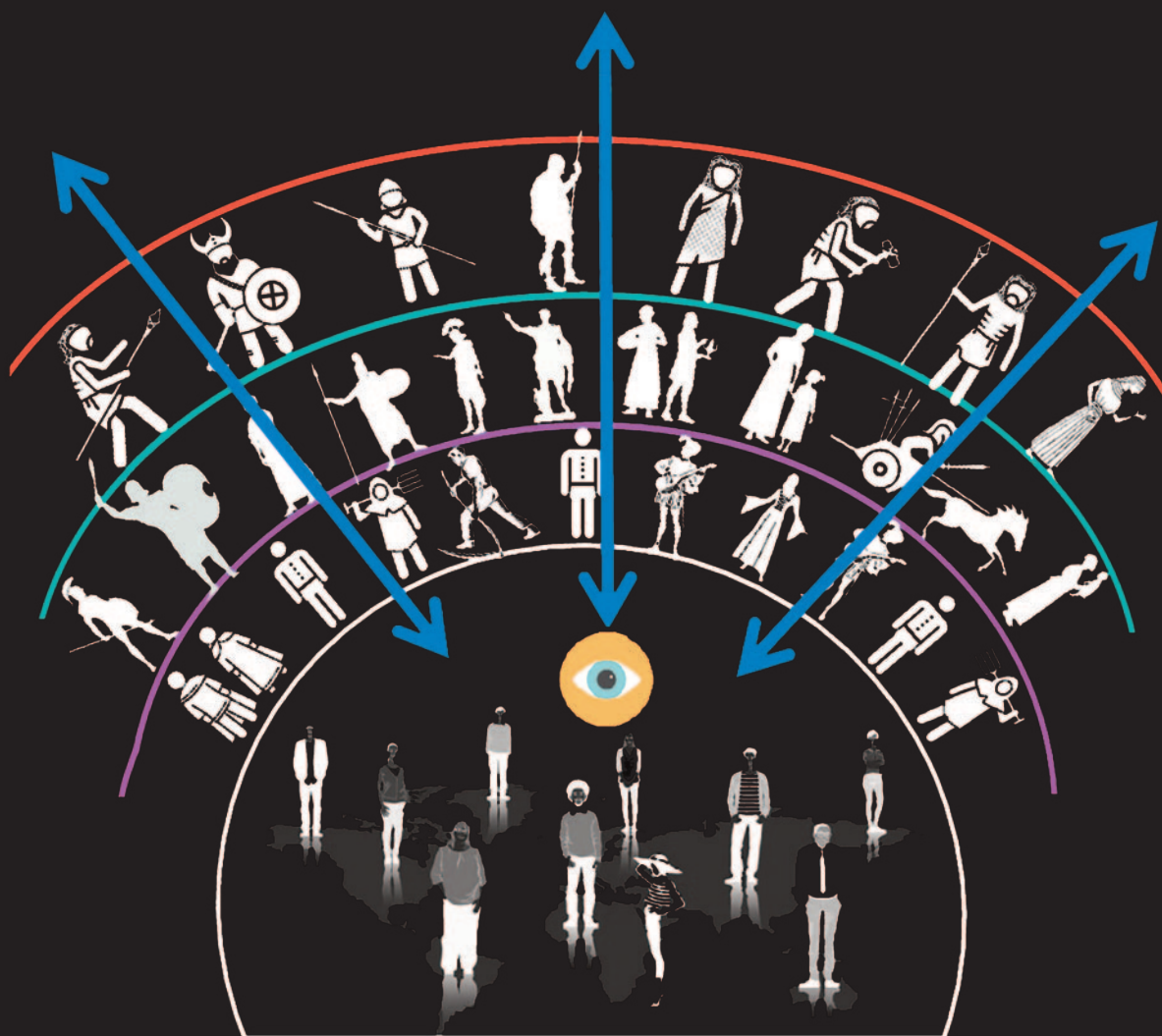


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Jean-Paul Demoule*

French archaeology: for whom, but also against whom?

