cultural heritage, nostalgic product lines, historic town

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centres, fleamarkets, historical museums and all kinds of historically inspired events are natural components of the Experience Economy. As a consequence, *Geschichtskultur* has acquired significant cultural, social, economic, religious, ethical and legal dimensions. This certainly endorses my strategy of interpreting more or less everything in a scene of 21st century life as an archaeological and heritage-related situation!

In contemporary *Geschichtskultur*, the past is thus significant in many ways beyond scholarship and learning. As parts of our *Geschichtskultur*, archaeology and heritage have acquired novel forms of expression and entered additional realms of everyday life. I suggest that archaeologists and historians need to relate proactively to these trends and adjust their own activities and objectives accordingly. They need to understand better in what way their subjects are actually meaningful in contemporary *Geschichtskultur* Holtorf 2005a; 2007a; 2007b. The professionals have a constant need to extend their cultural competence in order to stay connected with living *Geschichtskultur*, or they risk been seen as superfluous.

I wish to suggest here that in *Geschichtskultur*, archaeology and heritage are valued because they tell stories through which contemporary human beings make sense not only of the past but also of their own world in the present see also Holtorf 2010a; 2010b. These stories may be mystery or adventure stories about archaeologists making discoveries or investigating remains of the past. Or they may be stories about past events and processes that acquire particular meanings in the present.

In both varieties of stories, contemporary audiences may feature as characters in plots that give meaning and perspective to their present-day lives; it is such stories that I refer to elsewhere as 'meta-stories of archaeology' Holtorf 2010b. These meta-stories explore what it means to be human: what do all humans have in common? How does each of us cope with existential issues such as death? Archaeological meta-stories explore who we are as members of a particular human group: what is expected of us in the social milieu in which we live? Which community do we belong to and which not? Archaeological meta-stories explore how we engage with the world: what does each of us need to investigate? What adventures are we mastering in our lives? What do we hope will be preserved of our lives in the future? And archaeological meta-stories even explore how we might have lived under alternative circumstances: how did it feel to live in the past? Can we improve our own lives today by drawing on the past?

Crucially, in such meta-stories it is not the past as such which attracts interest and gains social significance but rather the broader issues that an engagement with the past raises. What matters most is not so much the scientific accuracy and empirical richness of the story itself but the extent to which the story draws us as characters into the plot of a meta-story that touches us. Such meta-stories make archaeology and heritage function as media of social practice *cf.* Barrett 1994: 35. They make us reflect upon our actions and motivations, and they influence our behaviour in contemporary society.

Today many archaeologists are concerned about quality issues in contemporary archaeology. I agree with this concern and would like to suggest that the most important quality we are talking about is that archaeology and heritage, as media of social practice, bring up social, cultural and political issues that are significant in contemporary society. I have given a number of examples in this lecture; many more could be added. Any archaeological and heritage-related project should start with a clear vision of how it addresses and advances this quality.

Prioritizing the question of what archaeology achieves for society at large has in the Netherlands recently been described as ‘archaeology upside down’ or ‘reverse archaeology’ *Van Roode 2010*. I think that it is rather worrying for the status quo when a genuine concern about the value of archaeology for ordinary citizens in present-day society is described as ‘reverse archaeology’. What kind of steamroller is ‘forward archaeology’, one wonders! It is even more worrying when such ambitions are explicitly criticized for selling out the agenda of scientific archaeology *Bazelmans 2010: 34–35*. A scientific agenda that does not put people first is, in my opinion, all too limited *cf.* *Operation Heritage 2004*.

The very idea of *Geschichtskultur* suggests that archaeology is not separated from society; it does not study the past from a specially protected vantage point, nor is it committed to the advancement of academic knowledge about the past alone. In addition to the strictly academic values of the scholars engaged in research, many of the legitimate values of other stakeholders in cultural heritage must be taken into account. Such non-academic stakeholders and the way in which archaeology and heritage are meaningful and valuable to them need to be taken seriously throughout heritage management. This is in line with the focus on heritage values that has become evident internationally, throughout the heritage sector *e.g.* *Smith et al. 2010*.



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In Swedish archaeology and heritage management, questions concerning the social value of archaeology and heritage have attracted considerable attention in recent years e.g. *Operation Heritage* 2004. Some of my colleagues have recently published impressively sophisticated and innovative discussions of archaeological practices and approaches that bring about clearly defined social benefits e.g. Högberg 2006, 2007; Svanberg and Wahlgren 2007. These advances, I would like to point out, have emerged directly from projects and a variety of challenges encountered at the sharp end of the Swedish heritage sector. They are accomplished by municipal and national heritage authorities, museums, and commercial companies operating in the heritage sector. It is symptomatic (not only for Sweden I gather) that the academic world and notably the universities are only now catching up with the major changes that have transformed the heritage sector in recent years.

In closing, I wish to note that it should not be considered particularly remarkable that the discipline of archaeology and the heritage sector are being subjected to the same mechanisms and principles that apply to other professions and service sectors in 21st-century Western societies. Archaeology is not only a particular academic and scientific practice, but more fundamentally it is a cultural and social practice. It has always been and should always remain a distinctive expression of the culture and the society running it. As such it will reflect and depend on that society's values and established cultural practices. These values and practices necessarily change over time, in the same way that culture at large is constantly changing. That this is occurring again today is not an anomaly of our age but the way it has been since archaeology first came into being, and indeed the way it should be.

Archaeologists may be searching for the past, but in more ways than one they are finding their own present. And we are all better off because of it.

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