

Annual Meeting of the UISPP 4th Commission 2009 in Budapest Data Management and Mathematical Methods in Archaeology Special Issue: Quantitative Methods for the Challenges in 21st Century Archaeology

Getting the most out of your trenches. Trenching strategies, predictive modelling and risk management in Dutch archaeology.

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Abstract

In this paper, I want to discuss the application of quantitative methods in Dutch heritage management. After the introduction of commercial archaeology, a national system of quality norms was developed. One of the most fundamental issues in establishing these norms has been how to decide on the best way to set up archaeological survey. The Netherlands have chosen a remarkable approach in this by introducing risk management tools, based on quantitative theory and empirical observations on the success rate of survey methods. There were two main reasons for using this approach: firstly, it was thought necessary to 'level the playing field' in a commercial environment, so that bids from different companies can be compared in a transparent and relatively objective way. Secondly, it was felt that the actual choices made by the authorities on where to do survey, and what to aim for, should be founded on clear criteria as well.

Firstly, I will discuss the role of predictive modelling as a baseline for making choices on where to do survey. This is probably the most problematic aspect at the moment: the predictive maps used are not based on clear quality norms and may therefore differ in reliability between regions. Secondly I will demonstrate how new guidelines for trial trenching survey were set up. By using simulation results, it proved possible to provide a quantitative baseline for evaluating the potential success of survey strategies. The paper will further try to adress a more philosophical point: why is it that archaeologists are so reluctant to use quantitative methods to their full potential, even when the added value is rather obvious?