1. Introduction

In France, archaeology played only a very minor role in the formation of the national identity within the establishment of the nation-state. Indeed, the official history of France, at least as it is recounted in texts, begins with a defeat, that of the Gauls at Alesia in the year 52 BCE, which put an end to the independence of the Gallic peoples. But Gaul, now Roman, was defeated again, this time by the Frankish soldiers of Clovis, who seized the territory and converted to Christianity in the process at the end of the 5th century CE. But the Franks in turn, in a third historic defeat, disappeared, this time not militarily but culturally, since French is not a Germanic language (the Franks spoke Frankish) but is largely descended from Latin. In just a few generations, the 100,000 or so Franks would dissolve into the mass of romanised Gauls, estimated at around ten million, or a hundred times more.

2. Persistent disdain

So, from the Ancien Régime onwards, the Gauls were not really 'our ancestors'. The kings of France claimed descent from a certain Francion or Francus, a survivor of the Trojan War, because the Iliad is also the oldest European text. French aristocrats, for their part, claimed to be descended in direct line from the Frankish warriors of Clovis, just like the Spanish aristocrats claimed descent from the Visigoth warriors who had once conquered the Iberian Peninsula. During the French Revolution, in his famous speech *Qu'est-ce que le Tiers-État (What is the Third Estate?)*, Abbé Siéyès proposed sending the nobility "back to

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the forests of Franconia”, as they were nothing more than “savages who had come out of the woods and ponds of ancient Germania” (Siéyès [1789] 2009). At the beginning of the 19th century, there was indeed a ‘Celtomaniac’ movement that glorified the Celts and interpreted the megalithic dolmens as sacrificial tables on which bloodthirsty druids immolated young virgins, but this literature had much more to do with romanticism than national identity (Reinach 1898; Piggott 1937).

This disdain for origins had a direct impact on the lack of interest in archaeological remains on French soil (Gran-Aymerich 1998; Hurel 2007; Schnapp 2020; Demoule, Schnapp 2024). If the Middle Ages attached no importance to ancient monuments other than as stone quarries, the Renaissance did little better, despite its rediscovery of Greco-Roman literature and philosophy. There were only a few exceptions, such as the decree issued in 1548 by Anne de Montmorency, Governor of Languedoc and companion of King François 1st. With reference to the Roman remains in the city of Nimes, he prohibited “all owners of ancient houses from demolishing the said antiquities, nor from constructing any new building that might cover or hide these antiquities” (Lemerle 2005, p. 55). There were also the notables of Arles, not far from Nimes, who collected the Roman antiquities discovered in the town to form a sort of museum and gradually bought up the individual houses that had covered the Roman amphitheater to begin restoring it.

With the French Revolution and the emergence of national sentiment, a more pressing concern arose, albeit without a future. In 1799, Pierre Legrand d’Aussy proposed drawing up an exhaustive inventory of all the ancient tombs discovered on French soil, to be accompanied by excavations. However, he wanted to exclude Roman tombs because “they belong neither to the customs of our fathers nor to their industry, and for us they are merely foreign monuments, erected on our soil by a conquering people according to their arts and customs” (Legrand d’Aussy 1799). At the same time, the Revolution created a short-lived *Musée des monuments français*, under the direction of the painter Auguste Lenoir. This museum brought together various statues and fragments of architecture seized from aristocrats on the run or during the demolition of symbolic monuments. But with the Restoration and the return of King Louis XVIII, the museum was dissolved and its works returned. In 1793, the revolutionary government had also opened the royal collections to the public in the form of the *Muséum central des arts de la République*, housed in the Louvre, the nationalised royal palace. But these collections mainly comprised paintings and also statues from Greco-Roman antiquity. This remains the vocation of the Louvre, which contains almost no objects from France. The Orient, Greece and Rome were felt to be the true cultural roots of the French elites of the 19th and 20th centuries.

