ROPA Membership Moves Toward Membership Vote in the Fall

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The proposal to establish a Register of Professional Archaeologists (ROPA) is moving toward a vote this fall by the memberships of both the Society for American Archaeology (SAA) and the Society for Historical Archaeology (SHA). The Archaeological Institute of America (AIA) is scheduled to consider the proposal in December. ROPA is based on the existing structure of the Society of Professional Archeologists (SOPA) but would come into being as a new organization under the sponsorship of SAA and the other major archaeological organizations. The proposal has been endorsed by the SAA board as a way to promote professionalism in archaeology and to respond to growing concerns within the field about ethics, professional standards, and public accountability (cf. Lynott and Wylie 1995; Lipe and McGimsey 1995; McGimsey et al. 1995; Lipe 1996; Lipe and Redman 1996; Lipe and Kintigh 1997).

The ROPA concept was initiated at a joint meeting of the SAA and SOPA ethics committees in 1994, and the present proposal was developed by an SAA-SHA-AIA task force (see below). SAA sponsored an open forum to discuss the formation of ROPA at the 1996 Annual Meeting in New Orleans, and the boards of SAA, SHA, and SOPA subsequently agreed to put it to a vote of their members. SOPA voted in favor of the proposal this past fall (Lipe and Kintigh 1997). If the members of both SAA and SHA approve it in the coming balloting, ROPA will be established and SOPA will become inactive.

Becoming a registered professional archaeologist (RPA) would be voluntary, but if ROPA is established, the sponsoring societies will encourage their professional members to join. To become an RPA, an archaeologist will have to meet basic standards of training and experience and will agree to abide by ROPA's explicit code of ethics and standards of research performance. Registered archaeologists will also agree to participate in a peer-administered grievance process should their professional work or behavior receive a credible challenge. This is a central feature of ROPA--having a mechanism for the enforcement of standards and ethics. The major archaeological societies currently have ethical codes, but no mechanisms for enforcing them. Initially, the ROPA code of ethics, standards, and grievance procedures would be those currently maintained by SOPA.

In American society, numerous occupations have developed ways of publicly documenting their members' rights to be called professionals and of holding those members to account for a
professional level of ethical behavior and job performance. Examples include not only medicine, law, engineering, and accounting, but numerous research and managerial specialties, as well as a number of trades. In general, public certification of professionalism develops in fields where there needs to be public confidence in the practitioner's ability to perform independently, with a high level of skill, and without taking unfair advantage of the public trust. Mechanisms for ensuring public confidence include in some cases rigorous qualifying exams and quasijudicial grievance procedures. As archaeology has increasingly come to serve legally mandated public policies, and as public interest in archaeology has grown, an increasing need has been recognized for the field of archaeology to develop and promote professional standards and measures to ensure public accountability.

The SOPA approach, which will become the starting point for ROPA, has been developed to fit the field of archaeology. It does not assume a rigid, one-size-fits-all type of training, and does not require an examination for registration. Rather, it is designed to recognize those archaeologists who have crossed a basic threshold of training and experience, and who have publicly declared themselves accountable to basic standards of ethics and research performance. It is a system designed to build a solid foundation for archaeological professionalism. If a sufficient number of archaeologists become registered, they can be extremely effective in promoting ethical use of the archaeological record and in increasing public confidence that archaeology is a professional field with high standards. By jointly sponsoring ROPA, the major archaeological societies can take a major step to establish and enforce basic expectations for ethical and professional performance in the field. Each of these societies serves a number of interests and has a broad base of membership including nonprofessionals and students, as well as professionals; hence their missions extend well beyond issues of professionalism. Sponsorship of ROPA will enable these societies to focus and implement those aspects of their missions that deal specifically with ethics, standards, and professional accountability. The alternative would be to create differing certification programs within each society.

