

Archaeology and the Natural Environment

EAC Symposium, Vienna, Austria, 24–25 March 2022

Concept Note

Archaeological sites and/or monuments are defined as spatial entities and therefore belong to the environment as humans perceive it. Landscape archaeology and concepts such as “landscape biography” have taught us that our environment has developed in millennia of interaction between humans and nature. In co-evolutionary feedback-loops, human societies adapt to and change their environments. Archaeological sites are also reflections of that principle, and vice versa. Obviously, human activities have effects on the natural environment. Rarely, however, do archaeologists and heritage managers take that “one step further” and view their sites and monuments from the point of view of natural science or nature conservation. To some extent, archaeologists tend to view their findings isolated from the natural environment. The “naturalness” of places or landscapes varies within a wide spectrum. Still, people have always tended to differ strongly between the concept of a supposedly pristine natural environment and the perceived cultivated landscape.

Two (quite straightforward) premises define the overall theme of the symposium:

* Archaeological remains are not merely a “part” of the (otherwise completely “natural”) environment. They have both formed in much the same way as a result of interaction between humans and their environment. Essentially, dealing with archaeological findings (and ultimately archaeological sites and monuments) can help our understanding of how environments evolve and develop.

* Archaeological sites, monuments and built environments demand protection and conservation, which is part of heritage management plans in many countries. When buried archaeology becomes excavated, preserved and presented to the public it begins to play a certain role in the management of our present environment and as (new) habitats for plants and animals. This aspect seems not to have been studied much so far, especially from a non-archaeologist view.

The symposium therefore aims at an interdisciplinary approach. Colleagues from fields of natural science and nature conservation are specifically welcome.

Papers are invited that explore the following areas:

1. Archaeology as habitat – monuments and sites as habitats

This theme focusses on currently preserved sites and monuments and the role they play as habitats for plants and animals. At first glance, this coexistence might seem purely coincidental. Do archaeological sites provide certain environmental conditions that make them especially “good” or “bad” habitats? Do large-scale protected and accessible archaeological landscapes (e.g. archaeological parks), as well as small (or even urban) monuments differ from other natural environments?

2. Archaeology and biodiversity – understanding species introductions, distributions and extinctions over time

Looking beyond today's preserved monuments, archaeological research has contributed greatly to the understanding of past habitats which underwent significant changes especially from the middle to the late Holocene. What conclusion can we draw on the co-evolutionary dynamics, the effects of human activities on the landscape, on flora and fauna? How does the development of land use through history and nowadays correlate with biodiversity? Has human impact on the "pristine" landscape led to a decrease or possibly an increase of biodiversity in certain cases?

3. Archaeological heritage and natural heritage management – conflict or collaboration in protecting nature and archaeology?

While the protection and conservation of archaeological sites and natural heritage have a lot in common, usually both issues are viewed separately on an organizational level. Does the legal and bureaucratic framework of European countries allow for a more integrated approach to the protection of archaeological sites and monuments as well as the natural environment? How do natural conditions (animals, plants) conflict with the protection of archaeological sites? Which noteworthy cases of collaboration and/or conflict have arisen and what can we learn from them?

Possible themes for papers:

1. Archaeology as habitat – monuments and sites as habitats

- In what ways can the design or architecture of a protected and accessible archaeological landscape, with or without visibly preserved ruins (e.g. archaeological park), contribute to making sites better habitats for the natural flora and fauna?
- Are materials and techniques used in the conservation (as well as the presentation) of sites today more sustainable than in past decades, not only for archaeological heritage but also for plants and wildlife?
- In which cases has nature "taken back" preserved sites and monuments? Is this mostly due to neglect, or are there successful examples of gradual, "managed renaturalization" of archaeological sites?
- How do archaeological sites and monuments function as "habitats" for humans? Can authenticity and aesthetics (as well as a sense of "wellbeing" for visitors) find a balance?

2. Archaeology and biodiversity – understanding species introductions, distributions and extinctions over time

- How can we make visible that some of the most valued natural habitats have evolved under human influence since the last ice age?
- Do sites of national/international importance to the study of past environments require special care or conservational concepts?
- How do heritage management and protection strategies react to the results of bio-archaeology and other (mostly "lab based") natural sciences?

3. Archaeological heritage and natural heritage management – conflict or collaboration in protecting nature and archaeology?

- Do some (if any) cultural heritage protection laws in Europe also comprise elements of the natural (i.e. entirely non-man made) environment? On the other hand, are aspects of archaeological heritage management regarded in laws for the protection of nature?

- Apart from (often large-scale) environment impact assessments, can policy makers and other stakeholders rely on best practice cases or other experiences regarding an integrated approach towards archaeology and the natural environment?

- Does field archaeological research respect the natural environment in a sufficient way? Is the “drive for discovery” sometimes stronger than the awareness of sensitive natural places?

- How can the educational presentation/dissemination of archaeology and “nature” work hand in hand within one specific site?

Are there case studies of archaeological sites that are also under nature protection law (e.g. UNESCO world heritage sites that are both natural and cultural heritage): How do the requirements and regulations concerning natural heritage and cultural heritage coincide, differ or even conflict each other – and how is this solved in the case studies?

Key words:

Archaeological heritage, monument protection, natural heritage, nature conservation, habitats, landscape biography, biodiversity, monument protection law, human-nature interaction