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Also sent by email

Dear Mr Gibbons

AHRC Strategic Resource Enhancement Programme

The Society of Museum Archaeologists (SMA) would like to comment on the relevance to museums of the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) Strategic Resource Enhancement Programme. We regard ourselves as a stakeholder because of our role as the leading body representing archaeologists working in museums.

The SMA currently has a membership of around 270, comprising individuals and institutions in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. We also have very close links with our sister organisation, the Scottish Society of Museum Archaeologists. The Society exists to promote museum involvement in all aspects of archaeology and emphasise the unique contribution of museums to the essential unity of the archaeological profession; to promote greater public understanding of the archaeological past, and a fuller public appreciation of the importance of archaeology; to campaign for the acceptance of museums as guardians of a vital part of the nation's heritage and as the appropriate location for the storage and interpretation of all archaeological material; and to develop a coherent philosophy of the role of archaeologists in museums.

The views that are presented below are submitted with the intention of raising the profile of archaeology collections amongst the members of the AHRC Strategic Advisory Group. We would like to see our comments as supporting any application that may be received from the research community that seeks to unlock the potential for the advancement of human understanding locked in museum collections. The SMA is happy to elaborate on this position and provide any assistance as required in line with its advocacy role for archaeologists working in museums

Resource

The resource is the accumulated result of over one hundred and fifty years of archaeological endeavour as represented by the collections of artefacts in museums throughout the UK. These collections may be housed in national, university or regional museums and even small local museums. They are a vast and unique reservoir of information about past societies and individuals. Beyond this mere fact of existence however, the museum, 'is a place where knowledge is created' (Gathercole, P 1983 'Museums and People'. Archaeological Review from Cambridge, 2.1, 41-3). Research by scholars and students on individual objects or categories of object leads to new insights which change our understanding of the past. Indeed for the vast majority of the period during which humans have existed archaeology is our sole source of evidence. Despite this great potential museum collections remain an under-utilised resource and the SMA has sought to promote their wider use by all sections of the community. Support from the AHRC Strategic Resource Enhancement Programme would make a very significant impact on the achievement of this goal.

Transformation

There is much that could be written about how widened access to museum collections will enable new research areas and modes of research to be explored. One example must suffice; recent research on the petrology of two Roman military tombstones at Colchester Museums has given us new insights into the impact of the Claudian Invasion on Britain and the near continent.

Size

There is potentially no limit on the size of the community that could use the resource represented by museum collections. Already museum archaeologists assist a wide range of researchers who may be at any level from schoolchildren to post-doctoral academics.

Access and impact

The impact that access to museum collections has on research outcomes is almost incalculable as shown by the results of collections-based research in museums since the pioneering work of C J Thomsen at the National Museum in Copenhagen in 1836 on the 'three-age system' of the antiquity of man. This tradition of research has continued into modern times but is under threat for some time as a result of a loss of support and consequent reduction in resources. Recently, however, there has been a renewed interest in research, for example in the Department for Culture, Media and Sport 2005 consultation paper 'Understanding the Future: Museums and 21st Century Life' (especially issue 2: Learning and Research).

Sustainability

Archaeological collections are the responsibility of individual governing bodies, whether these be boards of trustees, local authorities or other entities, and these bodies have a duty to preserve in perpetuity these collections which they hold in trust. Information generated through research on these collections is likewise seen as being of critical importance and will form part of the archive of associated collections information.

Partnership

There is clearly considerable scope for partnership funding here as is shown, for example by the reference in the aims of the scheme as listed in Annex A. It is worth adding that at present museums with collections designated as being of national importance benefit from access to funding through the Designated Museums Collections Fund. There is thus scope for such Designated Museums to devise joint projects with the AHRC.

Time and resources

Since we are not proposing a specific project it is not possible to provide any information under this heading.

Yours sincerely

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