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Editorial address

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Interdisciplinary Research Center of the University of Warsaw
"Identity – Dialogue – Security"
Prosta 69, 00-838 Warsaw
email: centrum.tozsamosc@uw.edu.pl

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Mateusz Drewicz*

The Social Archaeology of Sacred Heritage in Poland: The Significance of Archaeological Research for the Identity of Local Communities

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Abstract

The aim of the article is to demonstrate how archaeological research conducted on church premises in Poland becomes a social and cultural practice in which local communities – particularly parish communities – reinterpret the past and co-create their sacred heritage. It also aims to show that archaeology on church premises, when analyzed from a social perspective, performs not only a cognitive but also an identity-forming, community, and spiritual function. The article adopts the perspective of the social archaeology of sacred heritage, presenting it within the framework of contemporary approaches to the social archaeology of sacred places, including theoretical foundations and context. It presents an analysis of empirical data collected through individual in-depth interviews (IDIs) conducted with Roman Catholic clergy, in the following categories: discovering local uniqueness, building community identity, and barriers and challenges. The key findings of the study indicate that archaeology on church premises in Poland transcends the boundaries of scientific

* Adam Mickiewicz University in
Poznań, e-mail: mateusz.drewicz@amu.edu.pl, <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-7712-3386>

discourse, entering the sphere of religious, cultural, and community life, which makes it a significant element of identity-forming processes at the local level. The findings also highlight the necessity of developing an interdisciplinary methodology that combines social archaeology, contextual theology, and heritage studies.

Keywords

social archaeology, sacred heritage, archaeological research on church premises, identity processes, local communities

Introduction

In recent years, Poland has witnessed a growing interest in sacred heritage – not only as a collection of monuments but also as a living element of identity and memory for local communities. Archaeological research conducted on church premises increasingly involves not only archaeologists but also clergy, faithful, and local leaders, becoming a social process with both religious and cultural dimensions. These activities reveal not only concern for the preservation of cultural assets but also a desire to understand one's own roots, history, and the spiritual heritage of the place.

The Polish socio-religious context gives this phenomenon a particular significance. In many localities, the parish church constitutes the center of community life, and its space – the church, cemetery, and surroundings – functions as a bearer of historical and religious memory. Contemporary archaeological discoveries in sacred places contribute to deepening reflection on the past and serve as an impetus for re-experiencing local history through the lens of faith. During the individual in-depth interviews (IDIs) I conducted with clergy, themes frequently emerged relating to pride in parish heritage, a sense of generational continuity, and the conviction that archaeology can support pastoral work by fostering bonds and strengthening community identity.

In this article, I adopt the perspective of the social archaeology of sacred heritage, understood as an approach that interprets archaeological research in terms of social, cultural, and religious processes. I draw inspiration from the concepts of Ian Hodder, who emphasizes that the meanings of archaeological discoveries are socially constructed and co-created by various groups of participants.¹

1. I. Hodder, *Multivocality and Social Archaeology*, in: *Evaluating Multiple Narratives: Beyond Nationalist, Colonialist, Imperialist Archaeologies*, eds. J. Habu, C. Fawcett, J.M. Matsunaga, Springer 2008, pp. 196–200, DOI: [10.1007/978-0-387-71825-5_13](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-0-387-71825-5_13); I. Hodder, *The "Social" in Archaeological Theory: An Historical and Contemporary Perspective*, in: *A Companion to Social Archaeology*, eds. L. Meskell, R.W. Preucel, Blackwell Publishing 2007, pp. 23–42, DOI: [10.1002/9780470693605.ch1](https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470693605.ch1).

I also refer to Michael Shanks and Christopher Tilley, who define archaeology as a social practice that reconstructs the past in the present.² This perspective is complemented by Laurajane Smith's approach, which conceives of heritage as a dynamic process through which communities perform and consolidate their identities.³

The aim of this article is: (1) to show how archaeological research conducted on church premises in Poland becomes a social and cultural practice in which local communities – particularly parish communities – reinterpret the past and co-create their sacred heritage; and (2) to demonstrate that archaeology on church premises, when analyzed from a social perspective, fulfills not only a cognitive but also an identity-forming, community, and spiritual function.

This article takes the form of a case study situated within the Polish socio-religious context, based on qualitative research conducted with Roman Catholic clergy, in which I analyze their experiences and interpretations of archaeological discoveries. In the following sections, I present the theoretical framework, research methods, analysis of the empirical material, and interpretation of the findings in light of the principles of the social archaeology of sacred heritage.

2. M. Shanks, Ch. Tilley, *Re-constructing Archaeology: Theory and Practice*, Cambridge University Press 1987.

3. L. Smith, *Uses of Heritage*, Routledge 2006.

The social archaeology of sacred heritage constitutes an interdisciplinary field of research that combines perspectives from archaeology, anthropology, religious studies, and heritage studies. Its subject concerns the relationships between human communities and sacred places, and its aim is to understand how the past is co-created, reinterpreted, and utilized in the context of contemporary social and spiritual needs. Within this framework, sacred places cease to be mere objects of conservation and protection and become active spaces of meaning, in which contemporary communities participate in the process of endowing history, memory, and the sacred with significance.

