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SAA to Promote Professional Standards through ROPA Sponsorship

Bill Lipe and Vin Steponaitis

An essential part of the Society for American Archaeology's mission is to promote high ethical and professional standards for the conduct of archaeology. It is part of our obligation to the public, who support our work, to the fragile archaeological record that

supplies us with evidence of the past, and to ourselves, as dedicated practitioners of the science and art of archaeology. The formation of the Register of Professional Archaeologists (ROPA) under joint sponsorship by SAA and the Society for Historical Archaeology (SHA) gives the archaeological community the opportunity to develop and enforce an effective program of professional ethics and

standards. Past SAA statements regarding standards and ethics have provided archaeologists with informal guidance but have lacked the sanctions that provide the accountability required by a true profession. ROPA provides those sanctions. Becoming a Registered Professional Archaeologist (RPA) will be

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Remember, the regular \$35 application fee for ROPA will be waived through 1998. ROPA application forms will be available at the ROPA booth in Seattle, or can be downloaded from SAAweb, or requested from the SAA Central Office.

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ROPA

voluntary, but we encourage all SAA members who work as professionals—whether in an academic or non-academic setting—to register with ROPA and hence to become publicly accountable for upholding an explicit set of research standards and ethical practices. By joining and supporting ROPA, we can ensure that the term “professional archaeologist” has greater credibility to the society that supports us.

ROPA became a reality in 1997 when the members of both SAA and SHA voted to undertake its sponsorship. These votes followed approval by the members of the Society of Professional Archeologists (SOPA) of the transformation of their organization into ROPA under the sponsorship of the major national archaeological societies.

A transitional ROPA board has been established and met for the first time on January 10, 1998, in Atlanta in conjunction with the SHA annual meeting. Board members include current SOPA President Bill Lees (Oklahoma Historical Society); Secretary John Hart (New York State Museum); Treasurer Rochelle Marrinan

(Florida State University); SAA Representative Bill Lipe (Washington State University), and SHA Representative Vergil Noble (National Park Service Midwestern Archeological Center). Also attending were SAA President Vin Steponaitis, SHA President Henry Miller, SHA Secretary-Treasurer Stephanie Rodeffer, and Society of Archaeological Sciences representative Patrick Martin. The Transitional Board will meet again in conjunction with the SAA’s annual meeting in Seattle. By the time this article appears, the board will have developed the ROPA application form, and will have drafted a set of bylaws.

History

With the explosive growth of North American archaeology during the middle 1970s, there was considerable sentiment within the archaeological community to establish a certification process for professional archaeologists, similar to programs available in most fields having a substantial public service component. SOPA was established in 1976 as an independent organization designed to provide certification as part of an overall program of establishing and promoting professional standards and ethics in archaeology. In its 22 years of operation, SOPA has developed an effective grievance process to consider charges of unprofessional or unethical conduct brought against its members. The standards of training, experience, and research performance promulgated by SOPA have also been influential over the years in shaping the standards adopted by a number of states and federal agencies. As of the end of 1997, SOPA had approximately 750 members. The SOPA web page (<http://www.smu.edu/~anthrop/sopa.html>) provides additional background on

SOPA and on its Standards of Research Performance, Code of Professional Ethics, and Grievance Process.

Despite a number of successes, SOPA never attracted the critical mass of professional archaeologists needed to make it truly effective in establishing widely accepted standards of professionalism and in addressing complaints about substandard work or unethical practices. Discussions of gaining broader support in the archaeological community for a SOPA-like program of standards and grievance procedures began in 1994 with a joint meeting of the SAA and SOPA Ethics Committees. A task force was eventually formed with membership from SAA, SHA, SOPA, and the Archaeological Institute of America (AIA), and this group proposed the formation of ROPA as an independent registry under the sponsorship of the major archaeological societies. The development of the ROPA proposal has been discussed in a series of articles in the *SAA Bulletin* [especially Vol. 13 (2) and (3), and Vol. 15 (3)]. As noted, in 1997 the memberships of SOPA, SAA, and SHA all approved the change by mail ballot. The AIA is now considering the proposal and expects to make a decision regarding sponsorship in 1998.

How Will ROPA Work?

SOPA continues to operate, but will become dormant as an organization when ROPA is formally constituted in the near future. ROPA will start by adopting most of the procedures that have been developed by SOPA. It will have its own board, which will be responsive to the wishes of the RPAs and the sponsoring organizations. ROPA’s program for establishing, promoting, and enforcing standards will, of course, continue to evolve in the future.

