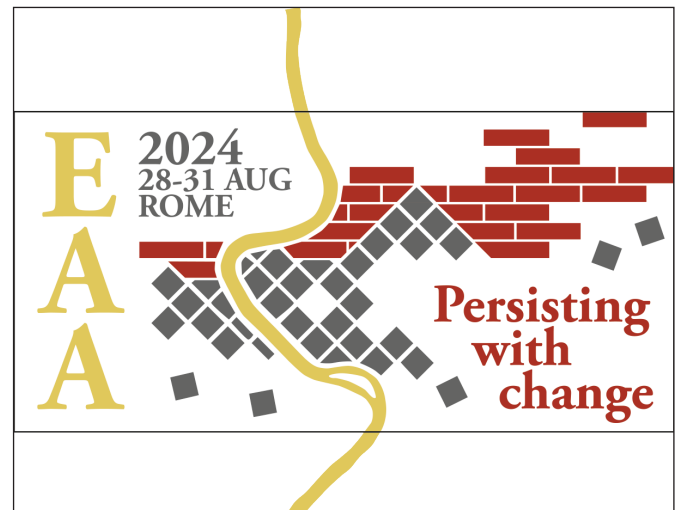


LOOKING BACK, LOOKING AHEAD: EAA AFTER ITS 30TH ANNUAL CONFERENCE IN ROME (28 AUGUST–1 SEPTEMBER 2024)

ESZTER BÁNFFY¹

Hungarian Archaeology Vol. 13. (2024) Issue 3, pp. 51–53

The European Association of Archaeologists, founded in Ljubljana in 1994, reached a milestone during its 30th conference this year. This is not only because of the round number but also because of the ever-growing membership and the increase in the number of conference participants. The current trend-like increase in membership and the constant changes in the environment of archaeology and heritage protection encourage the management to think continuously and develop the future of EAA as carefully as possible, as well as express their opinion of the membership. Below are some concise thoughts reflecting the personal opinion of the current EAA president about the challenges facing the organisation (and, in a broader sense, perhaps a little bit of European archaeology as well).



Keywords: European Association of Archaeologists, conference, membership

The European Association of Archaeologists, founded in Ljubljana in 1994, reached a milestone during its 30th conference this year. This is not only because of the round number but mainly because of the ever-increasing number of members and participants in the annual meetings. EAA crossed the one-thousand benchmark for the first time in The Hague in 2010, and two thousand attendees became common in the following years. At the same time, it was observed that there are "big" conference venues (such as Istanbul in 2014 or Barcelona in 2018) and smaller ones in less centrally located or perhaps archaeologically less significant cities. This opinion changed in 2023 when more than 3,300 members participated in Belfast, the border region of North-West Europe. At that time, we could already guess what a huge turnout we could count on this year in Rome, where all roads, but certainly the path of many archaeologists, lead.

Since the COVID-19 epidemic, and as a lesson learned from two annual online conferences, EAA management has insisted on offering a fully hybrid conference. The essence is that although we invite everyone who can come and get to know the venue's cultural heritage more thoroughly, we also think of those whose age, health, or financial situation do not allow for personal participation. Now, the poster section also works virtually: attendants can browse on the spot, on screens, or from home. Behind all these changes, there is a more extensive, compelling answer: What will we do with the difficulties arising from the growing membership and the difficulties arising from the enormous conferences that are slowly becoming logistically unmanageable? Sometimes, like after the current conference (see TEA, the autumn edition of our Newsletter published on 5 November), contemplations arise to reduce the number of participants by organising much fewer parallel sessions. Such proposals do not consider what a decision like that would entail: we would have to exclude a large proportion of our members from the possibility of participation. I am convinced that EAA's central values include inclusion and the social aspect of the programmes, not to mention the power of grassroots professional groups, i.e. our Communities. At our conferences, we offer several social

¹ President, EAA, e-mail: president@e-a-a.org.

programmes where participants can meet and talk freely and even dance to loud rock music one evening as if releasing the tension accumulated in long, focused attention. Perhaps it can be said that EAA, even with nearly six thousand members (this is the current situation), has not lost its “family atmosphere”: for many years, colleagues have been waiting for the late summer days to meet again, and perhaps in the eyes of most of us, these conferences also become the annual celebration days of archaeology.