3. Archaeology and national identity

After several unsuccessful attempts in the first half of the 19th century, in 1858 Emperor Napoleon III set up the *Commission de Topographie des Gaules*, a commission tasked with identifying archaeological sites and carrying out excavations, and in 1862 a Gallo-Roman museum, which later became the current *Musée d'archéologie nationale*. The emperor was writing a book on the life of Julius Caesar. But this archaeological interest also reflected the desire to base his power on a sense of national identity. He also restored universal male suffrage, which he had abolished when he took power in a military coup. However, the new museum was set up in a remote residential suburb inside a heavily restored former royal castle, and it never attracted the public or the funding it might have deserved – just until now (Demoule 2024). Under the same Napoleon III, the city of Paris was completely remodeled by Baron Hausmann, prefect for almost twenty years. Under his leadership, 60% of traditional Paris was destroyed, yet archaeological salvage excavations were few and far between.

Under the Third Republic, the Gauls finally became 'our ancestors'. In fact, the new regime was born out of a defeat, Napoleon III's defeat at Sedan in 1870, a defeat that in a way repeated Alesia and made Alesia more acceptable. In addition, the Third Republic had embarked on colonial conquests, which Alesia enabled it to justify. Since the Romans had conquered and 'civilised' Gaul, the French, descendants of the Gauls, were now in the process of 'civilising' the people of Africa. This is what school textbooks explain to schoolchildren. However, the archaeology of France was not helped by this. French institutes, dealing in whole or in part with archaeology, were set up in Athens in 1846, in Rome in 1875, in Cairo in 1880 and again in Damascus in 1922 (Gran-Aymerich, Gran-Aymerich 1990). But there was nothing similar in France. In its Maghreb colonies, the colonial administration introduced archaeological legislation, with public ownership of archaeological finds. But in France itself, a draft law-making archaeological excavations subject to authorisation was abandoned in the face of opposition from learned societies. In fact, most of the excavations carried out in France were carried out by amateur archaeologists, usually at their own expense, and they claimed to preserve 'freedom of research'.

It was not until the authoritarian regime of Pétain during the German occupation that a law was passed in 1941, admittedly prepared before the war, making excavations subject to authorisation, a process made all the easier by the fact that there was no longer a parliament (Negri, Schlanger 2024). Pétain also tried to use the Gauls to his advantage and organised a grand ceremony at Gergovie, the site of the only victorious battle between the Gauls and Caesar, reviewing the French Volunteers Legion, i.e. the French troops who were to help the German army fight the Russian army. He claimed that, just as the Roman conquest had

created a new and brilliant civilisation in Gaul, the so-called Gallo-Roman civilisation, the same thing should happen if France collaborated effusively with the German invader.

4. The three disastrous decades

The years following World War II were no better for national archaeology. Enthusiastic economists dubbed this period the 'Thirty Glorious Decades' (in reference to the three days known as the 'Three Glorious Days' that had ousted King Charles X in 1830). 'Glorious' for the economy, these three decades were disastrous for archaeology. The need to rebuild the country opened up construction sites everywhere. The first major network of motorways was built without any rescue excavations, whereas now, on average, a major archaeological site is discovered every kilometer during systematic surveys along future routes.

This disastrous situation deeply moved the younger generations of archaeologists from the 1970s onwards. A militant magazine was created, *Les Nouvelles de l'Archéologie*. Strikes, street demonstrations and illegal occupations of buildings were organised on a regular basis. At the same time, public opinion was changing. Long indifferent to the destruction, it began to take an interest in the past with the economic crisis of the 1970s. The future no longer seemed as bright as previously thought, and people began to look to history for lessons and landmarks. The destruction of spectacular sites such as the ancient Greek port of Marseille, the medieval cemetery of Orléans, the Roman quarters of Lyon and the Gallo-Roman sanctuary of Bourbonne-les-Bains aroused public opinion and were considered 'scandals'. In 1985, President Mitterrand launched a vast programme of excavations at the Mont Beuvray site in central France, the site of Bibracte, the capital of the Aedui people of Gaul and the place where Julius Caesar began to write his account of the Gallic War (*De bello gallico*). When he inaugurated this programme, completed by the construction of a museum dedicated to Celtic archaeology, he gave a major speech on history and national identity.

Developers began, on their own initiative and without any legal obligation, to finance salvage excavations in some cases, which were beginning to be anticipated before work began and were therefore described as 'preventive'. This term is misleading in English, where 'to prevent' can mean to *prevent*, and therefore *not to do*, whereas in French it means to anticipate destruction and organise accordingly.

