

SCIENTIFIC CONFERENCES: A NEW WAY OF ESCAPE AND TOURISM?

by

Estella Weiss-Krejci*

Abstract: International conferences are important venues for scientists. During these events scholars exchange and discuss new ideas, socialize and create new networks of knowledge. But conferences also form legitimate ways to gain tourist impressions of certain cities or regions and to escape one's usual academic and private circles. My own experience as a participant in a variety of international anthropology and archaeology conferences throughout my academic career provides the background knowledge for a discussion of the usefulness of these events.

Key-words: International conferences; tourism; archaeology; anthropology.

Resumo: Os congressos internacionais são locais de reunião importantes para os cientistas. Durante esses eventos os investigadores trocam e discutem novas ideias, desenvolvem contactos e criam novas redes do conhecimento. Mas os congressos também formam modos legítimos de ganhar impressões turísticas de certas cidades ou regiões e sair dos círculos académicos habituais. A minha própria experiência como participante em diversos congressos internacionais de antropologia e arqueologia durante toda a minha carreira académica capacita-me para compreender a utilidade múltipla desses eventos.

Palavras-chave: Congressos internacionais; turismo e arqueologia; antropologia.

My neighbors, family and friends usually look at me with suspicion when I tell them that I plan to travel far away just for a few days not for pleasure but to attend a conference. Since I always return in good spirits it is almost impossible to convince them that conferences are more than just a way of escape and tourism.

In the September 2002 issue of the British journal *Antiquity* Simon Stoddart and Caroline Malone (p. 600-602) dedicate five columns of their *Editorial* to describe their experiences in archaeology conferences. As editors of a high quality

* Departamento de Ciências e Técnicas do Património. Faculdade de Letras, Universidade do Porto (Post-doc).

international archaeology journal they have been fortunate enough to attend regularly a series of these events. Although I have probably not participated in as many exotic conferences as the former *Antiquity* editors I would like to follow their example and provide some of my personal impressions.

Between September 2000 and April 2005 I have presented papers on various topics at ten International Conferences which took place in the US, Guatemala, UK, Germany, France, Spain and Portugal. I attended the:

- 6th and 10th *Annual Meetings of the European Association of Archaeologists* (EAA) in Lisbon, September 2000 and in Lyon, September 2004;
- 66th and 70th *Annual Meetings of the Society for American Archaeology* (SAA) in New Orleans, April 2001 and in Salt Lake City, March/April 2005;
- 6th *Mesa Redonda de la Sociedad Española de Estudios Mayas* in Santiago de Compostela, October/November 2002;
- 7th and 9th *European Maya Conferences* in London, November 2002 and in Bonn, December 2004;
- 17th *Simposio de Investigaciones Arqueológicas en Guatemala* in Guatemala, July 2003;
- The conference *Imagined Modernities: Travel Literature, Illustration, and the Nation State in Asia and the Americas, 1850-1950* in Coimbra, February 2004;
- 4th *Congresso de Arqueologia Peninsular* in Faro, September 2004.

These conferences ranged from small intimate meetings with less than a 100 participants to large gatherings where thousands of archaeologists socialized and exchanged ideas. I have summarized eight of these events in Table 1.

The largest of events on my list is the SAA meeting. The Society for American Archaeology meets once a year in a different American City (also in Canada and Puerto Rico). These meetings are among the three largest archaeology conferences in the world. The most recent congress I attended in March/April 2005. Since I already knew that I would be giving this paper at the 9.^a *Mesa Redonda de Primavera* I paid special attention to the structure of the conference, tried to get some photo documentation and pay some attention to evaluating the scientific value of this conference and how it differs from the others. Stoddart and Malone (2002, p. 600) feel that the SAA meetings are not only out to cover their costs but to make a profit particularly for the convention hotel. My American colleagues and I share this

opinion. The SAA meetings are incredibly expensive. In 2005 obligatory membership was 120 US\$ and participation fee 105 US\$. On top one had to pay for expensive travel, expensive hotels and food.

The 2005 conference took place in Salt Lake City, Utah in the Salt Palace Convention Center. Sessions went on for 3 days, 3200 people participated, 208 posters were shown, 15 round tables and workshops took place. 1238 papers were presented in 146 sessions. At one time 20 sessions took place simultaneously leaving some of the large conference rooms almost empty. Papers were supposed to last no longer than 14 minutes and there was no time scheduled for discussions among participants. Talks started as early as 8 AM in the morning and ended as late as 9 PM. Maximum session time without interruption was 2 hours, lunch breaks lasted 90 minutes. I also have to mention that air conditioning turned some of the rooms into freezer units and I only managed to survive in my winter coat.

Like many of the other conferences that I have attended so far, the SAA meeting also had an attached travel plan. Usually such tourist trips range from walking tours through city centers to one or two day excursions that take place before or during conferences and which participants have to pay for. In 2005 the SAA offered 6 one-day excursions: Fiber Perishables Interest Group Tour (no fee); Historic Walking Tour I (9 US\$); Ancient Caves of Bonneville Basin (39 US\$); Golden Spike National Historic Site (39 US\$); Connor Springs Rock Art Tour (39 US\$) and Historic Walking Tour II (9 US\$).

