

UNESCO

According to The Times (15/11/84), Britain is about to hand in the required one year's notice and withdraw from UNESCO, thus following the example of the USA who are due to withdraw at the end of 1984. It seems timely then to review the work of UNESCO in relation to archaeology and ethnology, and assess the issue of withdrawal from this point of view.

Conservation and Excavation

One of UNESCO's functions set by its Constitution is the conservation of world heritage, including the protection of "cultural monuments of outstanding value for the whole of humanity". This, together with its role in promoting international cooperation, has led to valuable conservation and excavation work which would not otherwise have been possible.

One of UNESCO's major roles is to launch and coordinate appeals for the salvage of threatened sites, as has been the case of Nubia, Venice, Borabaduro, Carthage, Mohenjodaro, the Acropolis and Sukhothai. However, these appeals are not always successful; Mohenjodaro has been the aim of two appeals, in 1974 and 1983. At the request, and with the full cooperation, of the country where the site is located, UNESCO will facilitate the project and appeal to other member states, specialist, non-governmental organisations as well as individuals to provide financial aid, technical skills and other services. The extent of the practical role of UNESCO varies with the nature and size of the project but it is generally able to assist with funds, consultants and services as required. The scale of the projects vary some involving just restoration, others involving extensive excavation. This was the case with Nubia and Carthage.

Here many archaeological teams from both sides of the political divide in Europe worked side-by-side in the field, providing a rare opportunity for meeting outside conference rooms.

It is doubtful whether even restoration plans such as those for Borabaduro could have taken place without some form of international help. At the present time, aid as a whole is being curtailed by many traditionally generous governments, and direct aid for cultural purposes is having to compete with more immediate necessities. This, unfortunately, is coinciding with a period when the pressure on primary economic resources in Third World countries is threatening many valuable sites. Hence, the need for a well supported organisation with UNESCO's aims and functions seems to be even greater than ever.

In the case of the Nubia and Carthage projects, whose scale and urgency are well-known, the existence of an international organisation was a necessity. To achieve this degree of international participation, it takes a multilateral organisation which is respected by countries with different political outlooks. Thus, in effect, it must be affiliated to, or closely associated with, the United Nations. Also, being part of the UN network enables UNESCO to operate in conjunction with other UN organisations. For example, this was the case with the conservation and recording of the Katmandu temples, which involved the Nepalese government and the United Nations Development Programme.

Return of Antiquities

Many UNESCO members have gained their independence during recent decades and, as a result, have been becoming increasingly aware of the need to affirm their cultural identity as a means of providing themselves with a

'history' which is unconnected with, and often overlooked by, the Colonial powers. This 'history' serves to reconcile traditional and modern values and thus provides an indispensable basis upon which economic development can take place.

There has been growing pressure from Third World countries for the return of antiquities but, with the notable exception of Belgium and Zaire's accord over tribal art, there has been very little agreement between the parties involved. As a result, UNESCO decided to set up the "Intergovernmental committee for promoting the return of cultural property to its country of origin or its restitution in the case of illicit appropriation" to act as a referee between the parties concerned and to work towards achieving the goals outlined in its (characteristically long-winded) title.

It has been recognised that this can only take place if the countries involved know what there is to be returned and where it is now held. However, the countries most concerned with regaining their property often do not have the money or expertise to do this research. Therefore, one of the main tasks of the above mentioned Committee has been to arrange for the preparation of inventories of objects held outside their countries of origin. Inventories are drawn up by specialists for two organisations, ICOM and ICME, which collaborate with, or are under contract to, UNESCO. Publication is also the responsibility of UNESCO.

In accordance with this plan, an inventory of African collections held outside Africa has been made on the basis of published books and museum catalogues. Also being compiled are inventories of collections in the museums of the Pacific region. The second phase

of the inventory of Oceanian collections in Australian museums was being prepared in 1983 and the inventory of Oceanian artefacts in US museums was initiated in the same year. UNESCO has also contributed towards the publication costs of the survey of Oceanian collections in the museums of the UK and Ireland. If this material is to be returned, there is the need not only for adequate curation but also for the provision of trained personnel. These objections are often put forward by the retaining countries. Therefore, in conjunction with the UNDP, UNESCO has set up in a regional centre for training Museum personnel in Niamey (Niger).

Many countries regard the current illicit traffic of antiquities as more of a serious problem than the return of artefacts from other museums. UNESCO drew up a Convention in 1978 as a response to this problem but it has not been ratified by many countries and is still largely ineffective. It is important to stress that the return of cultural property does not contradict the principle of the worldwide value of works of art and architecture which is enshrined in the principles of UNESCO. This is because the acceptance that an object is part of the 'universal heritage' does not over-ride the notion that that it is also closely related to other objects at and a particular location in time and space, giving it an important historical dimension. Before the exchange of cultural objects from one country to another can take place, they must obviously be available in museums in all parts of the world. Unfortunately, the great majority of objects are found in the museums of the northern hemisphere; relatively few artefacts originating from the south are to be found in museums south of the equator, one exception being the Maori collections in Australia. The number of artefacts from the

north in museums collections in the south is even smaller. Only after this imbalance is redressed will a truly international exchange programme become possible.

