

Polish Archaeology Under Communism. The Trial of Massive Corruption of Clever Minds*

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Abstract: The aim of this article is not to discuss the paradigms or the methods of the 'free' and the 'Marxist' archaeology in the post World War II period in Poland. The literature about this is quite abundant, and I would like to tell another story than the scientific side of Polish archaeology during the communist domination. I remember the reality of those fifteen years in the daily activity of young Polish archaeologists in the late '70s and '80s of the XX century, and I would like to give here my personal point of view about this time.

Keywords: archaeology, political systems, Poland

History is a science strongly influenced by the ideological interests. All stories, from the oldest ones we know, oral or written, had an ideological significance and a political role. Archaeology is not free of the same temptation to manipulate faith by the actual – individual or institutional – power. This intellectual condition in historical and archaeological analysis has been pointed out by a number of researchers (ex. Baron 1986; Lozny 2002). Maybe the best known example of the ideological and political discussion in recent Polish archaeology was the dispute between German archaeologist Gustaf Kossinna (1858–1931), professor at the University of Berlin and Polish professor Józef Kostrzewski (1885–1969) concerning the relations between the Germans and the Slavs. So, the instrumental treatment of historical or archaeological researches in the 'political game' in popular, national or ideological consideration of its own societies was the 'original sin' in all prehistoric and historic science in Europe and probably also in our entire world. But, what was different in the political dimension of Polish archaeology after 1945. The answer is that the communist system considers the researches in the human sciences not only as a way to manipulate the past but as a tool to fortify actual authority and also to accomplish change in the society for the future. Witold Hensel in 1970 writes in one of his theoretical articles that the goal of the education of future young Polish archaeologists is not only to prepare them to be a professional researchers or scholars but also to 'educate them for the future society' (Hensel 1971). This approach shows a fundamental difference between the 'ancestral' pan-political objectives to manipulate the historical (archaeological) transmission and the new communist intention to use this research

to indoctrinate people, and at the same time to violate the archaeologist by convincing him, that the only way to achieve a professional career and a comfortable way of life, was to abandon his moral integrity. Official propaganda repeated that there was no other choice possible. Against it was the large majority of older and younger Polish archaeologists and students. They decided to become true, honest and – above anything else – good professional archaeologists. If my opinion is right, what were their motivations and their allies?

At the end of 1990s Jacek Lech published an essay considering the history of Polish archaeology in the twentieth century (Lech 1997–1998). His publication was a subject of tense discussion. But this question – the comparison between Polish archaeology before and after the Second World War was discussed on many other occasions. One of the first was the publication of the *First Archaeological Session of IHKM¹ of the Polish Academy of Sciences* in 1955 (Hensel ed 1957, especially pages 394–416); subsequently also by Witold Hensel, in 1971 on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the Polish People's Republic (PRL). The liberation of Poland from Russian-communist domination in 1990 was an impulse to large discussion about the recent history of Polish archaeology. A number of publications were dedicated to this theme (ex. Abramowicz 1991; Bursche and Tylor 1991; Lech 1996, 1997, Schild 1993; Jażdżewski 1995; Tabaczyński 1995 and many others). In 2007 Stefan Karol Kozłowski published his paper presented at the archaeological session on the occasion of 50 years of IHKM Polish Academy of Sciences. The brief history of Polish archaeology, from 1919 and nearly up to now, was narrated as a medieval tale regarding the struggle for influence and authority between the main Polish archaeologists (Kozłowski 2007). Looking at all this abundant literature, the aim of this paper is not to

* This article was based on my presentation during the session: 'Archaeology under communism: political dimensions of archaeology' at 32 Theoretical Archaeology Group Conference, Bristol University UK, 2010. The text was never published.

¹ IHKM – Institute for the History of Material Culture.

discuss the history, the paradigms or the methods of the 'western free' and 'eastern Marxist' archaeology. As far as I am concerned now is to understand for what reasons, after the Second World War, the 'rich capitalist West' earned the money for archaeological studies and heritage protection and the 'poor communist East' developed archaeological institutions, publication and fruitless archeological field researches.

In 1993 and in 1995 Paul Barford has presented his observations and his opinions about current Polish archaeology (Barford 1993, 1995). Despite polemics (see Lech 2002), he makes the right remark that the degree of official communist propaganda and ideological pressure were not the same in every East-European country (Barford 1993). This statement was shared by Sarunas Milisauskas – though Milisauskas conclusions regarding Polish archaeology were quite different to Barford (Milisauskas 1997–1998). Thus each East-European country has its individual and singular history, tradition, culture and, most important, a different relation vis-à-vis the German and Russian occupation during the Second World War. I consider this factor (active collaboration, armed resistance or passive submission) as crucial to understand the different social and individual reactions to post-war Russian military occupation and ideological communist domination. Hence, the countries isolated by the 'Iron Curtain' cannot be treated in an identical way. Ideological oppression and brutal physical repression led some people to rebellion. The popular risings in Berlin, Budapest and Poznan in 1956, in Prague and Warsaw in 1968, in Gdansk and Szczecin in 1970, in Radom and Ursus in 1976, in the whole of Poland in 1980. Every time the Polish people were present to manifest their opposition to communist totalitarian ideology and Russian domination. Why? Maybe because Polish people did not collaborate with any occupation force, and having suffered strong physical destruction by both – Germans and Russians and many more before – actively struggled against them. The Polish Military Forces combating III Reich counted about 600,000 armed soldiers on the occupied territory (AK, NSZ, and BCh²) and 250,000 regular soldiers on the West-European fronts (Norway, England, North-Africa, Italy, France, Holland). All this military force was linked with the Polish government in exile in London. After 1945, some fighters considered that after German, the Russian occupation began and they continued their armed battle. The last soldiers offering unconditional resistance were killed by the communist interior forces in 1962.