Additional background information on the development of the ROPA proposal is provided in the citations below. The article by McGimsey et al. (1995) also includes a copy of the current SOPA Code of Ethics, Standards of Research Performance, and Outline of Grievance Procedures. This information can also be found on the SAA web site (http://www.saa.org/News/ropa_proposal.html). The SOPA web site (http://www.smu.edu/~anthrop/sopa.html) presents additional information about SOPA and also includes the Code of Ethics and Standards of Research Performance. Questions about the ROPA proposal can be directed by email to Bill Lipe at lipe@wsu.edu or to Keith Kintigh at kintigh@asu.edu.

References

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Some Questions and Answers

Question: Why the name change from Society of Professional Archeologists (SOPA) to Register of Professional Archaeologists (ROPA)?
Answer: ROPA will be a new organization that will not provide a full range of services to a broadly defined membership (as do SAA, SHA, and AIA) but will serve an explicitly defined group of professionals and the profession of archaeology. The name makes it clear that the organization will not test (i.e., certify) its members but will list (i.e., register) those individuals who have obtained full professional status and who have agreed to be held publicly accountable to a code of ethics and to standards of performance with regard to their professional activities. Finally, registering rather than certifying its members ensures that they become Registered Professional Archaeologists (RPAs) rather than Certified Professional Archaeologists. Perhaps the world already has enough CPAs!

Question: Would an RPA be required to joined the SAA, AIA, and/or SHA?
Answer: No, but application fees and annual registration fees would be higher for RPAs who were not members of any of the sponsoring organizations. It can be expected that the great majority of RPAs would be members of one or more of the sponsoring societies.

Question: Would a member of the SAA, AIA, or SHA with professional qualifications be required to join ROPA?
Answer: No, but she/he would be strongly encouraged to do so by the leadership of those societies.

Question: How would this plan benefit archaeology as a discipline?
Answer: It would enhance archaeology's image as a true profession to the extent that ROPA's unified code and standards are accepted by a majority of professional practitioners. Professional credibility would also be enhanced because RPAs will have pledged to be held publicly accountable for any failure to comply with the code or standards.
Question: Why should an academic or a government archaeologist with institutional job security want to become an RPA?

Answer: All archaeologists are equal partners in their responsibility to act as stewards of the resource base, conduct archaeological research in an ethical manner, and behave responsibly toward archaeology’s several publics. If a majority of archaeological practitioners—whatever their work environment—accept and become accountable to principles of professional ethics and standards, it will be much easier for the profession of archaeology to act against unacceptable behavior within its own ranks and to make the case to the public against destruction of the archaeological record and trafficking in looted antiquities.

Question: Would SOPA cease to exist?

Answer: In order to enhance the effectiveness of ROPA, SOPA would become dormant (see Section D, "Transition" in the proposal). ROPA would be created as a separate not-for-profit organization with a structure similar to SOPA but with a somewhat different make-up of the board of directors. ROPA would serve the profession in much the same way that SOPA does now—by evaluating the qualifications of applicants, promulgating a code of ethics and standards of research performance, and conducting grievance proceedings.

Question: Would the sponsoring organizations (SAA, SHA, and AIA) control ROPA?

Answer: No. ROPA would have its own board, and none of the sponsoring societies would have a controlling voice in it. Because each sponsoring society would provide financial and moral support to ROPA, however, each would be represented on the ROPA board. The three officers of ROPA would be elected directly by the RPAs. All board members, whether elected at-large by the RPAs or representing the sponsoring societies, would themselves have to be RPAs.

Question: Would SOPA’s standards be reduced or compromised?

Answer: No. The ROPA board of directors would continue to have responsibility for the code, standards, and grievance procedures. While it is anticipated that there would be future changes to reflect the concerns of a broader constituency (e.g., archaeologists working outside the U.S., archaeologists whose primary data source is collections rather than fieldwork), there is no reason to doubt that the integrity of the code, standards, and grievance procedures would be protected and retained.

Question: Would there be substantial risk to the sponsoring societies of financial liability resulting from ROPA-related lawsuits?