Dissemination

The dissemination of knowledge is one of the functions set out in UNESCO's constitution. This is done at various levels and by various means. The setting up of major exhibitions, drawing material from many museums throughout the world, is a major task which can only be achieved by the kind of organisational ability on an international scale which is provided by UNESCO. These exhibitions take place in the cities of the northern hemisphere, in particular Paris. Although this geographical bias can be criticised, it nonetheless promotes an awareness of the richness of other cultures amongst the public of these countries. Therefore, it may be a good way of promoting the cause of the return of objects to their countries of origin.

This campaign of dissemination is also being pursued through Features and Museum, two specialist journals published by UNESCO. At the level of popular dissemination, the UNESCO Courier covers all the fields with which the organisation is concerned, including archaeology, history and conservation. It is probably, therefore, the widest circulated magazine of its type, being translated into 26 languages and also into Braille. For many people in the Third World it is their only source of information on science, education and culture. Hence, it provides a 'window to the world' and promotes people's awareness of their heritage and hopefully its conservation.

UNESCO deals with the publication of the museum inventories already mentioned, museum and conservation handbooks, as well as

books on world heritage. The most important publication in this latter respect is the multi-volume work The General History of Africa comprising short papers, commissioned from experts, dealing with such topics as methodology and human evolution all the way through to 20th century history. It has clearly fulfilled what many have perceived as a serious gap in African studies.

Commentary

UNESCO has been deservedly criticised for being bureaucratic, over-centralised, financially inefficient with frequently ill-defined programmes which run over budget. This year two reports, one by a UNESCO programme evaluation group and the other by the American Accounting Office, have been critical of the way in which UNESCO is run. As a result, UNESCO's Executive Board has approved a series of measures designed to eradicate these errors (including: closer involvement between the General Conference and the Executive Board, clarification of budget procedures, acceleration of staff recruitment, decentralisation of posts from Paris and clarification of the next programme and its budget). UNESCO should, therefore, be given the opportunity to show that it is responsible and responsive, since it is an organisation with immense potential.

Such potential is apparent in the purposes for which it was originally founded. Britain was among the 22 founder members of the UNESCO whose first Director General, Sir Julian Huxley, was a major influence in the outline of its philosophy. UNESCO's purpose has remained largely unchanged: to contribute to peace and security in the world by promoting collaboration among the member nations through education, science and culture. As a founder member, Britain undersigned this principle

at UNESCO's foundation and there is no reason, why 38 years later, it should be hostile to it to such an extent as to withdraw from the organisation.

At the practical level, UNESCO is the only truly international forum of intellectual exchange capable of overcoming political barriers, a condition which is necessary if it is to be practical. Taking the examples of the Nubia and Carthage campaigns, few archaeologists would doubt the relevance of such projects and the important role played by UNESCO in making them possible. For many poor countries, UNESCO fulfills a variety of roles which, in wealthier countries like Britain, are often provided by government-financed bodies which these countries cannot afford. If Britain were to withdraw, the move could be seen as denying the principal of international cooperation.

It is also difficult to deny UNESCO's range of publications. The publication of handbooks provides a basic source of practical and concise information on education, science and culture and are often used by educational institutions in the Third World.

Rather than withdrawing outright from UNESCO, Britain should stay within it and assure that the reforms outlined above are carried out. In this way it would maintain an active voice in the international forums of education, culture and science provided by UNESCO. Continued membership would also see that the results of the better management of resources are used for worthwhile projects which have been waiting for attention.

The combination of the unprecedented need to preserve the world's heritage, and a more efficient UNESCO which should mean that more of this type of programmes will become possible, is an exciting prospect for all those interested in preservation and excavation. The return of cultural property to its country of origin and the provision of safe museum installations and trained staff, should provide not only some sense of history for the countries concerned but will also provide the basis for truly international exchange. This will, undoubtedly, help to promote international consensus.

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The Gallery of World Prehistory and Local Archaeology, University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge: A Review

Background

A hundred years ago, in May 1884, the Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology first opened its doors. It moved to its present site in Downing Street in 1910, and since then its collections have more than doubled in extent. It now houses over half a million specimens, much of them acquired through fieldwork by such pioneers as Captain James Cook,

A.C. Haddon and Grahame Clark, and receives visits from researchers from all over the world, as well as about 17,000 members of the public annually.

By 1970 it was realised that the museum would have to be completely reorganised to alleviate the great storage problem that had arisen. In 1974, under the curatorship of Peter Gathercole, the museum was effectively sliced in two, with all the former exhibition galleries in the south section of the museum becoming storage and research areas and half of the collections, notably European post-