² AK – Armia Krajowa (Home Army), NSZ – Narodowe Siły Zbrojne (National Armed Forces), BCh – Bataliony Chłopskie (Peasants' Battalions).



Fig. 1. The students ready to go to search one of the Mesolithic stations on Rydno-Grzybowa Góra. Field-school directed by S.K. Kozłowski. October 1977 (?). Photo from the author's archive.

In 1944, despite of the huge destruction of the Polish economy, the newly-created 'Polish People's Republic' government very soon began to reconstruct and to develop archaeological institutions. Before 1939 about 800 professional and – above all – amateur archaeologists were active in Poland. During the war some professional archaeologists and students were killed and Poland lost a half its territory including two major universities (from for before the war): Vilnius and Lvov. Witold Hensel, in 1971, underlined the post-war development of archaeological institutions: 7 universities (4 before 1939), 6 museums (3 before), 12 archaeological periodic practices (5 before) and the creation of a central national research archaeological institute, the IHKM Polish Academy of Sciences in 1954 (Hensel 1971). In the end of '70s, about 1500 professional archaeologists were employed in Poland. This political interest in developing archaeology and its institutions in so poor country as post-war Poland is striking. What was the motivation for this?

To all political systems archaeology is an important factor, but the reasons for this are different. For liberal



Fig. 2. The lecture done by S.K. Kozłowski to his student during the field-school on Rydno-Grzybowa Góra. October 1977 (?). Photo from the author's archive.

economy dogma, the study of the past is a useless activity, not generating any real value. For authoritarian dogma, the past, if not manipulated by the actual political considerations is dangerous, and becomes the biggest enemy of the any totalitarian ideology. The other reason was that the new communist government, conscious of the popular antipathy and often, even hostility, had elaborated a large social indoctrination the young people called 'the battle for the hearts and souls'. The 'open doors' to university for the intelligent and ambitious youngsters interested by the past was part of this program. Every year 7 academic centres 'produced' almost one hundred new masters (*magister*). During 35 years (1945 to 1980), 243 doctoral dissertations were defended (Kozłowski 2015). Because work in PRL was obligatory, most of the graduates found employment as professional archaeologists in public institution. This 'scientific title' (considered often nearly a title of 'new noblesse') and offer of social position was an element of this ideological 'corruption of clever minds'. The idea was to transform Polish society, or at least its new elites into devoted adherents, or even into as simple followers, of new communist power. I was a student of archaeology (University of Warsaw) from 1974 to 1979. Then, I started to work in State Archaeological Museum in Warsaw (PMA) and after that I began to prepare my doctorate (never finished) at the University of Warsaw (after 1985 my 'professional career' was sufficiently event-full). When I remember these years, I recall the liberty in choosing the subject of a research and the ease, even for a student or junior researcher, to get funds for fieldwork and to publish with the support and encouragement of our professors (Fig. 1). And all this without any ideological obligation – at least at first. But the plot was divided into three phases: seduction, temptation, and finally: 'we've got you!'. The initial hook (seduction) was to publish enthusiastic news about the successes of Polish archaeologists and subsequently to identify the most gifted among those who took the bait as the competitive exam to enter the



Fig. 3. First strike in the State Archaeological Museum in Warsaw in support of the legalization of NSZZ 'Solidarność'.

In the enter-porch: A. Boguszewski, in the windows of second floor with the banner – A.J. Tomaszewski, leader of 'Solidarność' in the State Archaeological Museum in Warsaw and Z. Hallay. October 1980. Photo from the author's archive.

faculty of archaeology was extremely demanding. The second phase of the plot soon arrived: the temptation. Graduates were offered the prospect of achieving their dreams, to construct a professional career and to reach a relatively prestigious social status. Initially, it seemed great, but ultimately it turned out not to be free of charge. The more one progressed in research, the more difficult it was to secure funds. The first 'glass ceiling' appeared. To get through it seemed simple: to be just a little bit more acquiescent. And if somebody took this first step, apparently innocently and without any engagement, the 'got you!' started to operate. This is when the third phase materialized. It was the crucial moment that the regime much counted on. Sometimes the plot was successful, but in the majority of situations it didn't produce the wished-for results. Why did such elaborate an plan for 'massive corruption' fail? I think that it was due to the merit of quality of our professors, and of our friendship (Fig. 2). It was not easy because life under communism demanded compromises. Other temptations, other 'glass ceilings', blackmails and corrupting proposals were overwhelming. Why then did so many Polish archaeologists chose not to compromise their integrity and despite that managed to advance their research? Why did so many took part in construction of NSZZ 'Solidarność', the first free syndicate in East Europe? (Fig. 3). In my opinion it was due to a strong historical conscience and a common sense of decency.

To close this paper I would like to remember what Peter Bogucki said about the Polish archaeology during the communist period: 'The degree to which Polish archaeologists managed to continue research, publish, and sustain international contacts under these

condition was remarkable. With a few exceptions, they also maintained their intellectual and personal integrity while surrounded by a corrupting political environment' (Bogucki 2002).

Translated by the author

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