Contemporary Approaches of the Social Archaeology of Sacred Places

In the literature on the subject, it is increasingly emphasized that sacred heritage should be understood not as a closed collection of material objects but as a living, relational process.⁴ An example of this is the analysis of contemporary forms of participation in sacred places, including remote forms of presence such as online broadcasts of religious events. Kathryn Rountree notes that even in virtual

4. K. Rountree, *Transcending Time and Place in the Context of Covid-19: Imagination and Ritual in Modern Pagans' and Shamans' Creation of Sacred Space*, "Ciencias Sociales y Religión", 2021, Vol. 23, pp. 1–28, DOI: [10.20396/csr.v23i00.15030](https://doi.org/10.20396/csr.v23i00.15030).

conditions, it is possible to create a community experience and a sense of spiritual connection with a place. This indicates that the social archaeology of sacred heritage also encompasses intersubjective and technological dimensions of contact with the sacred, in which the past and present merge within the experience of community.⁵ Similar phenomena are observed by Innocent Pikirayi and Munyadziwa Magoma, who analyze the sacred landscapes of the Venda in South Africa.⁶ The authors point out that traditional knowledge, myths, and folk stories constitute an integral part of the system for protecting sacred places, and their weakening threatens not only the spiritual but also the ecological dimensions of heritage. Contemporary processes of industrialization and urbanization lead to the erosion of local practices and rituals; therefore, the researchers propose an integrated model of protection that combines ecological development, spirituality, and cultural management.⁷ This approach indicates that the social archaeology of sacred heritage cannot be considered apart from issues of sustainable development and spiritual ecology. Robert J. Wallis and Jenny Blain expand this perspective by analyzing the relationships between contemporary Pagan communities and archaeological sites in the United Kingdom.⁸ Their research demonstrates that ruins, stone circles, and burial mounds are not merely monuments but living places of ritual and spiritual experience. The authors note that in such contexts, archaeology interacts with religious practices, leading to the recontextualization of the past within contemporary belief systems. At the same time, these archaeological sites may become arenas of conflict among different stakeholder groups – scholars, heritage authorities, and religious communities. R. J. Wallis and J. Blain stress the need to develop participatory models of management that take into account diverse voices and values.⁹ Roberta Gilchrist, in turn, analyzing the medieval sacred landscapes of Europe, draws attention to the fact that these spaces are places of memory, conflict, and negotiation of meanings.¹⁰ Contemporary religious groups, local communities, and heritage institutions ascribe different, often contradictory, significances to them. The researcher emphasizes that the protection of sacred heritage requires recognition of its multilayered and dialogical character, in which history and spirituality co-create a space of meanings. Her position aligns with the analyses of Lynn Meskell regarding the UNESCO World Heritage Convention, highlighting the need to integrate cultural and ecological protection in a holistic manner that also embraces the spiritual and emotional relationships between people and sacred places.¹¹ Finally, Sarah Martin, Dan Witter, Dulcie O'Donnell, Raymond O'Donnell, Sandra Clark, Raymond O'Donnell Jr., and Badger Bates demonstrate that collaboration between archaeologists and indigenous communities enables the creation of a more sensitive and multidimensional model for the protection of sacred places.¹² The integration of scientific and traditional knowledge allows the archaeological narrative to be supplemented with local understandings of heritage, which constitutes one of the key principles of social

5. Ibidem.

6. I. Pikirayi, M. Magoma, *Retrieving Intangibility, Stemming Biodiversity Loss: The Case of Sacred Places in Venda, Northern South Africa*, "Heritage", 2021, Vol. 4, No. 4, pp. 4524–4541, DOI: [10.3390/heritage4040249](https://doi.org/10.3390/heritage4040249).

7. Ibidem.

8. J. Blain, R.J. Wallis, *Sacred Sites, Contested Rites/Rights: Contemporary Pagan Engagements with the Past*, "Journal of Material Culture", 2004, Vol. 9, No. 3, pp. 237–261, DOI: [10.1177/1359183504046893](https://doi.org/10.1177/1359183504046893); R.J. Wallis, J. Blain, *Sites, sacredness, and stories: Interactions of archaeology and contemporary paganism*, "Folklore", 2003, Vol. 114, No. 3, pp. 307–321, DOI: [10.1080/0015587032000145351](https://doi.org/10.1080/0015587032000145351).

9. Ibidem.

10. R. Gilchrist, *Sacred Heritage: Monastic Archaeology, Identities, Beliefs*, Cambridge University Press 2020.

11. L. Meskell, *UNESCO's World Heritage Convention at 40: Challenging the Economic and Political Order of International Heritage Conservation*, "Current Anthropology", 2013, Vol. 54, No. 4, pp. 483–494, DOI: [10.1086/671136](https://doi.org/10.1086/671136).

