

COMMENTS ON QUALITY FROM THE IVORY TOWER

Håkon Glørstad

Andersson, Lagerlöf and Skyllberg raise several important questions concerning the issue of quality in development-led archaeology. Their analysis of the system is precise and thought provoking. From a Norwegian point of view, however, one has to notice a blind spot in their argumentation. This area of debate was originally of great importance to Swedish archaeology and is still in prime focus in the Norwegian management of cultural heritage. The authors point out that in Scandinavia there now exist two different systems of doing development-led archaeology, that is, inside a state monopoly and as part of a competitive system. The main trend in public life in Scandinavia has been to break down the state monopolies and replace them by different systems of private or semi-private competition. One might ask why development-led archaeology in countries such as Norway has not been reorganised in a similar manner, as the idea of such a reform has regularly been suggested by several politicians and bureaucrats. I think the main reason for the Norwegian hesitance has been a continuous regeneration of the intellectual fundament of development-led archaeology. Development-led archaeology is primarily done in order to secure *source material* and documentation of past societies *for* research, when development plans are threatening the heritage. The importance of *using* this knowledge in public life is still sub-ordered such an ambition. There are two interrelated consequences of this stand. Firstly, in this system the developer is not expected or obliged to pay for any research or public appropriation of the past. The developer only pays for securing the source material for storage and future research. Secondly, this

research as well as almost all archaeological rescue excavations in Norway is done by the universities, or to be more precise, by five university museums.¹ Here we reach, I think, the aforementioned blind spot. This system namely, just as the Swedish, divides the world between an effectuated and a critical domain (Kant 1992). The difference is, however, that the demarcation lines in Norway cut right through the field of cultural heritage management, while in Sweden, as far as I can tell, this activity generally belongs to the effectuated part of society. In Norway, development-led archaeology is integrated into the universities because the primary function of this kind of archaeology is not to please society or consumers, but to secure valuable source material for critical and free research and knowledge production. Parts of Norwegian cultural heritage management represent effectuated social functions. That is, they manage the public goods according to the state's legislation. These institutions are the county administrations' archaeological offices, the Directorate of Cultural Heritage Management and the Ministry of Environment. They do not, however, perform research as part of their portfolio. Thus the system of cultural heritage management is constructed as two different interacting domains in order to secure quality and criticism.²

This sheds some light on the question of securing quality in Swedish archaeology. In modern society, the universities are supposed to create knowledge of high quality, through large research environments, processes of critical peer evaluation, and with close connections between research and education/reproduction. This knowledge should be produced for its own sake – not as a response to any needs of consumers or users. This is the ideal of the ivory tower. According to the authors, in Swedish development-led archaeology this kind of knowledge is no longer the end product of research; it is only a means for creating a product for consumption: “Scientific documentation is no longer the aim but the means. The aim should be to transform and present the results of the investigation for the different target groups in an interesting

1 The Norwegian system has undergone several healthy reforms in order to trim and improve the logic of its structure. Management according to the legislation and research/knowledge production has thus been better divided. A few deviations from a clear-cut division between these functions still exist, but the main trend is clear (Glørstad & Kallhovd, in press).

2 Needless to say, there is a constant temptation for the universities taking part in development-led archaeology to redefine their role similar to the rest of the field of cultural heritage management.

and relevant manner.” This is the magical formulation of the market and the turn towards the logic of a market. It is of great importance for the question of quality. Today the logic of the market is not about selling a reasonable product at the best price. This was perhaps the ideology of the production societies in the twentieth century, but in the twenty-first century we are part of consuming societies where there is little interest in production. Instead what is at stake is *consumption*, or to be more precise, maximising consumption in order to create and recreate identities as social life. This logic of our contemporary world is very precisely defined by Zygmunt Baumann (2008), leaving little optimism for any hope of securing traditional concepts of quality inside such a system. The effects of the new consuming ideology are displayed in various aspects of present-day human life. Most obvious is perhaps the transfer of large-scale production from the industrialised countries in the West to the remote East, enabling very low prices for the products. The low prices measured against Western ability for buying enable high consumption rates – and few products are actually made to last. Durability is not in the interest of a consuming society – thus the question of traditional quality boils down to the minimum standards of consumer organisation or governments. A noticeable consequence is the breakdown of the traditional Western concepts of humans and individuality, enabling the consumers to be recreated through a process of total commodification.