Finally, in 2001, a law on preventive archaeology was passed by Parliament (Demoule, Landes 2009). It obliged developers to pay the cost of preventive excavations, provided for the organisation of preliminary surveys in all areas where archaeological sites might be found, and created an institute for all operations,

the *Institut national de recherches archéologiques préventives* (INRAP), of which I was the first president. Unfortunately, the parliamentary majority changed the following year, and the new conservative majority decided to introduce the principle of commercial competition for preventive excavations. A number of MPs and senators made very violent speeches against preventive archaeology (Demoule 2013, pp. 237-239) and succeeded in getting commercial competition introduced.

5. Archaeological heritage and commercial competition

In practical terms, this meant that alongside public bodies such as INRAP, municipal archaeological services and even universities, private companies could be set up and compete for the 'market' of the preventive excavations. Even though these private companies had to be approved by the Ministry of Culture, it was the developer himself who chose the archaeological contractor and was obviously inclined to take the quickest and cheapest. This decision by the Conservative parliamentary majority was certainly in line with its ideological worldview; but it also demonstrated the perpetuation of this lack of interest in the national archaeological heritage that we have seen constantly present since the beginning.

Opening up the preventive archaeological excavation 'market' to competition has clearly not been beneficial. It has forced all those involved to charge low prices, to the detriment of archaeologists' salaries and working time in the field and for post-excavation scientific studies. Obviously, it is the time spent on studies that has suffered most, even though it is the very *raison d'être* of archaeology to transform the excavations into historical interpretations. As a result, the products of excavations are piled up in large sheds all over France, waiting to be properly studied. What's more, the diversity of those involved means that there is no unified system of documentation (Demoule 2011, 2020).

At present, it is estimated that total funding for preventive archaeology amounts to around €250 millions, and that excavations are divided roughly between half for Inrap and a quarter for local authorities and private companies. The total number of professional archaeologists in France is around 4,500, of whom around 80% work in preventive archaeology.

6. Growing public interest

The current situation in France is therefore mixed. At the beginning of the 1970s, there were around 600 professional archaeologists, the majority of whom worked on sites abroad, and rescue archaeology on national territory was car-

ried out by amateur archaeologists with very little funding. We can therefore consider that considerable progress has been made. On the other hand, apart from the serious problems caused by commercial competition, the professionalisation of archaeology has led to the virtual disappearance of amateur archaeologists. Yet they could be very useful ‘whistle-blowers’ when it came to pointing out ongoing archaeological destruction. What’s more, archaeology, properly supervised by professional archaeologists, can also be a ‘citizen science’, i.e. practised by amateurs, as is the case with meteorology or astronomy.

As soon as INRAP was set up, it became clear that one of the problems with preventive archaeology was that the public did not see concrete results. As the mayor of a large town once told me, “We’re robbed, but we get nothing back”. In practical terms, developers paid for preventive excavations, but there was no return for the public, who therefore saw no point in it. INRAP has therefore made great efforts, in partnership with museums, to publish a large number of accessible publications and to organise exhibitions, including both nationally (Malrain, Poux 2011; Catteddu, Noizet 2016) and regionally. In 2010, INRAP created the National Archaeology Days, which became the European Archaeology Days in 2020 and take place every year on a weekend in June. In France itself, these days bring together more than 200,000 people for visits to archaeological sites in progress, exhibitions and various lectures.

Interest in archaeology has also prompted some towns and *départements* (counties) to create and develop archaeological services, in particular to carry out any preventive excavations on their own territory, but also to respond to this interest on the part of their electors. From this point of view, these services constitute a kind of local archaeology (‘archéologie de proximité’) for the public, which is quite beneficial. Where these services exist, relations between archaeologists and decision-makers are much better. The only possible drawback is when local politicians find themselves in a conflict of interest, since they have to develop their town and build new facilities, but at the same time protect the town’s archaeological heritage.

