

## A NEED TO CREATE A SOCIETY OF PROFESSIONAL ARCHAEOLOGISTS IN THE PHILIPPINES†

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper lays out the reasons why the creation of a Society of Professional Archaeologists in the Philippines is an immediate concern. Much of the Philippine archaeological sites have been desecrated and/or lay unprotected, making them easy preys for treasure and pot hunters. Only a professional society then can focus on the institutionalization of the discipline with the aid of other government and non-government agencies concerned with the preservation of Philippine Cultural Heritage. The qualification requirements to be a member include both academic and field experience. A minimum number of academic units and weeks of field experience in archaeological exploration and/or excavation are set.*

*The society is primarily geared towards protecting Philippine archaeological sites, conducting archaeological activities in the field, and publishing archaeological field and laboratory reports.*

### INTRODUCTION

The discipline of Archaeology in the Philippines is a very young and the practice is mostly confined to the personnel of the National Museum of the Philippines, particularly personnel from the Archaeology Division. The National Museum is the only government agency authorized to grant permits to individuals and institutions to conduct archaeological explorations and excavations. Aside from this function, it also dispatches teams to the field to do the same. However, the office of the Presidential Security Group (PSG) directly under the Office of the President grants permits to individuals and institutions to hunt for treasure in the country. This is in sharp contrast with one of the objectives of the National Museum that is to preserve cultural materials through scientific excavation as opposed to indiscriminate diggings for materials with high monetary value. “Most of this intentional destruction is generated to supply an illicit world-wide market in antiquities” (Sharer and Ashmore 1996:230).

These two conflicting functions of two government agencies posed the question of whoever has the more right to dig and to simply dig. Tense confrontations have already occurred in the past between these two agencies as a result of the

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† Editors' note: this paper was written in 1996, two years prior to the creation of the National Museum Act of 1998 (RA 8492— An Act Establishing a National Museum System Providing for its Permanent Home and Other Purposes).

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obvious inconsistency on the part of the government of the Philippines, in general. This is a legislative setback being suffered by Philippine archaeology in so far as the preservation of cultural materials through scientific excavation is concerned.

Another major weakness of the discipline is its lack of manpower. So far, there are only two recognized archaeologists in the Philippines, both are with the National Museum and the University of the Philippines. There used to be a little more but a “greener pasture” has lured them out of the practice. An important breakthrough though has happened. The University of the Philippines, Diliman Campus has approved the creation of the Archaeological Studies Program. Dr. Eusebio Dizon, Curator I of the Archaeology Division of the National Museum is the Director with Mr. Wilfredo Ronquillo, M.S., Curator II, being one of the Professors. This is an opportunity to train students in the field of archaeology.

The two setbacks mentioned above caused some irreparable damages to many archaeological sites in the Philippines, the former being the legitimate and the most destructive. The National Museum cannot control the proliferation of treasure hunters because of lack of personnel to safeguard the field and the existence of the PSG permit-giving capability. These lacks of control have turned sites into “milking cows” of many in the antique business.

The Philippines is not the only country suffering from such a malignant social crisis. “Archaeology is under siege all over the world. Deep plowing, industrial development, mining, and runaway urban sprawl, to say nothing of looters and vandals, are decimating the archaeological record everywhere” (Orser and Fagan 1995: 243). Countries such as the United States of America, Australia, New Zealand, and many others have undergone the same fate. But many of these countries have already the capability to contain the problem. They have consolidated their forces almost always with the cooperation of their respective governments.

Among the means they employed was to create legislative measures (see Sharer and Ashmore 1996:226 for the list of major U.S. Federal Legislation for the protection of Archaeological Resources) that contains provisions which categorically declare the protection of archaeological resources. Second is the formation of archaeological societies that would bind archaeologists together to a common interest and commitment, i.e. the protection and preservation of cultural materials and sites. These societies have turned in positive results for archaeology. In other fields, for example, “historical societies are the backbone of local history in the United States and other countries” (Orser and Fagan 1995: 250). These have checked the activities of various individuals who are engaged in illicit digging and collecting activities and persons who have disguised themselves as archaeologists to gain access to cultural materials and archaeological sites.

