

Archaeology and the long-term future

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What is Archaeology?

The study of the past and its remains in the present

1. Studying material remains in order to gain knowledge about the long-term past
2. Reflection about the possibility and meaning of understanding the past in the present



Two applications of archaeology concerning long-term preservation of records, knowledge and memory

1. If and how information, knowledge and meaning of the past has been transmitted to the present
2. How we study and make sense of the past in the present



How information, knowledge and meaning of the past has been transmitted to the present

For example: megalithic tombs over 5,000 years

Very little was actually preserved:

- many were destroyed,
- those surviving experienced frequent changes of meaning and associated knowledge



How information, knowledge and meaning of the past has been transmitted to the present

The lesson to be learned from megalithic tombs over 5,000 years is that information, knowledge and meaning are created in every present.

Historical development is not predictable and full of changes.

How we study and make sense of the past in the present

The discipline of Archaeology is about 150 years old,
with roots maybe twice as old.

We cannot assume the existence of scientific Archaeology
in the long-term future.

David Macaulay, Gas Station, 1978



How we study and make sense of the past in the present

Archaeology is situated in a larger social and cultural context.

The information, knowledge and meaning it generates is necessarily of its own present,

... reflecting that present's perceptions of past and future.



Implications for long-term preservation of records, knowledge and memory

Future societies will make their own decisions. They will have their own perceptions of past and future.

We should continuously engage each present, recognising that historical development is not predictable and full of changes, expecting future societies to make their own decisions.



Implications for long-term preservation of records, knowledge and memory

- Permanent markers for the future are unreliable.
- We need to keep knowledge alive for the short- and medium-term futures, in the long-term.
- We assume that the next generation will re-interpret this knowledge and let it inform its own decisions.



Conclusions

- Even if the half-life of nuclear waste is long we need to act mostly in the short and medium term.
- Every present will make decisions for its own future, reflecting particular perceptions of past and future.



Conclusions: a change of metaphor

- Information, knowledge and meaning of the past cannot be transmitted reliably in the long term.
- From ensuring transmission through an *archaeology of the future* ...



Conclusions: a change of metaphor

- to managing nuclear waste for the continuing benefit of relevant communities as a form of *living heritage*.

Thank you very much!