This interest can also be double-edged: there is a vogue in France for metal detectors, which are used by around 200,000 people and constitute a real danger, particularly in the south of France where there are the most Roman sites and where many sites are looted. The detectorist associations claim to be practising ‘citizen archaeology’. They rely heavily on British legislation, of which they present a highly idealised view. In fact, declarations of finds by detectorists tend to fall sharply in the UK. And in any case, once removed from their context, the objects they collect no longer have any scientific value.

Nevertheless, overall, we can say that the cultural battle has been won. It is public support that has enabled preventive archaeology to develop in France, despite the opposition of certain developers, supported by certain politicians. An

apparent paradox is that conservative politicians should be the most attached to the past, to memory and to national identity; but in reality, as they are more tied to economic interests, it is they who are generally the most hostile to archaeology. It is true that President Chirac, an archaeology enthusiast, gave a major speech on archaeology at the Élysée Palace in January 2005, twenty years after President Mitterrand's speech. But there are regular attacks on preventive archaeology, which is supposed to be expensive, even though it rarely costs more than 1% of the total cost of a development project, and above all delays work. Regular references are made to the need to 'simplify' legislation, which means attacking archaeology, as recommended in a report by Senator Doligé in 2011, followed by another parliamentary report by Jean-Claude Boulard and Alain Lambert in 2013. As recently as April 2024, the newly-appointed Minister for Culture, Rachida Dati, declared that "excavations should not be carried out just for the sake of it", and that she preferred "to put money into restoring our heritage [i.e. castles] rather than digging a hole for the sake of digging a hole". On Twitter, she added that she wanted "only essential archaeological requirements to be retained" and that "exemptions for archaeological requirements should be possible", which obviously drew a strong reaction from archaeologists.

On the far right, on the other hand, there are attempts to reclaim the Gauls in the tradition of Philippe Pétain. For example, when the INRAP team made a spectacular discovery of the princely Celtic tomb at Lavau, near the town of Troyes, Marine Le Pen, the leader of the far-right Front National party tweeted in March 2015: "Magnificent discovery at Lavau, a reminder that France is not a country out of the ground, but the fruit of centuries of history". Unfortunately, she hadn't noticed that most of the finds in the tomb were precious objects imported from Italy and Greece! In fact, on far-right websites, participants often refer to themselves as 'Gauls'.

7. Citizen science?

But the French public's interest in archaeology has little to do with political considerations. It has to do with the usual fascination with archaeology, which leads many children to dream of becoming archaeologists, but obviously change their minds when they become adults – and from this point of view, only the obsessive persists with the same project! In addition, archaeological education has evolved considerably and museums, which have proliferated over the last thirty years in France, often as a result of local initiatives, have also become much more attractive (Demoule 2021a). What's more, archaeology is no longer confined to the ancient periods, when its upper limit was set administratively at 800 AD. From the 1960s-1970s, medieval archaeology no longer confined itself

to studying castles and cathedrals, but also excavated villages and studied techniques, showing that the Middle Ages were also the period of the first industrial revolution. Then, in the 1980s, the focus shifted to post-medieval archaeology, particularly as a result of the excavations carried out in Paris when the Louvre Museum was being enlarged: an entire 16th, 17th and 18th century district was meticulously excavated, reinforcing this new direction, while the industrial archaeology of the 19th century was developing. At the same time, excavations in the French overseas territories, particularly the West Indies, shed light on the colonisation process and the living conditions of slaves. Since the 1990s, the remains of the First and Second World Wars have entered the field of archaeology, with their military installations and the daily lives (and deaths) of soldiers. And now, in France, what is known as *Urbex* (*Urban exploration*) is also being practised, in other words the clandestine entry accompanied by the more or less scientific documentation of industrial sites or habitats abandoned in their present state (Offenstadt 2022).

A new definition of archaeology has thus emerged, that of the study of societies, ancient or otherwise, through their material remains, a definition that blurs the traditional academic distinctions between archaeology, history, sociology and ethnology. As far as the latter discipline is concerned, we know that ethnoarchaeological surveys have developed, ethnographic studies carried out by archaeologists on the material culture of the said traditional societies, while social anthropologists usually concentrate on the immaterial aspects of societies (myths, kinship systems, etc.). Finally, it should be added that archaeology, which was inextricably linked to art history in its early days because it focused solely on the artistic productions of past societies, had largely abandoned this perspective in favour of much more anthropological visions. Nevertheless, art and archaeology have come together once again, as contemporary artists have begun to reflect on the waste products of our societies and what will remain of them, following the example of Daniel Spoerri, who in 1983 buried all the remains of a banquet for a hundred people, and whose excavation I carried out in 2010 (Demoule 2013b; see also Calle, Demoule 2022).