12. S. Martin, et al., *Wilyakali and Archaeologists Collaborating to Map the Journey of the Bronzewing Pigeon, Broken Hill, Western New South Wales*,

archaeology. Through such an approach, archaeology ceases to be a discipline external to the studied community and becomes a practice of co-participation and dialogue.¹³ To summarize, the review of the literature shows that the contemporary social archaeology of sacred heritage is characterized by interdisciplinarity, polyphony, and relationality. Sacred spaces are perceived as places where science, spirituality, local tradition, and ecology intersect. The protection of sacred heritage therefore requires an approach that integrates different forms of knowledge and experience, recognizing the emotional and symbolic dimensions of human contact with place.

Theoretical Foundations of the Social Archaeology of Sacred Heritage

Adopting this perspective, in my article I draw upon the principles of social archaeology and heritage studies. Within this approach, sacred heritage is understood as a process of the social construction of meanings, in which religious communities reinterpret the material traces of the past and incorporate them into spiritual, educational, and identity practices. Social archaeology, developed since the 1980s by Ian Hodder, emphasizes that artifacts do not possess universal meaning but acquire significance within the context of relationships between people, objects, and places.¹⁴ A key concept in his theory is *multivocality*, which assumes that the past can be interpreted from many parallel perspectives.¹⁵ Understood in this way, archaeology lends itself to the study of religious communities, in which archaeological discoveries become sources of new theological, local, and patriotic narratives.

Michael Shanks and Christopher Tilley discuss archaeology as a social practice in which the past is continually reconstructed in response to the contemporary needs of communities.¹⁶ In the context of sacred heritage, this means that archaeological discoveries not only reveal history but also create a new dimension of it – serving to build bonds, shape identity, and strengthen the spiritual rootedness of the community. Laurajane Smith, a representative of heritage studies, argues that heritage is a social practice rather than a collection of objects.¹⁷ In her view, “heritage” constitutes a “performance” – an act of enacting identity through which religious and local communities sustain values by interpreting the past. In this sense, both research processes and narratives about archaeological discoveries become forms of social action and communication of memory. Religious communities, referring to archaeological findings, treat them as specific markers of identity – symbols of continuity, memory, and local distinctiveness. Drawing on these concepts, I define the social archaeology of sacred heritage as an approach that examines how religious communities – particularly parish com-

Australia, “Archaeology in Oceania”, 2024, Vol. 59, No. 3, pp. 405–421, DOI: [10.1002/arco.5335](https://doi.org/10.1002/arco.5335).

13. Ibidem.

14. I. Hodder, *The “Social” in...*, op. cit., pp. 23–42.

15. I. Hodder, *Multivocality and Social...*, op. cit., pp. 196–200.

16. M. Shanks, Ch. Tilley, *Re-constructing Archaeology...*, op. cit.

17. L. Smith, *Uses of Heritage*, op. cit.

munities – reinterpret the material traces of the past as essential components of their own spiritual, historical, and cultural identity. This approach encompasses both the analysis of the archaeological discoveries themselves and the processes of the social life of heritage: its communication, symbolization, and practice within pastoral work and community life. The clergy with whom I conducted individual in-depth interviews (IDIs) are therefore not merely witnesses to archaeological research but active co-creators of the memory and meanings that such research generates within parishes and local communities of the faithful.

Theoretical Context of the Social Archaeology of Sacred Heritage

The social archaeology of sacred heritage constitutes an interdisciplinary approach that combines the achievements of social archaeology and heritage studies. At its core lies the conviction that the past is socially co-created and that the process of interpreting the material traces of the past is relational rather than merely cognitive. This understanding of archaeology makes it possible to recognize that archaeological research conducted on sacred places does not merely uncover material remnants of the past but also initiates a process of social construction of meanings in which various actors participate – clergy, faithful, archaeologists, conservators, and local authorities.

Ian Hodder initiated what is now known as *interpretative archaeology* in the 1980s, which rejected the positivist assumptions of processual archaeology. In his view, the past is not “read” from archaeological material in an objective manner but is constructed through the meanings attributed to artifacts within a cultural context.¹⁸ The researcher ceases to be an external observer and becomes a participant in a discourse in which interpretations of the past are created in dialogue with local communities, heritage users, and contemporary social needs. Ian Hodder introduced the concept of *multivocality*, emphasizing that the past has multiple parallel interpretations that should be acknowledged rather than unified.¹⁹ In the context of Polish sacred heritage, this means that archaeological discoveries on church premises may be interpreted simultaneously in scientific, religious, emotional, and local-historical dimensions. Statements from the clergy with whom I conducted individual in-depth interviews (IDIs) indicate precisely this multivocality: archaeological research is perceived by them as both a cognitive and spiritual event – something that strengthens the sense of continuity and sanctity of place. In turn, Michael Shanks and Christopher Tilley point out that archaeology is a social practice in which the past is “reconstructed” in the present.²⁰ Their approach – termed *critical*