Archaeological societies do not only ensure the protection and preservation of cultural materials and sites but are also concerned in making sure that archaeologists have the right knowledge and technical ability to dig a particular site, i.e. an archaeologist trained in excavating burial sites is preferable to dig an ancient burial ground over an archaeologist trained in excavating settlement sites. Of course, it will depend on how many archaeologists available relative to how many archaeological sites that need to be excavated. The choice is not always there.

This paper contains the proposal to create a **“Society of Professional Archaeologists in the Philippines”**, which will be herein referred to as **SPAP**. This society will be composed only of professional archaeologists whose qualifications will be outlined in the succeeding paragraphs.

### **RATIONALE FOR CREATING THE SPAP**

The SPAP, first and foremost, is responsible in the preservation of the archaeological sites in the Philippines and is the primary group that should be vigilant in guarding these sites from people who wants to loot them and should be active in the fight against these unscrupulous people and legislation. It shall engage in any legal debate regarding issues endangering the cultural resource of the Philippines and shall be willing to engage in any legal battle should a need arise.

SPAP will be the only one who will determine the qualification of an archaeologist to conduct explorations and excavations in the field. No one goes to the field without the clearance from the SPAP. The powers of the SPAP are, of course, coordinated with the National Museum of the Philippines, which have the authority to grant permits for archaeological exploration and excavation. It is therefore ideal to have the two closely commensurate with each other.

In cases such as an Impact assessment activities, the SPAP play an important role in fielding competent archaeologists in the field to ensure a well documented Assessment report. Sites that are involved in this type of activity suffer huge and permanent destruction. The SPAP safeguards the site from any individual who wants to jump at any opportunity in this type of activity. Such individuals almost always lack the necessary qualifications in the field to conduct assessments and are only after the amount involved as compensation. In turn, the requesting party for such activities does not care about the individuals as long as their interests are met. It is imperative then, that any person who wants to conduct such an activity should be a bonafide member of the SPAP or he/she obtains a clearance from authorized persons within the SPAP.

Archaeological field schools are encouraged to promote the discipline of archaeology in the country. In fact, many such field schools were already conducted in the past but professors in the universities who are not archaeologists handled them. Though they may have experience in archaeological fieldwork or have taken units in archaeology, these do not necessarily make them archaeologists, skilled to direct an archaeological fieldwork. These professors may jeopardize the knowledge of the students and may destroy or damage archaeological sites. With the creation of the SPAP, control could be obtained at the university level.

Visiting archaeologists from other countries are very much welcome in the Philippines. Most of these archaeologists coordinate with the National Museum or the Universities that invited them. They teach at these universities and sometimes conduct explorations and excavations for their researches. They usually bring with them students from their respective universities. But there were cases that these foreign archaeologists failed to meet the standards set by the National Museum, especially when their students come back here on their own for research. And in worst cases, some foreign archaeologists do not treat the site the same way as Filipino

archaeologists do. In this case, SPAP will ensure that any archaeologists from foreign country has the right qualifications to do explorations and excavations in the country and that the standard set by the society and the National Museum will strictly followed to the letter. However, in cases that there are also standards these foreigners must follow, a suitable compromise must be obtained that will not jeopardize any of the objectives and the methodology in the field.

The SPAP will coordinate with institution that the foreign archaeologist belongs and secure a duly certified letter of recommendation from the institution. No walk-in foreign archaeologist will be entertained by the SPAP or by the National Museum. In cases, that the foreigner does not belong to any institution (a freelance), his/her latest employers could provide the necessary recommendations.

## **MEMBERSHIP**

The SPAP will have regular members and honorary members. Regular members must be Filipino citizens who are primarily doing research on Philippine archaeology. Honorary members may include archaeologists from other countries who wished to engage in a research undertaking in coordination with SPAP and the National Museum. All members should have passed the qualifications set by SPAP.

## **WHO IS AN ARCHAEOLOGIST?**

Anyone who wishes to be a member of SPAP should possess one of the following sets of qualifications. These are molded to combine both experience in the field and academic achievements.

A Master's degree in Archaeology plus a minimum total of 24 weeks of archaeological fieldwork and laboratory should be the minimum requirement to become a professional archaeologist.

