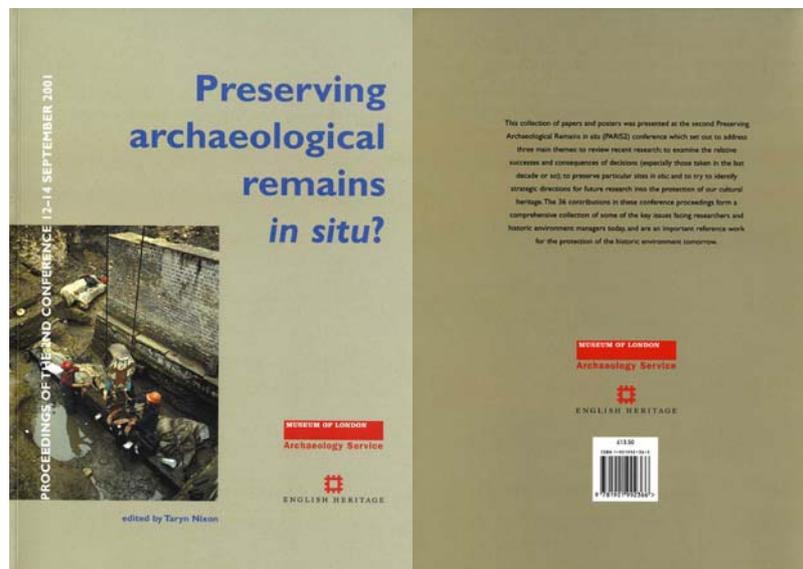


Nixon, T. Ed. 2004. Preserving archaeological remains *in situ*? Proceedings of the 2nd conference 12-14 September 2001, London. – London, Museum of London Archaeology Service (MOLAS)

Book review by E. Meylemans



Protection *in situ* of important archaeological values has become the predominant preference in international archaeological heritage management since the 1990s, as stipulated for example in the Valetta Convention, article 4. This constitutes one of the major challenges of archaeological heritage management today: trying to assess, evaluate and sustain historical landscapes, sites and monuments in a rapidly changing environment. Experience in the last decades with implementing this principle has brought to light many problems and difficulties, mainly associated with the lack of knowledge on all levels, and with the increasing pressure on the landscape. The PARIS 2 publication draws attention to a number of these aspects.

First and foremost in this respect is the question: what to protect? In other words: how can the archaeological resource be valued and weighed to make planning decisions concerning which values we want to keep for future generations? In her paper Kate Clark mentions (p. 204) that, “For archaeologists, the value of the historical environment lies largely in the ‘ability to demonstrate’ past events.”: the ‘significance’ of the monument. When applying the Dutch set of criteria in assessing this significance primarily the intrinsic qualities (research potential, rarity, group value, representativity) and physical qualities are important (Deeben *et al.*, 1999). Other parameters that need to be weighed are often of an ‘external’ (*i.e.* non-archaeological) nature: economic, social, aesthetic ... values. Central in the Clark paper is the fact that archaeologists have to value the archaeological resource without always thinking in terms of mitigation (or, as she describes it, the ‘mitigation ghetto’ in which a lot of archaeological heritage officers seem to dwell), but in adapting a more positive and proactive approach in creating a sustainable historical environment. The same message comes from the paper of John Carman, who stresses that sustainability for archaeology has to be viewed primarily in terms of an historical sustainability, rather than an ecological one (which of course depends primarily on its potential for regeneration). The archaeological resource has to be translated, through interpretation and narrative, to an archaeological ‘heritage’ in order to become sustainable historical environment.