18. I. Hodder, *The “Social” in...*, op. cit., pp. 23–42.

19. I. Hodder, *Multivocality and Social...*, op. cit., pp. 196–200.

20. M. Shanks, Ch. Tilley, *Re-constructing Archaeology...*, op. cit.

archaeology – focuses on the question of in whose interest and for what purposes the past is reconstructed. In relation to sacred heritage, this question makes it possible to see that archaeology is not neutral with respect to its religious context: in parishes, archaeological research often becomes a tool for constructing community narratives and a component of pastoral work. M. Shanks and Ch. Tilley also propose that archaeological research should be treated as an act of communication and participation rather than mere documentation. In Polish parishes, where the results of archaeological research are often presented during homilies or meetings with parishioners, this social function of archaeology can clearly be observed. Archaeological discoveries cease to be “scientific data” and become carriers of community memory – material points of reference for group identity. The perspective of social archaeology connects closely with the achievements of heritage studies, within which Laurajane Smith’s concept plays a key role. In her book *Uses of Heritage*,²¹ she challenges the dominant, materialistic model of heritage conservation, which focuses on the preservation of monuments. L. Smith argues that heritage is not a tangible object but a process and a social practice: it is the way in which communities interpret the past and use it to create meanings in the present. In this sense, *heritage* constitutes an act of identity – repeated, narrated, and experienced through rituals, celebrations, and storytelling.

In Polish parish communities, this process can be observed in a particularly vivid way. Archaeological discoveries, such as the remains of old churches, graves, cemeteries, or liturgical furnishings, are incorporated into the narrative of the endurance of faith and the “sacredness of place.” Their significance transcends the scientific dimension and becomes part of the everyday performance of the community, in which clergy and faithful jointly “enact” the history of the place as an element of their own spiritual identity.

Integrating the above concepts, I define the social archaeology of sacred heritage as an approach that examines the relationships between archaeological discoveries, religious communities, and processes of identity construction. It encompasses both the tangible and intangible aspects of heritage: artifacts, places, rituals, memory, emotions, and narratives. In this view, sacred heritage is a living process in which the past is reinterpreted through dialogue between science and faith, between the researcher and the community. Archaeology on church premises thus possesses not only cognitive potential but also community-building and pastoral potential. In this way, it intertwines with the theology of place, the cult of memory, and local patriotism, all of which together shape the contemporary understanding of parish identity in Poland.

21. L. Smith, *Uses of Heritage*, op. cit.

Methods

The research material was collected using the method of individual in-depth interviews (IDIs),²² conducted between 20 February and 29 May 2024 in selected parishes and rectorates across Poland. The group of respondents consisted of nine Roman Catholic clergymen managing church properties located in five voivodeships (Lower Silesia, Lesser Poland, Mazovia, Subcarpathia, and Podlaskie). In seven cases, these were parish priests, and in two cases, rectors of churches, both from urban areas (6) and rural areas (3). Prior to the commencement of each interview, every interlocutor was informed of the anonymization of the interview, the visible result of which was their openness in providing responses, which, in turn, contributed to a more accurate representation of the studied issue.

The research process consisted of the following stages: development of the research concept, consultations within the community of security and political science specialists regarding the undertaken initiative, preparation of the research tool (the scenario of the individual in-depth interview – IDI), purposive selection of respondents, conducting the interviews (IDIs), transcription of the recorded conversations, codification, categorization, analysis, synthesis, consultations on the research results, and the final preparation of this article. The research tool was developed with the assistance of experts in sociological research,²³ as were the principles regarding codification and categorization.²⁴ The process of respondent selection proceeded according to the following steps: (1) conducting an online query to identify parishes and rectorates in various voivodeships where archaeological research had been carried out; (2) telephone conversations with parish and rectorate office staff to inform them about the research and invite participation in the study (during these conversations, contact details of other clergymen were also obtained, some of whom agreed to take part in the study). The interviews were conducted in parishes and rectorates where archaeological research had previously taken place. Such an organization of the research process proved effective and optimal, and the collected material served as the basis for this publication.

The choice of a qualitative method, in this case individual in-depth interviews (IDIs), was dictated by the specific nature of the studied phenomenon, which is interpretative, contextual, and based on the subjective meanings attributed by respondents. The aim of the study was not to quantify the attitudes or opinions of clergymen towards archaeological research conducted on church premises but rather to understand the ways in which they ascribe meaning to these events, interpret their spiritual and community dimensions, and incorporate archaeological discoveries into the narratives of parish identity. In accordance with the qualitative approach, the researcher does not seek a sin-

22. See: M. Hennink, I. Hutter, A. Bailey, *Qualitative Research Methods*, SAGE Publications 2020; D. Silvermann, *Doing Qualitative Research*, SAGE Publications 2017; S. Kvale, *Doing Interviews*, SAGE Publications 2007.