But more generally, the public's interest in archaeology also stems from our contemporary questions about the trajectory of humanity. That's why the destruction that took place in indifference during the 1950s and 1960s was no longer possible from the end of the 1970s, at the time of the economic crisis, the rise of ecological anxieties and the new epidemics, among others. From this point of view, archaeology is becoming an integral part of the major societal debates of our time, and archaeologists are increasingly called upon to take part in such debates (Demoule 2020, 2021b).

The discussions surrounding the Anthropocene, i.e. this historical moment on planet Earth that no longer depends solely on geology and climate, but on

human action, are proof of this. Have there been societies in the past that have so mismanaged their economy and environment that they have headed for disaster? But symmetrically, when we speak of a 'collapse', as in Jared Diamond's well-known bestseller, is it really the whole society that has collapsed, or just the ruling classes that have disappeared (McAnany, Yoffee 2010)? Although the Mayan cities disappeared at the beginning of the second millennium AD, there are still millions of people speaking Mayan languages in the Yucatan peninsula of Mexico today. Similarly, the collapse of the Indus civilisation during the second millennium BCE was not followed by a desolate landscape, but by a return to a traditional village economy that was better able to exploit its environment harmoniously. Finally, although the Mycenaean cities disappeared at the end of the second millennium BCE and archaeologists speak of the 'Dark Ages' because they no longer find gold masks or palaces with their colourful frescoes, it is not a landscape of ruins that we find either, but a return to village economies from which the 'Greek miracle' will soon emerge (Schnapp-Gourbeillon 2002). The same applies, for example, to the question of whether violence and inequality are constitutive of human societies, or whether other social forms are possible, which brings us back to the debates surrounding anarchist anthropology, if not anarchist archaeology, for example (Graeber, Wengrow 2021).

8. Pessimism or optimism?

In several respects, the situation of archaeology in France is not entirely comparable to that in other countries. Legislation to protect the national archaeological heritage was introduced much later than in other countries, such as Sweden, Germany or the United Kingdom. As we have seen, France created the *École française d'Athènes* in 1846, but the *Institut national de recherches archéologiques préventives* (Inrap) only in 2002. While metropolitan archaeology was a key factor in the construction of national identity in many European countries, it was almost the opposite in France. But there is always room for a step backwards. The power of the Italian superintendencies has diminished considerably since the Berlusconi years. In the early 2000s, Hungary built an institute of preventive archaeology on the model of Inrap, and in cooperation with Inrap. This institute was subsequently abolished by the Orban government, which authoritatively limited the cost of preventive excavations to 1% of the budget for a given development within a very tight timeframe. In France, the statements by Culture Minister Rachida Dati quoted above are not isolated either. In 2024 also, for example, one of France's populist leaders, *Éric Ciotti*, succeeded in overturning a decree requiring preventive excavations to be carried out in the *Vésubie* valley when major developments were required following a natural disaster. He

described the decision by the Ministry of Culture's archaeology department as "grotesque and ridiculous on the subject of archaeological excavations, drafted by technocrats out of touch with reality".

From this point of view, the arrival in power in several countries of populist and nationalist parties is not favourable to archaeology, despite their proclaimed taste for the 'national story'. In fact, these parties generally have an ultraliberal vision – in the economic sense, of course, and not in the political sense – hostile to any constraints in the economic field. What's more, they are not very supportive of historical and scientific academic research. Moreover, archaeology is sometimes used as a pretext by citizens' associations who do not want a new building or a new road. In such cases, archaeologists are sometimes attacked when they arrive, accused of being agents of the developers. And in any case, because of a shortage of staff, archaeological monitoring only covers a quarter of the areas developed each year.

