Debate

Protest against cuts in the public funding of archaeology in Germany

Rengert Elburg
on behalf of the executive and scientific boards of the
Deutsche Gesellschaft für Ur- und Frühgeschichte (DGUF, http://www.dguf.de)

All over Europe, there has been a recent tendency of governments to withdraw funding from the cultural heritage sector. Whereas the ‘polluter pays’ principle for the financing of archaeological excavations has been introduced in many countries, state funding of archaeology and the conservation of built heritage is being reduced. A very recent example of this practice can be observed in the German federal state of North-Rhine Westphalia. Not only is North-Rhine Westphalia the most populous state and has the strongest economy in Germany, contributing over 20% to the GDP, it also is one of the richest in archaeological terms. The internationally well-known sites in the region include the Neander Valley (Neandertal), which gave its name to the humanoid species found there first, the vast areas of fertile loess soil with dense settlement since the Early Neolithic, and the Roman heritage of cities like Xanten, Haltern, and of course, Cologne, capital of the Roman province of Germania Inferior. The cathedrals of Cologne and Aachen/Aix-en-Chapelle are UNESCO World Heritage sites; the Carolingian monastery of Corvey is on the tentative list.

Due to intensive building activity and large-scale extraction of sand and gravel, as well as the exploitation of enormous opencast lignite mines, the archaeology in the region is especially vulnerable. Until recently, North-Rhine Westphalia practiced the ‘polluter pays’ principle on development-driven excavations. This was stopped by a court ruling in 2011 because the principle was not explicitly laid down in the Monuments Law, causing unforeseen and un支持able extra costs for the archaeological services and regional and local governments. The new government of North-Rhine Westphalia, which was elected in 2012, is currently introducing legislation aiming at a better protection of unknown archaeological sites, where the developer pays for excavation costs (reintroducing the ‘polluter pays’ principle), and including a regulation for a state Treasure Trove. At the same time, however, funding of cultural heritage is massively reduced, from € 12 million in 2012 to € 10 million in 2013, with the prospect of a complete stop in 2015.

A well-known problem with developer-driven and -paid archaeology is the fact that only the excavation itself is financed when archaeology is funded in this way. Publication and conservation still have to be paid for from public funds. In addition, the new law demands reliable scientific evidence of potential archaeological sites in advance in order to administer the ‘polluter pays’ principle. This would be feasible only where large scale surveys and mapping can be carried out in advance of the construction works, which would have to be paid for from public funds. Thus, improving the possibilities for archaeology and excavations on the one hand and the severe reduction of public financing on the other hand is a clear contradiction. Another problem caused by the reduction of the budget available for cultural heritage management by a comparatively wealthy state like North-Rhine Westphalia is the devastating signal it sends to less well-off states, that it is perfectly reasonable to withdraw state funding from archaeology.

In order to protest against these funding cuts, the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Ur- und Frühgeschichte/German Society for Pre- and Protohistory (DGUF) has explored new ways to react to political demands and has set up an online petition. This petition can be signed by
the general public, including international supporters. Our aim is to also involve non-specialists, so that the protest does not come only from the few ‘usual suspects’, to avoid the appearance of the protection of special interests. The petition has received a tremendous response: within six weeks, the petition was signed by over 20,000 people, many of whom are leading figures in archaeology and heritage preservation. But more important is the widespread attention by local and national media, as well as the participation of the public at large, which sends out a strong signal to politicians. The adequate funding of archaeology is an issue that concerns everyone, not only archaeologists.

The petition is open for signature until 23 June 2013, and is accessible online: https://www.openpetition.de/petition/online/angekuendigte-streichung-der-landeszuschuesse-fuer-die-archaeologie-und-denkmalpflege-zuruecknehmen.

More information, including an English version of the petition’s original text and a collection of the media’s reactions, can be found on the DGUF website: http://www.dguf.de/index.php?id=243.

Please support the petition, please sign and invite other colleagues to do so.

Without present, without future and now... without past.
For the defence of historical heritage in Madrid

Jaime Almansa-Sánchez,
JAS Arqueología (jasarqueologia@gmail.com)

Over 30 years working under the ‘polluter pays’ principle, not everything went well, but we managed to record and preserve hundreds of archaeological sites threatened by construction works. Now the Spanish government is planning a new rescue excavation law for the Autonomous Region of Madrid – Law 1/13 – to be passed in the coming weeks.

The new law for the historical heritage of the Autonomous Region of Madrid is based on economic and privatizing principles. After an exhaustive analysis of the text, we can say that Madrilenian heritage is left unprotected and in serious danger, at the mercy of speculative interests. The most negative points of the text are:

- Any intervention on protected heritage will remain without opposition, if the administration does not react to building plans. This means an abuse of administrative silence, since the only thing they need to do to approve the destruction of a site is to say nothing.
- Short deadlines are suggested for investors, from one to two months, to inform administration about environmental impact and urban planning processes. Right now, the time span is more than double this length. No new resources in administrative manpower will be given to cope with the shorter time span. So, we go back to the situation that was occurring before the introduction of the polluter pays principle.
- Heritage commissions will remain unheard, muting a qualified voice for the evaluation of interventions on historical compounds and sites. This means that only politicians will decide on heritage, which may intensify corruption in construction approval procedures.
- Special Protection Plans for historic compounds will not be compulsory anymore. Thus, declared historical compounds do not “need” to be protected in town planning.
- According to the Spanish constitution, all archaeological remains are of the public domain, which means they belong to all of us and must be protected by the state. The