23. D. Silvermann, *Doing Qualitative Research*, op. cit.; S. Kvale, *Doing Interviews*, op. cit.

24. S. Kvale, *Doing Interviews*, op. cit., pp. 33–66, 104–106.

gle “objective truth” but instead strives to reconstruct the meanings and interpretations that actors – in this case, clergymen – attribute to their own experiences. Archaeology on church premises and religious heritage concern objects of study deeply rooted in the symbolic, emotional, and spiritual spheres; therefore, they require methods that enable the capture of nuances in the language, values, and beliefs of the interlocutors. The IDI method allows for in-depth exploration of these meanings, providing respondents with the opportunity for free narration and reflection on their own role in the process of interpreting the past.²⁵ An important advantage of the qualitative method in this study was that it also enabled the examination of the social context in which parishes and religious communities function.

Archaeological research on church premises is a complex phenomenon that intertwines theological, cultural, historical, emotional, and organizational aspects. The qualitative method enables a comprehensive understanding of the multidimensionality of these relationships and the process of co-creating heritage by clergymen and the faithful. Furthermore, the use of a qualitative approach aligns with the perspective of the social archaeology of sacred heritage adopted in this article, which – following the concept of Ian Hodder²⁶ – assumes multivocality and the researcher’s co-participation in the process of interpretation. In this sense, the application of the qualitative method is not merely a technical choice but a theoretical decision – an expression of the conviction that the identity of religious communities and their relationship to the past and its material remains can only be understood through hermeneutic comprehension rather than quantitative measurement. The analysis of individual in-depth interviews (IDIs) thus makes it possible not only to describe facts but, above all, to reconstruct the ways of thinking and experiencing by clergymen regarding the relationships between the sacred, history, and the local community.

Codification and categorization of the data made it possible to distinguish five categories: (1) discovering local uniqueness; (2) building local identity; (3) barriers and challenges. The empirical material thus organized was subjected to content analysis.²⁷

When citing the statements of clergymen, I use the abbreviation IDI and the number assigned to the interviewed clergyman, e.g., (IDI 1), (IDI 2). The terms “clergyman,” “respondent,” “priest,” and “interlocutor” are used synonymously.

25. S. Kvale, S. Brinkmann, *Interviews: Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing*, SAGE Publications 2009.

26. I. Hodder, *Multivocality and Social...*, op. cit., pp. 196–200; I. Hodder, *The “Social” in...*, op. cit., pp. 23–42.

27. S. Kvale, *Doing Interviews*, op. cit., pp. 105–106.

Categories of Interpretation of the Meanings of Archaeological Research on Church Premises

The content analysis of nine individual in-depth interviews (IDIs) conducted with Roman Catholic clergymen in Poland made it possible to distinguish three categories describing the way in which the clergy interpret the significance of archaeological research conducted on church premises for the identity of local communities. These categories are: (1) discovering local uniqueness; (2) building community identity; and (3) barriers and challenges.

Discovering Local Uniqueness

The statements of the interviewed clergymen indicate that archaeological research conducted on church premises is perceived not only as a scientific endeavor but also as a process of revealing the uniqueness of a place and its community. Archaeology, in this sense, becomes a tool for parish self-understanding, restoring the memory of its historical roots and spiritual heritage. The discovery of material traces of the past strengthens the sense of community continuity, giving its history a tangible and emotional dimension.

Let us consider the respondents' statements: "Show that this community has its own history; that there were people here who contributed something and left good traces behind"²⁸; "what is characteristic of this place. What has this place been through. What were the vicissitudes"²⁹; "allowed us to learn more about the history of the parish. We learned something from history that we were not aware of before."³⁰ These statements reveal a belief that archaeological research on church premises does not so much "discover" something new as it brings back from oblivion meanings that connect present-day faithful with their spiritual predecessors and with the place itself.

From the perspective of social archaeology, this process can be described as an act of community meaning-making, in which the past is reinterpreted in light of current values and needs.³¹ Archaeological discoveries serve not only as evidence of the past but also as reference points for contemporary narratives about the community, its spiritual continuity, and the significance of the place in local history.

The clergymen also recognize a spiritual and symbolic dimension in archaeological research. Their statements include: "Showing certain things in sermons, in conversations, or at pastoral meet-

28. IDI 4.

29. IDI 1.

30. IDI 8.

31. I. Hodder, *The "Social" in...*, op. cit., pp. 23–42; M. Shanks, Ch. Tilley, *Reconstructing Archaeology...*, op. cit.

ings, where the uniqueness of this place is demonstrated³²; “this place has its own history; there were people here before who prayed in the same place, in the same temple³³; “can showcase uniqueness and awaken local patriotism and concern for tangible and intangible heritage. This heritage remains relevant to us.”³⁴ The last statement reveals the link between archaeology and the concern for “living heritage,” which aligns with Laurajane Smith’s approach,³⁵ who understands heritage as a social practice – a performance through which communities reconstruct and sustain their identity.