Master's degree in other fields, such as Anthropology, History, and Geology but with focus on archaeological research could also qualify as members provided applicants satisfy the minimum of 24 total weeks spent in archaeological fieldwork and a minimum of 24 total weeks spent in the laboratory. Or a minimum of 12 weeks each in the field and laboratory plus at least 3 published articles with topics in archaeology with not less 3,000 words per article. The required number of published articles or books may be substituted with seminars and conferences conducted and/or attended.

However, graduate students who entered any graduate program, except archaeology during the first semester of the school year 1996 are required to take courses from the Archaeological Studies Program (ASP), University of the Philippines, Diliman. Core courses are highly recommended.

Long before the conception of a society for Filipino archaeologists, many personnel in the National Museum have been involved in several archaeological endeavors. Except for a few, these people do not have an academic background in archaeology and maybe too late for some of them now to have one. But their field experiences cannot be discounted. As a matter of fact, many of these people were

tapped by various professors to conduct archaeological lecture on their respective fields. These people are veterans on the field and even in the laboratory. The SPAP will gladly welcome the membership of these personnel from the National Museum who are not below the position of Researcher I and have been on the service for not less than 5 years.

Those who are below the position of Researcher I but have rendered more than ten (10) years of service in the National Museum involved in archaeological activities may qualify to become a member of SPAP depending on their field experiences.

## **REGISTRATION**

The Society of Professional Archaeologists in the Philippines will be duly registered with the Security and Exchange Commission (SEC) under the non-stock, non-profit category. It will be required before registration to provide its Constitution and By-laws that will be drafted as soon as the proposal formalizes.

The SPAP could also register with the Professional Regulatory Commission (PRC). This will, of course, require rigid scrutiny before it could pass the Commission. However, under the PRC, the SPAP will have more privileges and benefits, its objectives and aspirations uphold better, and its rights protected. And the most important, it can exercise its power to protect the archaeological sites with the full cooperation and back up of the other professional societies in the Philippines.

## **CONCLUSION**

The year 1996 was a memorable year for Philippine Archaeology. The year saw the creation of the Archaeological Studies Program (ASP) in the University of the Philippines, Diliman campus. It has taken off with seven (7)-pioneering students for a Diploma in Archaeology. The move was initiated by the two active archaeologists in the country. Other Asian countries warmly welcomed the ASP during the SPAFA conference on “Current Developments on Museology and Archaeology” last May.

This year another breakthrough should be expected. The birth of the Society of Professional Archaeologists in the Philippines (SPAP). The creation of SPAP will mark the unification of all the people working for the preservation of our cultural heritage, in general. SPAP will be the voice of the archaeologists in the country in the campaign against treasure and pot hunting, among others. And more importantly, SPAP will be vanguard in the protection of archaeological sites from individuals who want its priceless possessions and from other institutions who wanted the same.

Philippine archaeology in this stage will be well within “safe altitude” and soaring high. It is time that Philippine archaeology puts itself at par with the archaeology of other Asian countries that at all possibilities could enhance the ties among these nations. However, the “safe altitude” cannot be safe at all without consistent monitoring and constant hard work, otherwise it will tip on one side and eventually fell.

A regional nationalism among Asian nations could then pick up. For years, Asia has been bombarded with American and European archaeologists and not at all



times it is advantageous on the respective local archaeology. With the possible strengthening of ties among Asian countries, control can be achieved regarding the conduct of archaeological activities by foreigners. However, it is not all right to prevent these non-Asian archaeologists from doing research in Asia. It would be better said that the researches of these non-Asian scholars should have limits. Malaysia for example has made their point regarding this issue.

Among the limits that should be stressed here are the topics of research these archaeologists are going to have. Each country has a projected range of research projects for a span of years, which all the resources are poured in. It is then essential that research topics of non-Asian archaeologists are in-line within the planned researches of the host country. Otherwise, a big possibility that the host country cannot monitor the activities of the researcher.

The area coverage of a non-Asian researcher should have limits, at any rate possible. Local researchers should always be the priority in archaeological sites. And besides, archaeologists have the responsibility towards the future generation with the much-sophisticated technology to study the past.

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