Rome had almost five thousand personal and six to seven hundred online participants. This year, it became completely obvious to the Board that there are no more “small” and “big” conferences. More and more people are coming, and we are forced to take action. If we don’t want to exclude anyone (and I would like to stick to the inclusive position as president), we need to make significant changes, primarily by strengthening the secretariat in Prague. Many of you probably know that this huge organisation’s elected and appointed leaders (president, board members, committee members) do voluntary, unpaid work (in addition to the working hours of their academic jobs). The exception is the handful of teams coordinating organisational tasks at the EAA headquarters in Prague. The current number of employees can adequately serve a membership of approximately 1,200–1,500. From this, you can already see what a trying, almost impossible task it has been to serve the needs of a membership many times over that for years. Therefore, our most important current task is to have new, sufficiently trained colleagues to help the current staff. In the area of finances, payments, and the organisation work of the annual conference, it may be possible to expand the team this year, but I am convinced that we need to hire an assistant to aid our Senior Manager Sylvie Kvetinová, the “soul” of EAA, in the near future – and this is only the minimum plan.

The development mentioned here does not stand alone but is part of EAA’s medium-term strategic plan. The members could read the outline of the 2025–2028 continuation of the current 2021–2024 plan already in the summer and endorsed it with a large majority of votes. Based on these, we believe that we are basically on the right track, that we can play an increasingly important role among the world’s archaeological organisations, and that our voice is heard everywhere. On our newly presented, completely renewed website, our members and interested parties who are not (yet) members can find detailed information about everything. In addition to the organisational changes, we are striving to offer content innovations from 2025 that will, on the one hand, cope with the reception of the huge flow of information and, on the other hand, will mark EAA’s path in the following four years from an ethical point of view.

Finally, I would like to say a few words about this last topic. When I became president-elect in 2020, the biggest challenge for EAA was Brexit. At that time, I saw my main task as strengthening cooperation with our British members to show that Europe is larger than the EU. On 24 February 2022, the Russian government launched an unprecedented, coordinated attack on the entire territory and capital of an independent European country, Ukraine, starting a war that has not stopped for almost three years. EAA always supports our members who fight to protect the cultural heritage of their country with all their might: as a reminder, free membership and conference registration are provided to Ukrainian EAA members, but the organisation of scholarships and a network of contacts hopefully also help our Ukrainian colleagues. At the same time, although EAA has suspended all institutional relations with the individual Russian and Belarusian institutions, it allows entry for our individual members there, who can apply without affiliation. Unfortunately, in the last two years, we have experienced that the series of further war conflicts are still incomplete. In the Armenian-Azeri conflict, we received letters from both sides, confirmed by many signatures, condemning the other side’s destruction of their national cultural monuments. Finally, in the conflict in Gaza, and now, also in Lebanon, we receive urgent calls to condemn this or that Israeli activity. All of this encouraged the management to take a stand: we stand for the protection of cultural and archaeological heritage. Always, everywhere. As already formulated in 2019 in our Bern Declaration entitled [Archeology and the future of democracy](#) and approved by the membership, EAA is not a completely apolitical organisation, but long before the war and the most recent conflicts, it already took a stand against how, in many cases, politics and certain ideologies might want to exploit archaeology and how they contribute to the distortion or even destruction of the archaeological heritage. Thus, we raise our voices against anyone, political leaders or institutions, if an ethnic group wishes to use its past living in a given place for political gain by claiming it

has more rights to live in a given area than others. At the same time, we do not take a position regarding the immediate and current political situation of war conflicts, as there may be divisions among our members.

One of the four advisory committees established under my presidency complements the experience of the Board in matters related to cultural heritage since we do not understand, and cannot understand enough, the many areas that require local knowledge. This committee also gives us ammunition for how we can most effectively stand up against destruction and the destruction of our common European archaeological heritage.

From all of this, perhaps it becomes clear what a complex task it is to manage, maintain, and increase the importance of such a vast organisation that embodies many different members and interests. In all of this work, there is one solid foundation on which we rely and for which it is worth carrying on: jobb a fellow-archaeologists, our membership in museums, universities, heritage protection, or in the development of relations with the broad public. It is worth going on for them, since the EAA now represents a unique value for our members from several continents dealing with the archaeological heritage of Europe and for the whole of European archaeology.

E. Bánffy
President