Nevertheless, to stay with the French case, if the situation, as has been said, has changed radically since the 1970s, it is only thanks to the resolute action of archaeologists, and not at all to political will. So if we want to remain optimistic, archaeologists must remain mobilized against any infringement of archaeological legislation. And beyond that, they need to show that archaeology, by understanding the past, is also a way of understanding the present and the future, if not of transforming it.

This is why some archaeologists, in France and elsewhere, are not far from adopting the sentence that concluded the introduction to the collective book *Ideologies in Archaeology* (Bernbeck, McGuire 2011) and that I took up in my own commentary to the same book, a sentence that was intended to modify the famous thesis 11 of Karl Marx's 'Theses on Feuerbach': "Archaeologists have hitherto only interpreted ideologies in various ways; the point is to criticise them in order to change the world".

In this sense, archaeology can truly be a citizen science.

Abstract

Unlike in many other countries, archaeology in France has played only a very minor role in shaping national identity. Indeed, the official history of France begins with three successive defeats: the Gauls conquered by the Romans, then Roman Gaul conquered by the Germanic Franks, and finally the cultural disappearance of the latter in conquered Roman Gaul. The Gauls did not become the 'ancestors' of the French until the Third Republic, which was born in 1870 after another defeat, this time against Prussia, and which established free, secular and compulsory education. As a result, although France set up archaeological institutes in Greece, Rome, Egypt and the Near East, the archaeology of the national soil was left to amateur archaeologists with no resources. As a result, many archaeological sites were destroyed without any salvage excavations until the 1980s, and it wasn't until 2001 that a law was passed on 'preventive archaeology' and the *Institut national de recherches archéologiques préventives* (Inrap) was created. However, in 2003, the conservative government ideologically established commercial competition in the field of preventive archaeological excavations, leading to a reduction in budgets, salaries and resources for research. Nevertheless, the considerable progress made in recent decades has been largely due to the determined efforts of archaeologists, which is why we must remain optimistic for the future. What's more, the French public is passionate about archaeology and, less than nationalist ideologies, it is the role of archaeology in current social debates that interests the public, particularly questions around climate change, violence, male domination and inequality, for example.

Keywords: public archaeology, salvage excavation, commercial competition, nationalism, France.

A differenza di molti altri Paesi, in Francia l'archeologia ha svolto un ruolo molto marginale nella formazione dell'identità nazionale. Infatti, la storia ufficiale della Francia inizia con tre sconfitte: i Galli conquistati dai Romani, poi la Gallia romana conquistata dai Franchi germanici e infine la scomparsa culturale di questi ultimi nella Gallia romana conquistata. I Galli divennero gli "antenati" dei francesi solo con la Terza Repubblica, nata nel 1870 dopo un'altra sconfitta, questa volta contro la Prussia, e che istituì l'istruzione gratuita, laica e obbligatoria. Di conseguenza, sebbene la Francia abbia creato istituti archeologici in Grecia, a Roma, in Egitto e nel Vicino Oriente, l'archeologia nel suolo nazionale fu lasciata ad archeologi amatoriali e privi di risorse, dunque molti siti archeologici sono stati distrutti senza che venissero effettuati scavi di recupero fino agli anni '80. Solo nel 2001 è stata approvata una legge sull'"archeologia preventiva" ed è stato creato l'Institut national de recherches archéologiques préventives (Inrap). Tuttavia, nel 2003, il governo conservatore ha ideologicamente introdotto una concorrenza commerciale nel campo degli scavi archeologici preventivi, portando a una riduzione dei bilanci, degli stipendi e delle risorse per la ricerca. I notevoli progressi compiuti negli ultimi decenni sono stati in gran parte dovuti agli sforzi degli archeologi, motivo di ottimismo per il futuro. Inoltre, il pubblico francese è appassionato di archeologia e, più che ideologie nazionaliste, ciò che interessa il pubblico è il ruolo dell'archeologia nell'attuale dibattito pubblico, in particolare riguardo temi come il cambiamento climatico, la violenza, le questioni di genere.

Parole chiave: archeologia pubblica, archeologia d'emergenza, concorrenza, nazionalismo, Francia.

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