But how to implement such a view? On a macro scale, in the first place, information about the extent and preservation of the archaeological resource is required. For this, projects such as the ‘MARS’ survey (Darvill & Fulton, 1998) are certainly of primary importance. In his paper Lambrick gives an overview of the threats in arable landscapes and possible remedial measures. These threats are of a physical and chemical nature, and pose an exponentially grown stress regime in the past decades. This exponential increase in degradation is also shown by the work on the Dorset earthwork (paper by David Hopkins), and also by the paper of Helge Brinch Madsen *et al.* on the deterioration pattern of prehistoric bronzes. This shows us that the (physical and chemical) stress on the resource is rapidly growing, and a lot has been lost already. The possibility of creating ‘risk models’ in order to make ‘large scale’ decisions is mentioned by Lambrick. Since the 2001 PARIS convention a number of such ‘testing’ models for assessing ‘preservation potential’ have indeed been created, mainly inspired by geo-archaeological approaches and the application of erosion modelling (for example Ducke, 2004; Vanmontfort *et al.* forthcoming).

Several papers in the PARIS 2 publication treat the difficulties and opportunities of preservation of archaeological remains in urban areas. It seems that in these areas, under a lot of stress from large scale developments, the 'mitigation ghetto' is unavoidable. Most of the work concerning urban archaeology addressed in this publication has been done as a mitigating measure in development projects. However, as some of the examples demonstrate, this does not necessarily mean that the archaeological resource needs to be destroyed. The papers concerning a number of sites in Britain (London and Gloucester), demonstrate that engineering and archaeology can work together in preserving archaeological remains, either *in situ* or by record if no alternative arises, and that this can indeed add value and meaning to the development project itself. Of primary importance in this respect is the involvement of archaeologists from the first stages of planning onwards. This is largely dependant on the interest in archaeology or the historic environment in general with the planners and developers themselves, and their willingness to take this value into account. The results achieved in the London examples, where we can veritably speak of 'sustainability' are very hopeful in this respect, and speaking from a Flemish perspective, mouth watering. John- Pugh Smith *et al.* mention in their paper on the Gloucester site (p. 149) "...the design solution should be developed as much from the archaeology upwards as from the building downwards..." and speaks of 'sustainable mitigation'.

In the development of these 'sustainable mitigation' strategies, the assessment and monitoring of the physical qualities of a site is of primary importance. In the first place an evaluation has to take place to assess if the site has enough preservation conditions to be protected *in situ*. In the second place the question arises if this quality can be sustained within the development itself, for example below the foundations of other buildings. A lot of publications in this volume deal with these questions. From these papers a fairly complex picture arises. Preservation of archaeological, organic and inorganic materials depends on a wide variety of factors that are not completely understood. A lot of the research discussed in the book is of an experimental nature, but are most definitely ways forward in filling in this gap in our knowledge. An important lesson that has to be learned is that protection of archaeological remains *in situ* has to be of an active nature. It is not enough to take hard protective measures or leave the remains untouched, but a monitoring and, if necessary, conservation strategy has to be developed. This is primarily so when dealing with organic remains, where slight changes in the soil can cause massive information loss.

This, of course, raises an economic question: monitoring and conservation strategies cost money, and the total cost has to be weighed against (again) the value of the monument on the one hand and the costs of a 'preservation by record' on the other. When dealing with large scale and highly destructive stress situations, such as described by the paper of Murphy & Trow, concerned with the large scale effects of climatic change on the historic environment of the coastline areas, the preservation *in situ* preference is in the main not applicable. Here, sufficient knowledge and research agendas have to develop an efficient framework for 'rescuing' a selection of the archaeological resource by record.

The PARIS publication brings together a lot of novel and practical approaches in developing an archaeological heritage management which is aimed at sustainability. The book should be on the bookshelf of everyone dealing directly with these problems, as it presents a good overview of the different aspects of the problem. Another good step forward would be to create and maintain an international database of projects dealing with these issues.

Nixon, T. Ed. 2004. Preserving archaeological remains *in situ*? Proceedings of the 2nd conference 12-14 September 2001, London. – London, Museum of London Archaeology Service (MOLAS). 264pp. ISBN 1901992365. Price £13.50 (paperback).

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