Respondents also emphasized that archaeological discoveries can inspire artistic and educational initiatives, becoming a stimulus for creative dialogue between the past and the present. As one respondent stated: “The discovery of remains (...) in our church led to the creation of a modern Way of the Cross. Also from the newly discovered (...) whose the authenticity of this book’s authorship was confirmed at that time as (...). From this, we also drew threads for the Stations of the Cross. Texts. It is a kind of dialogue between what is historical and what is contemporary.”³⁶ Moreover, the statements of the clergy demonstrate that the process of discovering the past is not passive – it engages the emotions, curiosity, and imagination of the faithful, as illustrated by one clergyman’s comment: “They’re digging something, they’re scratching around, they’re doing something. Some people approached us and asked what we were doing there, why we were doing this research. So it’s just human curiosity.”³⁷

This diagnosis indicates that for archaeological research to truly fulfil its integrative and educational function, it must be consciously incorporated into pastoral and social activities. Clergymen, in line with I. Hodder’s concept,³⁸ thus become “mediators of meaning” – individuals who help the community interpret the past and assign it spiritual significance in the context of the contemporary life of the parish. The statements cited confirm that, in the eyes of the clergy, archaeology has a deeply community-oriented dimension. As one respondent stated: “Archaeological research can show us how the cult of God has been shaped in a given place over many, many generations. (...) they can further explain or illuminate a certain part of this tradition to which we currently have no access.”³⁹ In this sense, discovering local uniqueness is a process of social and spiritual rootedness.

From the perspective of the social archaeology of sacred heritage, discovering local uniqueness should be understood as a complex process of co-creating meaning, in which the past, materiality, memory, and spirituality converge. Archaeological discoveries in parishes are not merely scientific facts but interpretative acts – moments in which the community of the faithful finds in the past a mirror of its own continuity.

32. IDI 1.

33. IDI 5.

34. IDI 6.

35. L. Smith, *Uses of Heritage*, op. cit.

36. IDI 2.

37. IDI 6.

38. I. Hodder, *Multivocality and Social...*, op. cit., pp. 196–200.

39. IDI 3.

Building Community Identity

In the statements of the clergy, the building of community identity appears as a process of embedding archaeological discoveries within the current practices of the parish: in preaching, in work with parish groups, in local commemorations, and in their incorporation into intangible heritage. Archaeological discoveries – “silent” in themselves – become meaningful signs only when they are interpreted, narrated, and “used” by the community. This mechanism aptly reflects the perspective of social archaeology and heritage studies, in which community identity is produced performatively through interpretative practices surrounding the material traces of the past.

Firstly, the respondents emphasize preaching and formative ministry as channels for “translating” archaeological discoveries into the language of community meaning. Consider the words of one clergyman: “Showing certain things in sermons, but also in conversations or pastoral meetings with groups, where the uniqueness of this place is presented: what is characteristic of it, what this place has gone through.”⁴⁰ Framed in this way, archaeological discoveries are not merely material traces of the past but a starting point for a narrative about shared roots and the continuity of the parish.

Secondly, the clergy clearly link archaeological discoveries with mechanisms of identification. One priest remarked: “[Parishioners] have the opportunity to identify with something concrete – with a certain parish and its history.”⁴¹ Here, identification is based on proximity and tangibility: on the “concrete” that can be shown, named, and integrated into the rhythm of parish life. Another respondent drew attention to generational continuity: “There were people here before us, who contributed something to this community, who left good traces behind.”⁴² Such symbolism of the past, reactivated in the present, helps to reinforce the sense of shared heritage.

Thirdly, the construction of identity also occurs through the inclusion of the faithful – both at the level of curiosity and cooperation: “People ask questions themselves. Sometimes there is a suggestion coming from the faithful: ‘I know an archaeologist, I know an art historian – if needed, please let us know, we would be happy to help, get involved, and do something good together.’”⁴³ This element of co-agency means that identity is not “decreed” but co-created – in line with the principles of multivocality and participation.

40. IDI 1.

41. IDI 5.

42. IDI 4.

43. IDI 8.

Fourthly, the clergy point to the interweaving of tangible and intangible heritage, in which archaeology strengthens and “legitimizes” living practices. One priest referred to the Passion Mysteries as intangible heritage: “It is a certain heritage that is transmitted orally, shaping the place over centuries. (...) Monuments can be woven into this intangible heritage. (...) In our parish, this heritage is still actuality.”⁴⁴ In this logic, archaeological discoveries serve to give meaning to ritual, while ritual socializes archaeological discoveries.

44. IDI 6.

Fifthly, respondents connect archaeological discoveries with local patriotism and the memory of place. This is illustrated by one clergyman’s statement: “This small town has its own history. (...) The anniversaries [of the battle] are always commemorated. (...) People have this sense; they identify with this history. (...) It defines their identity.”⁴⁵ Archaeological discoveries “anchor” these narratives – allowing people to point to specifics: where the old church once stood, where princes are buried, where the battle took place. In this sense, archaeology provides the material for community storytelling, making it more convincing and “familiar.”

45. IDI 7.

Sixthly, the community’s identity is built through places of memory and sacralized symbols centered around archaeological discoveries and local history. Consider the words of one priest: “In our parish, the church (...) is a place of patriotic gatherings. We have a Katyń Cross; a Way of the Cross is being created referring to the history of the Fatherland; inside, there is a mausoleum for those who perished – teachers, professors, and school students; the lower church was designed as the Katyń Chapel – soil was brought from Katyń, from Mednoye. For years, we have cultivated the cult of St. Andrew Bobola.”⁴⁶ This is a striking example of the convergence of religious tradition, national memory, and local history into a single identity practice – one that is described in heritage literature as transforming places and objects into “identity markers.”

