A European View of Selecting for Archaeological Archives

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Abstract

This paper examines the issues around selecting for archaeological archives, including the reasons for doing so, how selection fit into a project and the methodological framework. The context is 'Making Choices', a project of the Europae Archaeologiae Consilium that is looking at how all choices are made across archaeological practice, while the foundations are provided by existing standards for archiving and for selection.

Keywords: Archaeological Archives, Selection, Standards

Introduction

In recent times, it is possible to see an increasing emphasis on the necessity for the compilation process for archaeological archives to include an element of selection, where the amount of material retained for long-term curation is pared down to achieve an optimal size. The impetus for development has been driven by pressure on archive repositories, or museum stores, where space is at a premium and archaeological projects are understood to be producing more material than can, or should, be accessioned. The reasoning is that if selection is more rigorous then the size of an archive would be smaller and thus more manageable. This paper, based on a short presentation given at the EAA conference in Maastricht in August 2017, examines this issue from various perspectives and introduces an initiative that aims to provide guidance on selection procedures.

Three questions around selection will be considered: why select, including both academic and pragmatic perspectives; when to carry out selection, with an emphasis on project planning and management; how to select, including the personnel involved and methodological approaches.

Before proceeding it may be useful to define the term 'archaeological archive'. The most current definition is to be found in 'A Standard and Guide to Best Practice in Archaeological Archiving in Europe', produced by the EU funded project 'Archaeological Resources in Cultural Heritage: a European Standard', otherwise known as ARCHES and published by the Europae Archaeologiae Consilium as EAC Guidelines No1[1]:

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[1] Perrin et al. *A Standard and Guide to Best Practice for Archaeological Archiving in Europe*, EAC Guidelines 1, 2014.

> *An archaeological archive comprises all records and material objects re-*
> *covered during an archaeological project and identified for long term pre-*
> *servation, including artefacts, ecofacts and other environmental remains,*
> *waste products, scientific samples and also written and visual document-*
> *ation in paper, film and digital form.*

One important element of that definition is that it relates an archaeological archive to a project, thus promoting the notion that every aspect of the project process must include an archive element. The effects of this may be understood in light of the three issues considered in this paper.

Why

Selection is seen as a way of reducing the size of the archives submitted for long-term curation, thus reducing the rate at which storage space is being filled. The necessity for achieving that ambition is shown in a survey funded by Historic England and conducted by the Society for Museum Archaeology (SMA; formerly the Society of Museum Archaeologists) in 2016, which shows the state of museum collecting in England and points up the pressure on current storage provision (SMA 2016). The project consisted of a survey of all museums with archaeology collections in England, seeking to establish if they are still collecting archaeological archives and if so, on the basis of the space remaining in their stores, how much longer they might continue to do so. The overall response, from a sample of 154 museums, shows that out of that number, 35 have stopped collecting archaeological archives, while 61 estimate that existing space in their stores will have been filled within five years. A further sixteen museums estimate that their stores will be full within ten years. The conclusion is that by 2027, 112 museums out of 154 will no longer be able to collect archaeological archives unless new storage provision is made. The scale of the problem in England illustrates why selecting for archives is now being actively considered as a way of slowing the rate at which storage space is filling up.

A reason however, is not an objective, and a more academic approach to selection may be found in what is now a somewhat aged guideline document, 'Selection, Retention and Dispersal of Archaeological Collections'[2]:

> *The purpose of selection should be:*
> - *to enable a mass of finds and data to be quantified and interrogated more*
>   *effectively*
> - *to remove material of no perceivable information value and/or intrinsic*
>   *interest*

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[2]   Society of Museum Archaeologists (SMA), 1993, *Selection, Retention and Dispersal of Archaeological Collections.*

- *to distil the information, research and utility values of an archive into a manageable and cost-efficient archive, without compromising the archive's integrity.*

A further objective is set out in the forthcoming international archaeological archive standard written by the Archaeological Sites Working Group of CIDOC, the International Committee for Documentation of ICOM, the International Council of Museums (CIDOC, forthcoming). The Working Group has established a distinction between a working project archive and the preserved archive:

- *Working Project Archive: all the documentation and physical items gathered during an archaeological project.*
- *Preserved Archive: elements selected from the working project archive for curation beyond the duration of a project.*

If this distinction becomes accepted then it is clear that one purpose of selection is to produce the Preserved Archive. The value of the Preserved Archive is that it comprises everything that has the potential to inform future academic research and public enquiry. Potential, therefore, is what should govern the selection process. With that as a starting point, it should be straightforward enough to understand selection as a positive act, not predicated on the assumption that some objects or materials will inevitably be 'de-selected', or in common parlance 'discarded', but a process aimed at determining which of the collected archive components has potential. It is therefore possible to develop a selection strategy that results in every record and object being compiled into the final project archive, and there is no imperative to reduce the size of the archive simply for the sake of doing so.

