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Report: WAC Inter-Congress Vienna: Archaeology in Conflict

The WAC Inter-Congress "Archaeology in Conflict," held in Vienna in April 2010, originated in the 6th World Archaeological Congress (WAC) which was held in Ireland at the University College Dublin (UCD) in July 2008. In three academic sessions the issue of archaeology and war was discussed most controversially. One was entitled "Archaeologists, War and Conflict: Ethics, Politics, Responsibility" and plead more or less for a boycott of the military by the scientific community. The second one, "Working with the Military: Not Evil, Just Necessary" did the opposite. The third one, "Archaeology in the Context of War" focused on legal and systematic issues. The hot topic even caused a local anarchic movement to utter immediate threats against the conference and its participants and the UCD felt it was necessary to ensure protection. As a consequence thereof uniformed police personnel were present during part of the conference. This fact triggered even more discussion during the final general assembly of the congress which by tradition is the closing forum of every WAC allowing its members and participants to discuss imminent issues and bring draft resolutions before the assembled audience and the WAC board. In the course of this assembly, I suggested to organize a WAC Inter-Congress (WAC IC) that would specifically deal with the issue of archaeology and war/military, explore the status quo and collect data that would serve as a basis for further decision making.

Before the WAC IC in Vienna was to take place another important event was already scheduled: the WAC IC in Ramallah in August 2009. This conference rooted in the 5th WAC which was held in Washington in 2003. One of the experiences of this WAC had been that many archaeologists from various countries around the world were hindered to attend a conference in the western part of the world due to political reasons and were denied visa. The WAC IC in Ramallah was held in Palestine largely because Palestinian people have great difficulties obtaining visas to many countries including the USA or countries in the EU. The fact alone that WAC powered an IC in the Palestinian Occupied Territories, but also the point that representatives from the Israel Antiquities Authority were not explicitly and directly invited to this event by its organizers, triggered off harsh critique from Israeli officials as well as the media resulting in the false accusation that Israeli and Jewish archaeologist were intentionally excluded from this event and that the whole conference was an anti-Israeli and anti-Semitic undertaking.

The WAC IC in Vienna was designed to finally overcome all these resentments. It was the intension to bring together people from all kinds of conflict zones as well as from all sectors actively involved: academia, NGOs, the military, law enforcement agencies, public service etc. For this reason I decided to broaden the organizational basis of the conference and to invite Blue Shield to power the event together with WAC. Also the venue, the Tech Gate within the so called UNO-City, the area were the UN office building in Vienna is located, was chosen to stress the neutrality of the meeting. And the patronage of UNESCO was well as the Austrian Commission for UNESCO, for which we feel very grateful and honoured, served the same purpose to guarantee a broad and neutral basis for discussions.

The WAC IC in Vienna was planned to hold approximately 20 papers covering all aspects under discussion. In the end we received about 100 proposals. Since most of them were excellent, we accepted about 80 changing the nature of the conference completely; it was in the end a series of short presentations of 15 minutes each. One remarkable element was the rather high number of junior scholars presenting their work in progress including the "Next Generation Project" on Facebook. The highlight of the conference was our participation in the speech of the Secretary General of the UN, Ban Ki-moon, in the Austrian Parliament on the occasion of his state visit to Austria. Unfortunately, the WAC IC in Vienna also came to suffer under the fact that several registered experts and in particular some junior scholars in the end were not able to travel to Austria, either due to political (visa) or out of financial reasons. Nevertheless, the conference was very successful - in quality and also in quantity with the highest number of participants as well as papers delivered ever at a WAC IC. All speakers were invited to submit their papers for publication in the "Forum Archaeologiae" and about one third did so, which I am very grateful for.

This is also the place to thank all colleagues who have made this success possible: all the participants, my co-organizer Magnus Bernhardsson, professor at the University of Iceland and the Williams College, Claire Smith, the past-president of WAC, and all her colleagues from the Executive Committee, Karl von Habsburg-Lothringen, the president of the "Association of National Committees of the Blue Shield", and all his colleagues from the board, Leylya Strobl, director of the Austrian Roerich Society, and all the Roerich delegates from around the world, Norbert Fürstenhofer, president of the Austrian Society for the Protection of Cultural Property, and his executive board, our host Michael Pfeifer, the General Secretary of the "Foreign Policy and United Nations Association of Austria", and his team of students, the representatives of the Austrian Ministry of European and International Affairs, the staff of the Tech Gate Vienna in the UNO-City, the staff of Austropa Interconvention, and last but not least Elisabeth Trinkl, the editor of "Forum Archaeologiae," who aided in publishing portions of the proceedings of the Inter-Congress.

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