46. IDI 9.

47. IDI 1.

48. IDI 5, IDI 8.

49. IDI 6, IDI 9.

Seventhly, the respondents note that identity does not build “itself”; it requires communicative effort and the continuous “presentation” of meanings within the parish space. Therefore, there is an emphasis on systematically “showing the uniqueness of the place,”⁴⁷ “telling its story,”⁴⁸ and linking archaeological discoveries with religious education and local events.⁴⁹ In this sense, the clergy act as mediators between the material and symbolic spheres – a role that theory (Ian Hodder⁵⁰) defines as participation in the creation of meaning.

50. I. Hodder, *Multivocality and Social...*, op. cit., pp. 196–200.



From the theoretical standpoint adopted in this article, the described practices confirm that community identity is the outcome of the social “processing” of the past. In the spirit of Ian Hodder, the past does not “speak for itself,” but begins to speak through social relations – through homilies, rituals, memorial symbols, and lay participation. According to Laurajane Smith’s approach, heritage functions as a performance of identity – the Passion Mysteries, Ways of the Cross, and memorial places become stages upon which the community performs and affirms itself. In the sense proposed by Michael Shanks and Christopher Tilley, this constitutes the reconstruction of the past in the present: archaeological discoveries are “put to use,” rewritten for pastoral and local purposes.

As a result, the building of community identity is revealed as a relational and performative process: from discovery, through storytelling, to integration into the rhythm of parish life. What is excavated and documented becomes something lived and co-created – and it is precisely in this sense that archaeology, within parish reality, “creates identity.”

Barriers and Challenges

The statements of the clergy reveal that the process of socially integrating the results of archaeological research into parish life is not without difficulties. Respondents pointed to both social and generational factors, as well as organizational, educational, and mental limitations, which hinder the full utilization of the potential of archaeological heritage in shaping the identity of local communities.

The respondents indicated a lack of interest among some parishioners, particularly within the younger generation. Let us examine the statements of the clergy: “There was no such special passion,”⁵¹ “the present generation is not interested in this at all. It’s a tunnel kind of thinking, which only includes what directly concerns them.”⁵² The clergyman here describes an individualistic attitude in which community, tradition, and history cease to be sources of identification. Continuing his statement, the respondent observes: “[The young] do not consider it in such categories, that this is a kind of distinction, a certain uniqueness. They are not interested in it.”⁵³ Such diagnoses point to a growing cultural gap between material cultural heritage and the sensitivity of contemporary audiences.

Next, the clergy drew attention to institutional and organizational aspects. The respondents’ statements show that priests usually lack sufficient archaeological, historical, or conservation

51. IDI 7.

52. IDI 2.

53. Ibidem.

training to properly interpret or present the results of archaeological research. Let us examine one of the statements: “Under normal circumstances, if someone is not educated in that field, since often parish priests don’t hold doctorates or have any deeper knowledge of history or auxiliary historical sciences, then it is difficult to work on it, because it requires not only willingness but also a certain specific knowledge.”⁵⁴ In this context, archaeology, although it arouses curiosity, requires a level of expert knowledge. This very problem – the lack of expert knowledge – results in archaeological discoveries often remaining outside everyday pastoral practice and failing to become a source of local pride.

Respondents also pointed to the lack of proper material and administrative infrastructure for storing or exhibiting archaeological findings. One priest explained: “We’re facing a permanent shortage of space. So here, we don’t have the smallest spaces to display things like that. For reasons of making certain choices about what to do, I wouldn’t consider a museum. More like pastoral ministry, not a museum. But if the parish has the resources, it can.”⁵⁵ Such situations mean that the results of archaeological research do not enter social circulation – they remain invisible both in the sacred space and in the awareness of the faithful. Theoretically, this can be interpreted as an unrealized potential of the “social life of things”⁵⁶: archaeological discoveries that could serve as carriers of identity remain “mute objects” devoid of narrative.

Furthermore, the clergy drew attention to discrepancies in the perception of heritage values among different social groups within the parish. They observed that some parishioners perceive archaeological research primarily as an inconvenience. One respondent stated: “When I was renovating the whole church and everything, they weren’t interested at all. They were just angry that there was a renovation disturbing their normal life.”⁵⁷ Such a narrative shows that archaeology – in parish practice – may be perceived not as a form of cognition or discovering the past but as an interference in the daily rhythm of community life. From the perspective of the social archaeology of sacred heritage, this is an example of the tension between the scientific and emotional economies of heritage: what for some holds cognitive value may, for others, become a source of discomfort.