When

It seems obvious perhaps that creation of the Preserved Archive will happen at the end of a project, just before transfer into long-term curatorial care. That, however, is difficult to achieve unless it is a stated aim of the project from the outset and work is planned accordingly. The EAC Standard includes sections on selection that cover how the process should be managed during the course of a project, from the development of a selection strategy as part of project planning, to archive compilation prior to deposition:

> *A selection strategy should be agreed at the project planning stage. This should set out the criteria for selecting records, documents, data files and materials (finds) for inclusion in the project archive[3]; the selection*

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[3] Perrin et al. *A Standard and Guide…*, 25.

strategy should be kept under regular review. This is especially useful at the stage where finds assemblages are evaluated for their potential for analysis and again during analysis when a secondary selection process may be undertaken… [4]

That is largely based on an extended section on selection that was introduced in 2011 into 'Archaeological Archives'[5], the 2007 publication from the Archaeological Archives Forum (AAF) in the United Kingdom. That document describes the selection process and attributes particular tasks to specific individuals throughout the course of an archaeological project. It is a useful guide to the roles required to produce the Preserved Archive.

How

The EAC Standard states that

A selection strategy should be drawn up with input from all the relevant members of the project team, including specialists and the curator of the repository or repositories into which the final archive will be received, and also that it should *set out how things that have not been selected for archive will be dispersed or discarded*[6].

The Standard also makes provision for reviewing the selection strategy through the data-gathering and analysis stages of a project:

- *The selection and retention strategy should be flexible and open to amendment; for example the discovery of unexpected finds or stratigraphy may affect the decision about what was previously identified for dispersal.*
- *It is important that the selection and retention strategy is reviewed against the project research or management objectives as the project progresses and that any changes to the selection and retention strategy are recorded and agreed by all concerned, including the recipient repository. Selection and discard should not lead to any substantial loss of information which detracts from the project research or management objectives.*

Selection is therefore an ongoing process throughout the course of a project. This is the most effective way of establishing potential and ensuring that selection leads to the creation of the Preserved Archive.

The SMA Guidelines on selection suggest that the selection process should be based on the following criteria:

- retaining key assemblages intact

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[4] Perrin et al. *A Standard and Guide…*, 33.

[5] D.H. Brown, *Archaeological Archives. A guide to best practice in curation, compilation, transfer and curation* Archaeological Archives Forum, 2011.

[6] Perrin et al. *A Standard and Guide…*, 25.

- retaining whole assemblages from well-documented or key contexts
- the validity of the retrieval and recording methods used
- statistical viability
- possible suitability for future analysis with new research or analytical techniques
- whether objects have been illustrated in publications[7].

It should be re-iterated that the SMA guidelines are intended for museum curators wishing to determine the validity of archaeological material already in their collection, so application during the course of a project is somewhat problematic because archaeological project management is not often aligned with the ethical codes of museum practice. The criteria for decision-making are sound, however, and if they are followed, it may be possible to achieve the fundamental aim of selection during a project: the production of a Preserved Archive that has the potential to inform future use.

This rationale is further supported in the UK document 'A Standard for Pottery Studies in Archaeology'[8] where the need for selection is, cautiously, recognized:

> 2.1.2 *During project planning the project manager must:*
> - *consult with the identified pottery specialist to develop a strategy for the collection, sampling, selection*
>
> 2.1.3 *A project design must include:*
> - *An archive selection strategy for all recovered material, in accordance with the requirements of the project archive repository*
> - *Selection strategies must therefore be agreed between the project executive, the project manager, appropriate specialists and the repository curator.*
> - *Selection should be based on the premise that every pottery find has the potential to inform future research and a strong case has to be made for not selecting pottery for archive.*

It is clearly beneficial for selection to be included in specialist standards or guidelines, where specific requirements for types of finds can be set out in detail, so this is therefore a model that is worth taking further.

Both the AAF guide and the EAC Standard promote the development of a selection strategy at the outset of a project, but there are very few existing examples of that having happened, and equally few instances of selection being updated as work progresses. The CIfA in the UK are initiating a project

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[7]   SMA 1993, 24.
[8]   PCRG (Prehistoric Ceramics Research Group), SGRP (Study Group for Roman Pottery), MPRG (Medieval Pottery Research Group) *A Standard for Pottery Studies in Archaeology,* 2016.

to produce a template for a selection strategy that could be used in all forms of archaeological projects. If successful, it could be used to inform the future work of the EAC Working Group for Archaeological Archives (EACWGAA).