Answer: ROPA will be a separate organization and will be set up in such a way that a "firewall" will be maintained between it and SAA. SAA’s existing bylaws authorize the development of formal relationships with other organizations, and the Council of Affiliated Societies has operated for some years under a type of SAA sponsorship. Legal counsel has expressed the opinion that there is little chance that a lawsuit against a sponsoring organization that stemmed from ROPA actions would succeed, even though total immunity can never be guaranteed. Low-cost liability insurance, like that now carried by SOPA, is available to cover claims that might be assessed against a sponsoring organization. SOPA’s 20 years of experience without any such suit being brought attests to the fairness and viability of its grievance procedures.
**Question:** Is there any guarantee that an RPA would always perform to the full satisfaction of employers, granting agencies, and professional colleagues?

**Answer:** Of course not—no more than that a fully qualified, experienced physician will always make an accurate diagnosis or that a licensed barber will always give her/his clients a satisfactory haircut. However, should any member’s performance violate the code and/or standards, a grievance may be filed against that individual by anyone, member or nonmember alike, and the RPA charged will voluntarily submit to the grievance process.

**Question:** What is to prevent the ROPA grievance process from being used to pursue trivial complaints or personal vendettas?

**Answer:** The grievance process would be a multistage one, which would start with inquiries and fact-finding by a grievance officer, who would have the authority not to proceed with a grievance, should the officer determine the grievance was groundless based on private, initial inquiries (usually by telephone). SOPA’s experience is that this outcome is not uncommon and seems to be effective in eliminating frivolous grievances without a substantial impact on the accused party. The grievance process would continue to be modeled on the one successfully developed and implemented by SOPA over a period of more than 20 years. SOPA’s experience has been that only the most serious and well-founded complaints move through the full process.

**Question:** Will ROPA actively seek out cases of possible misbehavior to investigate?

**Answer:** No. The grievance process is triggered only by a complaint, and as noted above, there would have to be clear evidence that a serious issue was involved before the challenged RPA would be asked to appear before a hearings board.

**Question:** How would this benefit individual archaeologists?

**Answer:** Individuals will be publicly identified as professionals by virtue of having met ROPA standards of training and experience and of having agreed to abide by a code of professional ethics and standards of performance. Such public identification as a professional may assist in employment and career advancement. For all archaeologists, including those in secure positions, there are both practical and philosophical benefits in identifying with a major effort to ensure professionalism in the use of the archaeological resource base. As archaeologists, each of us is often both the first and the final “steward of the past.” If each of us does not accept full public accountability for our actions with respect to the archaeological record, how can we expect others to act in a responsible manner?

**Question:** Have existing SOPA standards been effective outside that organization?

**Answer:** A number of public agencies have modeled their requirements for archaeological training and experience on SOPA’s standards, and SOPA’s code of ethics and standards of research performance have been widely cited as examples of basic principles for archaeological professionalism. With sponsorship by the major archaeological organizations and a greatly increased membership, it can be expected that ROPA will be even more effective in promoting a general understanding and acceptance of what it means to be a professional archaeologist.

**Question:** I know a certain archaeologist who is a member of SOPA, and, in my opinion, this person is not a good archaeologist. In that case, why should I believe that the transformation of SOPA into ROPA will do anything to increase the level of professionalism in American
The existence of a grievance procedure will give archaeologists a chance to actually do something about violations of basic ethical and professional standards, instead of just complaining to each other. In fact, if you believed a Registered Professional Archaeologist had seriously violated basic standards, it would be your responsibility to bring it to the attention of the grievance officer, whether you are an RPA or not. You must keep in mind, however, that both SOPA and its proposed successor, ROPA, are designed to establish and enforce minimal basic requirements of archaeological qualifications, ethics, and performance. The process is not primarily designed to identify and reward excellence, as desirable as that might be; it is designed to define what is minimally required for someone to be called a professional archaeologist. A core concept is that individuals who become registered have publicly declared that they will be held accountable through the grievance process should their qualifications, ethics, or research performance be challenged. This is what will give the register its moral force for defining professionalism both within archaeology and to the general public. All archaeologists have a stake in establishing and maintaining these standards of ethical and professional behavior.