Respondents also noted communication difficulties between clergy and archaeologists. The priests observed that archaeologists do not always manage to adjust the language of presenting research results to the language of the community. This is illustrated by one statement: “Here you definitely need a priest who will read this data well and be able to use it.”⁵⁸ This situation demonstrates that the

54. IDI 3.

55. IDI 2.

56. I. Hodder, *The “Social” in...*, op. cit., pp. 23–42.

57. IDI 2.

58. IDI 3.

mere completion of archaeological research is not sufficient – translation and interpretation of the results in the local context are necessary.

In addition, the clergy pointed out a lack of interest on the part of secular authorities and local institutions, which makes it difficult to use archaeological discoveries for educational and promotional purposes. One priest remarked: “There was no support from the city. (...) When we had completed all this work, I held a meeting with all the school principals from our parish. (...) They were delighted. (...) Then groups of young people from those schools came.”⁵⁹ From the perspective of heritage studies, such observations indicate that contemporary heritage is fragmentary and dependent on local narratives – its social potential manifests itself only where someone is able to activate it.

From a theoretical perspective, all these barriers confirm that sacred heritage is a field of negotiation rather than a homogeneous set of values.⁶⁰ The social archaeology of sacred heritage, following I. Hodder, M. Shanks, and Ch. Tilley, assumes that the meaning of heritage is not given once and for all – it must be continually reconstructed within the context of social relations, emotions, and interests. Within this framework, tensions, misunderstandings, or lack of engagement are not merely obstacles but symptoms of a dynamic process of meaning-making.

To summarize, the barriers in the social reception of archaeological research within parishes include: (1) differences, including generational ones, in the perception of the past; (2) lack of expert knowledge; (3) limited material and institutional resources; (4) communication difficulties between clergy and archaeologists; and (5) lack of systemic support from local authorities. Despite these challenges, the process – as the research shows – holds immense potential for community-building. It is precisely in overcoming these barriers that the potential of sacred heritage as a space for dialogue between science, faith, and the local community becomes most evident.

59. IDI 4.

60. L. Smith, *Uses of Heritage*, op. cit.

Conclusions

The aim of this article was to show how archaeological research conducted on church premises in Poland becomes a social and cultural practice in which local communities – particularly parishes – reinterpret the past and co-create their own heritage. It also aims to show that archaeology on church premises in Poland, when analyzed from a social perspective, serves not only a cognitive function but also plays a role in identity formation, community building, and spiritual life. The analysis of individual in-depth interviews (IDIs) conducted with clergy confirmed that archaeology

on church premises in Poland transcends the boundaries of scientific discourse, entering the sphere of religious, cultural, and community life. This shift from the domain of technical knowledge to the social and symbolic sphere makes it a significant element of identity processes at the local level.

From the perspective adopted in this article – the social archaeology of sacred heritage – the key point is the confirmation of the thesis that archaeology can “strengthen communities,” and to identify the mechanisms through which this occurs. The research demonstrated that the processes of interpreting the past are not neutral but relational and negotiated: between the past and the present, science and faith, the experience of archaeologists and the experience of clergy. Archaeological discoveries do not acquire meaning in themselves – they gain it only when they are “domesticated” by the community, incorporated into the rhythm of its practices and the language of its spirituality. In this sense, it is not the artifact that is crucial, but the relationship that forms around it. It is the relationship between object, place, and community in which – as Ian Hodder wrote⁶¹ – materiality acquires meaning within a network of social relations. Polish parishes where archaeological research has been conducted on church premises become laboratories of these relations – spaces where the past and present coexist, and the sacred intertwines with local experiences of memory. The findings indicate that the social archaeology of sacred heritage reveals the processual character of heritage – it is not a state of possession but a dynamic practice of constructing meanings. Archaeological discoveries are transformed into narratives, rituals, symbols, and markers of local pride. In this process, the clergy act as mediators between the world of science and the world of faith, translating the language of archaeology into the language of community experience. This mediating role – hitherto insufficiently explored in the literature – deserves further study, as it reveals the theological and anthropological functions of mediation in building community identity. At the same time, the collected data indicate that the social potential of archaeology is conditional and not fully realized. It requires deliberate cultural, educational, and institutional support, as well as spaces for collaboration between archaeologists, conservators, and clergy. Otherwise, sacred heritage will remain fragmented, and its meanings opaque to local communities. This leads to a broader question concerning the model of heritage management in Poland: is it possible to develop a practice in which the sacred, science, and the local community cooperate on equal terms? From a scientific standpoint, this research confirms the need to develop an interdisciplinary methodology combining social archaeology, contextual theology, and heritage studies. Such an approach allows not only for understanding how religious communities ascribe meaning to the past but also for designing models of heritage protection that do not reduce heritage to the status of an object but treat it as a living process of participation.

61. I. Hodder, *The “Social” in...*, op. cit., pp. 23–42.

From the perspective of further research, it is therefore worth asking not only what archaeology discovers but also for whom and in what way these discoveries are integrated into social memory. The answer to this question requires not so much additional excavations as reflection on how a community becomes the subject of its own past. It is precisely this moment – when the community begins to “read” archaeology as its own history – that marks the threshold where science meets life, and heritage attains the fullness of its meaning.

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