The authors rightly identify this process, not only in development-led archaeology but also in the educational system. Today university education is transformed into creating a market for consumption of points and courses, hence fragmenting the traditional disciplines and making education a question of creating your own individualised competence – becoming unique and attractive on the work market by consuming standardised products. Most fields of social research and humanities have even developed ideologies suitable for this new situation. We also have some remarkable examples in archaeology (first and most clear-cut: Miller 1987). Two consequences can be drawn from this. First, the universities are no longer a guarantor for quality in archaeology. Second, the concept of quality will be equated with the concept of consumption – *who will need or appreciate the products offered?* In my opinion it is utopian to think that the market system in archaeology itself would secure quality – if so, that would have been a clear and rare exception in history. The market first and foremost secures

high activity, and consumption rates and products should thus be adjusted to an average audience.

As initially remarked, the choice of financing research is crucial. The Swedish system allows for financing research through the money the developer is obliged to pay. This creates a great potential for increased employment and activities. In general, the market system is a much better creator of jobs and positions in archaeology than state monopolies. (This is, of course, paradoxical for those who believe that a market would reduce prices.) Embracing the market, the fundamental challenge is to recreate the critical functions the way Immanuel Kant defined them (Kant 1992; see also Bourdieu 1996, and Glørstad 2008 for archaeological discussion on the subject) in such a system. How can we create critical functions that are not part of the effectuated system that funds excavations and research? In Norway this is done by dividing strictly between securing sources and doing research. However, in the Swedish system this would likely be too large a sacrifice; it would probably mean giving up funding and reducing the level of archaeological activity. This touches upon a delicate aspect of the question of quality – it is intimately connected to the question of *social dignity*. The Norwegian system has created a large stock of archaeologists who do not have permanent positions or full-time jobs. Their choice of making a living out of short-term contracts in development-led archaeology actually disqualifies them from permanent positions because they are spending their time getting competence that is not highly rated in management and research. Thus, the outcome of their career runs the risk of turning into a social tragedy – they will not be able to have a normal family life, and as soon as they age or become injured in such a way that fieldwork no longer is possible they will not be considered a resource of interest for the archaeological employers. A regulated market would to a larger degree offer them social security and more stable jobs. Making quality a question of interest and consumption also creates a diverse work market. Such an asset is hard to resist.

Now, these comments might seem critical and a bit depressing, and certainly they must be balanced by a less principled and more pragmatic evaluation of the quality of Swedish development-led archaeology. In my opinion there is a lot of solid, high-quality archaeology done in Sweden today. The reasons for this good performance also deserve some comments. Most Swedish archaeologists are still primarily writ-

ing for an audience that consists of other researchers – thus the rather general standards of writing scientific texts are still prevalent. Closely related to this practice is also a definition of the function of the text – not to write for different target groups in an interesting manner, but to present scientific documentation of high quality and thus of relevance for the work of one's peers. As long as the system of education is still granting such virtues, the standards will likely be kept. Unfortunately, as the authors say, this can no longer be taken for granted. Despite this regrettable development, the connections to education and university research should in any case be strengthened in development-led archaeology. Many historical examples point out such organisations and activities as the most stable element for securing high quality in research and knowledge production, and not least some critical evaluation of the work done. Securing quality in Swedish cultural heritage management can probably not be solved in a long-term perspective inside this framework exclusively. High quality implies solid reproduction and a certain amount of institutionalised disinterest. The way I see it, such assets can not be offered inside the present system of Swedish cultural heritage management alone. By this I do not mean that such qualities are absent from development-led archaeology, but they are not functions of the system – thus there exist no mechanisms for their reproduction.

Håkon Glørstad, Museum of Cultural History,
University of Oslo, Norway

References

- Bauman, Z. 2008. *Konsumtionsliv*. Gothenburg: Daidalos.
- Bourdieu, P. 1996. *Homo academicus*. Stockholm: Brutus Östlings Bokförlag Symposion.
- Glørstad, H. 2008. En nisses tale for akademiet. *Primitive tider* 10. p. 95–107.
- Glørstad, H. & Kallhovd, K. in press. Rescue archaeology initiated by research – a contradiction in terms? – The role of the universities in Norwegian Cultural Heritage Management. In: G. Blancquaert, F. Malrain, H. Stäuble and J. Vanmoerkerke (eds.): *Understanding the past: a matter of surface-area. Acts of the XIIIth session of the EAA Congress, Zadar 2007*. BAR International Series, Oxford: Archaeopress.
- Kant, I. 1992. *The conflict of the faculties*. (Original: *Der Streit der Fakultäten*, 1798) Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Miller, D. 1987. *Material culture and mass consumption*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.