**Question:** How will ROPA impact CRM firms?
**Answer:** Registration will be the responsibility of the individual archaeologist. RPAs in consulting firms will be responsible for the quality of the field and laboratory work conducted under their supervision.

**Question:** Can we expect future modifications in the code of ethics and performance standards?
**Answer:** Undoubtedly. With the inclusion of more archaeologists and diverse interests, the ROPA board will certainly wish to consider promulgating new standards to better address various levels of field experience, work in foreign lands, and issues not addressed in the initial proposal.

**Question:** What will happen if ROPA is not formed?
**Answer:** SOPA will continue to exist. If SAA wishes to promulgate an enforceable code of ethics and performance standards without ROPA, it could do this independently but with a reduced scope and larger startup and operating costs (because SHA and AIA would not be cosponsors). By developing different sets of ethical codes and standards (and the organizations involved could go in this direction), we create confusion for government officials, the public, and, potentially, ourselves.

**Question:** Will the formation of ROPA lead to the development of state licensing of archaeologists?
**Answer:** Interest in licensing has been expressed in some states and by some segments of the archaeological profession. Licensing is common in many professions and trades that serve the public. Moves toward state licensing would have to originate at the state level, and such licensing would be controlled by state governments or state commissions appointed by state government. If ROPA is formed, it will be positioned to have input into state licensing and to provide a national model for the types of training and performance standards that should be required by states that choose to pursue the development of licensing programs for archaeologists.
Question: Will ROPA become a drain on the SAA budget and hence affect SAA's ability to carry out other programs of benefit to its members?
Answer: Sponsorship of ROPA will require an initial allocation of $7,500 by SAA to help fund start-up costs, and an annual contribution to ROPA of $5,000. The annual contribution cannot be raised without the consent of the SAA board. To the extent that ROPA sponsorship could result in increased membership in SAA, some of these costs will be offset. The annual contribution to ROPA will represent only half of one percent of SAA's total operating budget and is sustainable within that budget. The SAA board supports ROPA sponsorship because it will help further basic SAA goals in a timely, cost-efficient manner.

Question: I finished my degree years ago and hear that it is very difficult to put together the information needed to become SOPA member. Will this remain a problem in applying for RPA status.
Answer: Over the past several years, SOPA has simplified its application process, and the ROPA board can be expected to continue to make the process as user friendly as possible. On the other hand, it will remain essential that basic levels of training and experience be credibly documented (see section 2, "Application and Registration") in the proposal.

Question: Why do both SAA and SHA need to approve ROPA for it to proceed?
Answer: Having multiple sponsors is necessary to make the organization economically viable and to support an initial drive for new applications. It also makes sense for both SAA and SHA to be sponsors, given that a significant number of professionals belong to only SAA or SHA. ROPA must be broad based to succeed.

Question: I am all for archaeological ethics and would be willing to support ROPA financially to enhance ethical behavior in the profession. However, I cannot see exposing myself to a large financial and legal liability over a frivolous grievance.
Answer: As noted above, every effort is made to screen out grievances that do not appear to have a solid basis. ROPA would not levy fines as a penalty. It depends on moral force as a sanction; the worst outcome of a grievance case would be that an individual's registration would be publicly revoked. As in many other professions, the grievance process is conducted by peers rather than lawyers. The grievance process operates within rules that ensure fair treatment and orderly consideration of evidence.

Question: Can ROPA really make a difference?
Answer: Yes, if a sufficient number of archaeologists participate, so that registration becomes an expectation both for current members of the profession and for the students who are studying to enter the profession. If a "critical mass" of archaeologists becomes registered, it will be much easier for the profession to police itself. Furthermore, archaeologists will have much more credibility when they tell the public that responsible use of the archaeological record requires a basic level of training and adherence to appropriate standards.

Bill Lipe is the retiring president of SAA and Keith Kintigh is the retiring secretary of SAA.