Making choices

The theme of the EAC symposium in 2017 was Making Choices in Heritage Management. The Archaeological Archives Working Group is supporting this through an investigation into approaches to selection for archives in participating states across Europe. The first stage in this project is to conduct a questionnaire survey that seeks to cover issues relating to selection, ownership, storage conventions, rationale, methodology and sustainability. Ownership is important because selection can only take place if it is legally permissible to dispose of archive materials. The survey will therefore begin by investigating the variety of archive ownership structures currently in place. Through an examination of storage conventions, such as what types of repository curate archaeological archives and how it is decided which stores will collect an archive, the survey will consider how selection is related to the aims of curatorial institutions. Once the framework for selection is understood, the rationale can be considered, and the survey will put forward questions concerning the reasons for selection and the ways in which selection strategies are developed. The methodology of the selection process, in terms of who develops selection strategies and how they are created and carried out, will also be covered by the survey. The final theme is that of sustainability, where the survey will seek to establish if anyone has conducted research into the impact of selection. Has there been, for instance, any research into how a properly selected archive might be used for academic or curatorial purposes?

The aim of the survey is to gain an insight into how selection is organised and understood, with the hope that this will help the EACWGAA to produce guidance as a supplement to the EAC/ARCHES standard. The aim is to promote the principle that archive creation is a commitment to producing a resource for the future. It is possible therefore to conclude that an archaeological archive, or the 'preserved archive,' should comprise elements selected from the working project archive for curation beyond the duration of a project. It is important also to promote the following requirements for archive selection and collection. Selection criteria must be based on:

- potential to inform future research
- potential for use in further analysis
- potential for use in museum activities.

Selection criteria must NOT be based on:

- demands of storage space
- economic resources
- commercial considerations.

All of this has to be underpinned by a shared recognition that the future of archaeology is informed by what we do in the present.
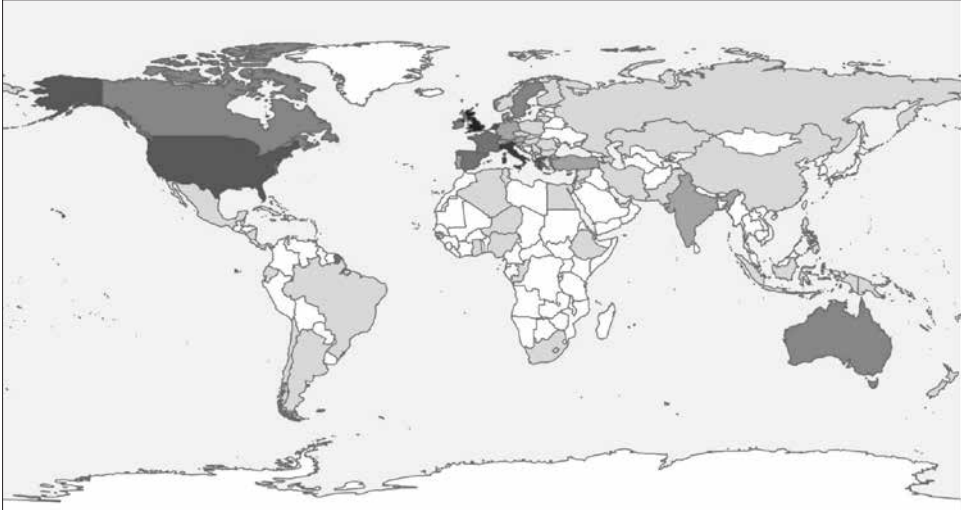
Figure 1. World-wide awareness levels of the ARCHES Standard, where high awareness is indicated by the darkness of the colours.

Rezumat

Această lucrare discută câteva probleme legate de tema selecției pentru arhivele arheologice, inclusiv motivele și raționamentele pentru a opera această selecție, modul în care selecția respectivă se potrivește unui proiect arheologic, precum și cadrul metodologic al acestui proces. Contextul imediat pentru acest studiu este proiectul 'Making Choices', inițiat de către Europae Archaeologiae Consilium. Proiectul cercetează, cum anume sunt efectuate diverse alegeri și cum se iau deciziile în domeniu la toate nivelurile practicii arheologice. În același timp, aspectele fundamentale ale acestor procese sunt condiționate de standardele existente în domeniul arhivării și selecției arheologice.

Cuvinte-cheie: arhive arheologice, selecție, standarde.