I joined the Connor Springs Rock Art Tour for 39 US\$ and left Salt Lake City on Saturday April 2. After one hour, we found ourselves on the private grounds of a company called Thiocol, which produces rocket boosters for NASA and holds an enormous area of land. On their property one of the most fascinating Indian rock carvings of Utah are located, entirely non accessible to regular tourists.

An excursion is a welcome event. There is no way that anybody can attend even a fraction of all presented papers at a conference like the SAA meetings. In theory one person could have attended 90 papers in 3 1/2 days. I am almost certain nobody did.

Some people go to conferences without attending any papers. I once knew a professor – his name will remain a secret – who did not like to listen to papers but mainly went to meet with other archaeologists. Before he retired, his former students organized a full day session in his honour. When I met him later, he told me that he had never suffered so much before in his life, because – as a guest of honour – he had to sit in the conference room for the entire day and listen to every single paper.

The SAA meetings are not a relaxing conference. I do not think their scientific value is very high either. They are primarily about business; they are a major job

market since interviews with applicants for university positions are frequently scheduled to take place there. In 2005, 72 publishing houses had their book stands set up. The booths not only serve to advertise and sell books, but also give the publishers a chance to discuss future book projects with authors.

The SAA meetings are not the only large conference on my list. At both the meetings of the European Archaeological Association (EAA) and the Congreso de Arqueología Peninsular (CAP) papers started early, there was a huge selection, lunch breaks were short, and sessions went on for a long time without breaks (Table 1). However, these conferences are less business oriented. Especially at the EAA meetings which take place in a different European City each a year, the organizers are usually very concerned to create a light atmosphere for the participants and to present their city from its best side. Receptions and dinners are highlights of the conference.

At the EAA meeting 2004 in Lyon there was a reception every night. The sessions always ended early so everyone could make it to the evening events in time. The first three receptions were included in the conference fee; one took place outside Lyon, several busses were organized to take everybody there. The last event was a dinner party in the Musée gallo-romain for 35 €, which ended in a dance on a mosaic floor and lasted till 2 AM in the morning. The American cities in which the SAA meetings take place do not offer anything comparable, no receptions with buffets, during breaks neither coffee nor snacks are provided. Receptions are private affairs, and only organized by publishing houses and university departments. However, the EAA are much cheaper than the SAA meetings. The 2004 EAA conference cost 135 € for non-members.

Many other conferences that I have attended were organized by regional societies, universities and associations. I agree with Stoddart and Malone (2002, p. 601) that the smaller meetings are the more useful ones. Papers are more carefully selected through invitation. The meetings focus on a topic and allow updating of views, airing of new data, discussions and debate. These conferences are more focused because they are less dense. Absence of participants will be noticed by the others and there is usually no reason to be absent, because there is plenty of time to go to the bathroom, take a drink and talk to the others. In these types of conferences I did not miss many papers. I attended almost all papers in Coimbra 2004, in London 2002, in Bonn 2004 and in Santiago 2002. And there was plenty of time to socialize, eat and drink coffee.

However, all these conference – large and small ones – serve a very important purpose. They are legitimate ways to escape one's usual academic circles and to get professionally engaged with other people. They often result in valuable publications. Almost all my papers have or will be published in one form or another. My SAA

meeting participation in 2001 has resulted in two publications (Weiss-Krejci 2001, 2005). Santiago de Compostela and Guatemala have also been published (Weiss-Krejci 2003, 2004). My papers from London 2002 and Faro 2004 are in press (Weiss-Krejci in press a and b; Weiss-Krejci and Duarte in press). Coimbra 2004, Bonn 2004 and Salt Lake City 2005 are on their way. Conference related publications make up 70% of my published work.

Especially for those, who come from outside the English speaking academic university system, international archaeology conferences often provide the only opportunity to get in contact with colleagues from other parts of the world, to learn about new discoveries and to publish their results internationally. I consider participation in international conferences as a must in every scientist's life and indispensable for academic development.

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Table 1

	N.º of papers	N.º of session days	Length of paper	Earliest paper starts	Last paper ends	Max time without break	Lunch break	Fee
Coimbra 2004	17	2,5	30 min.	11:00	17:45	2h	1:30 min.	no fee, food covered
London 2002	23	3	40 min.	9:00	18:00	2h	1:10 min.	no fee
Bonn 2004	28	3	30 min.	9:00	18:30	2h	1:30 min.	no fee, hotel covered
Santiago de Compostela 2002	29	4	45 min.	9:00	19:30	2:15 min.	2:45 min.	no fee, hotel covered
Guatemala 2003	126	5	30 min.	9:00	18:00	2h	1:30 min.	ca. 15€
EAA Lyon 2004	440	3	15 min.	8:30	18:15	2:30 min.	1:30 min.	135€, coffees and receptions
CAP Faro 2004	442	3,5	20 min.	8:30	19:00	2:20 min.	1:10 min.	50€
Salt Lake City SAA 2005	1238	3,5	14 min.	8:00	21:00	2:30 min.	1:30 min.	ca. 200€