Thinking thematically

J. Peter White, University of Sydney

This article is part of the Antiquity coverage of the Fifth World Archaeology Congress (WAC-5), held in Washington DC in June 2003. Please see our other articles from WAC-5

Starting to write this on a high the day after WAC-5 ended, it is easy to see that it has been a worthy successor to previous WAC conferences. Finishing it a month later, I start to worry that WAC conferences may be becoming victims of their own success.

First, the positives. As with previous conferences, there has been a major controversy - in the context of the Iraq invasion, should WAC-5 have been moved to somewhere else? There was global participation, though unequally representative. There was an extraordinary range of papers and discussions in a nicely informal ambience. There was a great end-of-conference dance party.

In the 300 pages of abstracts four main aspects stand out. First and most obvious is 'straight' archaeology, mostly thematic and not areal - agriculture, diasporas, war, rock art, catastrophes, zoos, underwater. Second is management, not only of sites, but landscapes, marketing, teaching and ethics. Third is indigenous perspectives and relations which, although permeating nearly all aspects of WAC's world view, were also specifically discussed. Fourth, and specific to WAC-5, is conservation issues, the result of major participation by the Getty Conservation Institute.

Because of its location, USA participants were by far the largest group, with other large groups coming from UK and Australia. Regrettably, I think, this resulted in some sessions becoming very SAA/SHA-like - 20 minute (or more!) papers filling all session time and obliterating discussion. Herein lie the possible seeds of WAC's self-destruction. After 20 years, it is successful in attracting the world, but will this success allow it to continue to be a successful conference? So now, the problems.

WAC conferences have focussed, since their start, on general themes which have global significance - questions and problems, not data. Keeping to this rubric requires organisers and participants to think thematically and to structure sessions so that discussion and debate can be the focus. One method of doing this is to post papers on the web and allow only 5 minutes for presentation. WAC-5 tried to encourage this by providing outstanding web facilities. For many WAC participants, however, web access is either very expensive or non-existent. Producing all the papers in hard copy, available on arrival, is also expensive, difficult to organise - and who would have time to read them? Neither solution overcomes human sloth, which often results in standard length papers finalised the night before presentation.

Is there a solution? Probably only partially, though awareness by conference organisers that there is a problem will be a start. Session organisers need to be encouraged to plan time and themes for discussion, session chairs need to be brutal in keeping speakers to their allotted time, speakers need to recognise that no-one's views, including their own, justify more time. My basic fear after WAC-5 that WAC is becoming just another conference. I hope the WAC-6 conference and session organisers can plan together, insist that a large conference can be more than papers and prove I'm wrong.

<< Back to WAC-5 page

https://doi.org/10.15184/S2978855200905766 Published online by Cambridge University Press