

Vivian Smits

*Kulturarvsparadoxen: Om uppdragsarkeologin
och kulturarvets användning i samtiden*

(Eng. *The Cultural Heritage Paradox*)

Doctoral dissertation in Archaeology
Linnéuniversitetet, Studio Västsvensk Konservering
Linnaeus University Dissertations 455
Linnaeus University 2022
326 pages
ISBN: 978-91-89709-16-4; 978-91-89709-17-1

Review by Fredrik Svanberg 

Kulturarvsparadoxen (Eng. *The Cultural Heritage Paradox*) is an Archaeology dissertation that examines how Swedish contract archaeology creates knowledge of significance for society. This is one of the systemic goals of contract archaeology as defined in legislation, and therefore something which should theoretically be followed by regional county administrative boards when setting the aims for specific projects. Though written in Swedish, the dissertation invites an international audience to its content with a generous seven-page English summary.

The purpose of the thesis is to investigate the meaning and relevance of archaeological heritage in relation to the different target groups of Swedish contract archaeology: researchers, government agencies and the general public. Three research questions are formulated: (1) How does cultural her-

Nordiska museet
fredrik.svanberg@nordiskamuseet.se

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons 4.0 International licence (CC BY 4.0) (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

itage, which originates from contract archaeology and end up in museum collections, function in Swedish society? (2) Why is knowledge produced within contract archaeology often limited to knowledge of the past rather than knowledge for contemporary society? And, (3) To what extent can cultural heritage produced by contract archaeology be more relevant to society?

The book follows a classic scientific structure starting with purpose and questions, followed by limitations, method and material, eight investigative chapters and finally a concluding chapter where the study is summarized and questions answered. Methods applied are studies of literature, case-studies of limited archaeological projects and analyses of questionnaires to selected groups of archaeology and museum actors. This works in relation to the questions asked, though perhaps the detailed study of one specific site (see below) could instead have been exchanged for more general studies of a number of contexts, since archaeological cases tend to differ.

Smits clarifies her position from the outset, in the introduction, saying that she perceives a paradoxical relationship between what contract archaeology produces – knowledge about the past – and the expected contemporary relevance of this as significant knowledge for the future. The paradox (or rather discrepancy) is the difference between what the political, legislative level wants and prescribes for contract archaeology to produce, and the actual product. The formulation of this paradox is, in itself, a useful contribution to the scientific discussion.

Smits positions her study at the intersection between archaeology and critical heritage studies. She adopts a critical approach towards the dominant preservation discourse, discussed by Laurajane Smith as the Authorized Heritage Discourse. Smits also applies the perspective of organizational theory comprising the impact assessment of political goals, regulations and other instruments as well as their application to the process of making heritage.

The main investigation is presented in seven chapters. The first three are basically a review of literature analysing the relationships between politics, society and heritage focusing on the period after the important cultural heritage proposition of 1974 in Sweden. The proposition is regarded as the starting point for the modern field of Swedish cultural politics, and laid the foundation for much of today's system. Smits presents a thorough walk-through of all major policy developments, debates and relevant literature. In general, while the meaning of cultural heritage has changed for society at the cultural policy level – from a marker of national identity to a utility for personal cultivation, identity building, sustainability and regional growth – the outlook of the state on authorized heritage has not changed. It supports the same dominant actors as before, such as major museums and archaeological actors (chapter 4). Smits also describes the profession-

alization process of archaeology, its different processors and actors and their respective missions and goals (chapter 5). Interestingly, she finds a further paradox here. The current market-orientated system of contract archaeology, combined with the decentralization of cultural politics and new public management, has fragmented the process and, crucially, cut the bonds between contract archaeology and museums – the main institutions working publicly and with the aim of making knowledge of the past significant. The main value embraced today in policy-making is sustainability, which contrasts with a lingering antiquarian focus of the actors in contract archaeology.

Then follows a case study of collection databases, and object lists from excavations at the medieval town of Nya Lödöse, combined with a survey study including interviews with sixteen contract archaeologists (Chapter 7). The study looks at what was excavated and the processes of sorting of the finds and selection. Not surprisingly, it turns out that selection has changed over time. The most interesting result is that current goals for the work formulated in tenders and excavation plans completely lacks reference to any contemporary developments of society. The relevance is solely motivated in relation to antiquarian knowledge of the past. The results are enriched by interviews with 32 museum employees. They say, most importantly, that perspectives of museums regarding, for example, what sort of material might complement collections or which would be valuable in audience-related work, are currently not implemented in contract archaeology, and that they see the relevance of archaeological collections for contemporary society as poor.

After these empirical chapters follows a lengthy discussion of findings where Smits deepens various aspects of the paradoxical relationships found, and finally suggests a new model for the production of archaeological heritage. These discussions are generally thorough, though a link to the general context of public archaeology appears to be missing. This research field has, after all, wrestled with questions of relevance and audience interaction in depth and produced a significant body of knowledge about these things (e.g. Merriman 2004; Skeates et al. 2012; the journal *Public Archaeology*). Incorporating knowledge from this field could have deepened reflections and significantly helped in the design of the suggested new model.

The most important conclusion of the dissertation is that ‘the relation between cultural politics, Contract Archaeology and the museum, affects the production of archaeological heritage to a degree that it cannot be considered viable as a Heritage product with relevance for the general public as it is intended’ (p. 255). Smits identifies this as due to a number of shortcomings of the current heritage production process. In order for cultural heritage produced by contract archaeology to gain significance for soci-

ety, the paradox described by Smits needs to be resolved. To do so, Smits has several suggestions. Among the most important is the need to involve museums in the process and a strengthening of the coordinating role of the county boards. Moreover, there is need for a wider understanding of the contents, methods and useability of the contract archaeology process and its use for other disciplines, as well as its meaning in aspects other than the purely scientific and the development of a critical perspective on the preservation discourses currently focused.

The practical suggestions identified by Smits may be difficult, at least in part, to put into practice, and do not necessarily lead towards higher contemporary relevance. I am not sure, for instance, that it really is in the detailed selection of finds that higher significance may be sought. Rather it may be in the selection of what type of sites to dig in the first place, and in how finds are actually used in museums.

Kulturarvsparadoxen is a highly relevant and readable work, presenting an astute analysis of the Swedish contract archaeology system in relation to cultural politics and society. The paradox identified is an accurate observation, studied in depth, which in my opinion is the most important result. It reveals a lot about the Swedish system. The method of comparing intended outcomes on a political/legislative level with actual outputs and studying the roles and practices of different actors in the system could probably be applied with equally interesting results to other countries/systems. Smits goes after the grail of how to produce knowledge of relevance for society, and though she may not have gone the whole distance, she certainly highlights and pushes the question in important ways, opening it up for discussion and for future research to build upon. I would have wished for the addition of the body of knowledge stemming from public archaeology, and the suggestions formulated within this field, but overall, *Kulturarvsparadoxen* is an excellent work. It is much needed, and should be taken as a serious starting point for discussions of how to develop Swedish contract archaeology.

References

- Merriman, N. (ed). 2004. *Public Archaeology*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Skeates, R., McDavid, C. & Carman, J. 2012. *The Oxford Handbook of Public Archaeology*. Oxford: Oxford University press.