Organiser themes

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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

I attended my first World Archaeological Congress in June in Washington. It was a wonderful experience in many ways. There were many scholars from around the world whom I could not have met in any other setting, and everyone was very approachable. It was casual, in the very best sense, with session formats that did not consist of a series of talking heads showing slide after slide of statistics, with no chance of interaction. In short, the WAC was full of pros, with just a few cons, both of which I will briefly outline.

I particularly enjoyed the "teaching of archaeology" sessions. These sessions generally involved group participation and quite a lot of discussion. Appropriate to the subject, ideas were not simply presented, but engaged with. In discussions, I am sure that the presenters learned as much from the attendees as the attendees learned from the presenters. What and how we teach in archaeology should be of interest to everyone, especially since we do not teach only future archaeologists, but the general public. Though the sessions were well-attended, I think that teaching and other public archaeologies should be placed in plenary sessions.

There were a number of times I had to decide between two or more sessions, and often between the plenary sessions, where it was the most difficult. I understand the need for concurrent sessions in order to accommodate as many presenters as possible during a limited period, but the plenary sessions should not compete with each other. These are generally the more political sessions, and politics is behind the birth of WAC.

For students and scholars from third world countries, the cost can be prohibitive. There is a good deal of effort made to bring scholars from the third world, as there should be. However, more and more students in the West are coming from lower- or working-class backgrounds than ever, and many of us live on very low financial support. WAC-5 was the first time it was financially feasible for me to go, but the registration fees, travel, and accommodations are enough to put many students in debt. It is important to the WAC to be representative not only of scholars from around the world, but also of the range of socio-economic classes involved in archaeological inquiry.

Every paper I attended was given in English. This was problematic partly because many papers given by non-native speakers were difficult to understand and the presenters were unable to participate in discussion without help from a colleague. Language can be a dividing factor as much as economics. Scholars who are not comfortable with English should take advantage of WAC's translation services or project a translation. Native English speakers, especially those that work in non-English speaking countries should translate their papers into the language of their study area, and those could be similarly projected.

I would like to see a block of time, perhaps a day, to address issues of world archaeological heritage, without competition. I was giving a paper during a session about the archaeology of Afghanistan, which I would have been interested in attending. During a presentation about Iraq, there was also a session about interactions between feminist and indigenous archaeologies. WAC could choose a theme for each congress, such as the cultural looting of Iraq; the effect of war in the protection of archaeological heritage; the appropriation of archaeology in the service of political power; or the place of women and ethnic or political minorities in archaeological inquiry around the world. The theme should have relevance to the country in which the Congress is held and involve the non-archaeological public. In association with the theme, there should be press conferences to publicise the issues raised or resolutions passed. A name like "World

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Archaeological Congress" should attract a lot of attention from major press services. Some potential presenters did not come to WAC this year in protest of United States foreign policy, particularly in Iraq. Their absence did not change anything, but their noisy presence might have turned a few heads.

Of the issues I raised, the political aspect is the most important for WAC to focus on. The others may be attacked by individuals or in a piecemeal fashion, but only an organised effort of the Congress will bring political issues to the attention of archaeologists and the general public. WAC-5 was an amazing conference; I hope in four years it will be even better.

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