Most professions have some type of certification system that provides a way of sanctioning individuals who display grossly unprofessional conduct. Many of these systems are heavily loaded toward regulating entry into the profession. This is usually accomplished by rigorous testing, and those who are certified are often then required to take additional prescribed coursework or training from time to time in order to maintain certification. However, the field of archaeology is so diverse—both intellectually and methodologically—that a testing-based approach is impractical for satisfying registration requirements. Instead, the ROPA application focuses on documenting basic educational achievement and appropriate archaeological experience. The main emphasis of ROPA is, therefore, not on establishing a uniform program of training requirements or a lofty hurdle for entry into the profession, but on professional performance itself. The core of the program is a code of ethics and standards for research performance, coupled with a peer-based mechanism to provide sanctions in cases where professional performance can be determined to have fallen short of the standards.

The central concept of ROPA is public accountability. By becoming RPAs, professionals agree to uphold a specific ethical code and set of research standards. At the same time, they declare their accountability to the code and standards by agreeing to participate in a grievance process if there is a credible challenge to their ethical or research performance,

and to accept sanctions—including public revocation of their registration—if the peer-based grievance panel determines they acted in an unprofessional manner.

The key point is that ROPA provides a mechanism through which a member of the public, or a client, or another archaeologist, can ask that the actions of an RPA be reviewed by a panel composed of other professional archaeologists. There are checks and balances to weed out petty, unfounded, or “political” complaints. This process provides archaeologists with a way to do more than just talk about standards and ethics—it provides an actual mechanism by which professionals can police their own community. If an RPA has, in fact, misrepresented his or her qualifications, has behaved unethically, or has displayed major deficiencies in the conduct of a research project, those who are concerned about it can file a complaint through ROPA; if peers determine there is substance to the complaint, the grievance process is set in motion. Of course, as it has worked under SOPA, this process has often resulted in resolution of the problems short of actual censure or expulsion—that counts as a “win” for the system, too.

ROPA is designed to “build a floor” under professionalism in archaeology and to ensure that legitimate complaints are heard. It is not designed to ensure that everyone learned everything they should have learned in school or that they will always keep up with the literature. It will not automatically and painlessly identify and root out all substandard work. It will not accomplish its goal if those who are concerned about violations of ethics and standards only complain to each other and never use ROPA’s mechanisms for having peers investigate such violations. But it does provide an established, concrete structure and mechanism for promoting professional standards and public accountability among archaeologists.

How Will ROPA Be Organized and Funded?

ROPA will be just what its name implies—a register of professionals. It will not be a membership organization in the ordinary sense, in that it will not host meetings at which individuals read scholarly papers, nor will it publish a journal. ROPA will be a separately chartered organization with its own officers, board, budget, and central office. It will be legally separate from the sponsoring societies, and there will be a legal “firewall” to keep any lawsuits against ROPA from spreading to its sponsors and vice versa. The bulk of the ROPA budget will be furnished by annual registration fees paid by the RPAs, plus application fees paid by prospective new RPAs. However, each sponsoring organization will contribute \$5,000 per year to the ROPA budget. SAA’s annual contribution will not be increased without the express approval of SAA’s board. In addition, SAA is committed to a one-time expenditure of \$7,500 to assist in the establishment of ROPA.

The ROPA board will consist of a president, president-elect, and secretary-treasurer who are elected by the RPAs, and a board member elected or appointed by each of the sponsoring societies (currently SAA and SHA). The board members who represent the sponsors must themselves be RPAs. SAA’s representative on the ROPA board will be charged with bringing issues of importance to the RPAs to the attention of the

SAA board, and the existence of a large number of RPAs who are also SAA members will also ensure that such issues receive the attention of the SAA leadership.

The annual registration fee will initially be \$45 per year for RPAs who belong to one of the sponsoring societies and \$125 per year for those who do not. The application fee of \$35 is being waived for the duration of 1998 as an incentive for archaeologists to apply to become RPAs.

The ROPA central office has not been established yet but will be independent of the sponsoring societies. A ROPA web page will be established, and a ROPA news column will be published regularly in the *SAA Bulletin* or the *SHA Newsletter*.

Concluding Remarks

Membership in a broad-based, multifunctional society such as SAA is open not only to professionals, but to students, amateur archaeologists, teachers, and others who would not claim to be professionals but who nonetheless support archaeological education and research. This is as it should be, but it means that SAA membership alone does not signify that an individual is or is not a professional archaeologist. Furthermore, although part of SAA’s mission is to promote ethical behavior and high standards of archaeological research, SAA has no mechanisms for identifying or sanctioning violations of ethical and professional standards by its members. ROPA provides SAA members with such a mechanism, as well as a way for them to publicly document their professional training and commitment to professional ethics and standards.

By sponsoring ROPA, and encouraging its professional members to register, SAA is taking a significant step forward in carrying out its mission. Sponsorship of ROPA by SAA, SHA, and (we hope) AIA, provides an opportunity for the field of archaeology to establish a practical, widely accepted system for promoting professionalism and for dealing with problems in its own ranks. Hence, we urge SAA members to apply for registration. There will be a ROPA booth at the annual meeting in Seattle at which application forms can be obtained. They can also be requested from the SAA central office and can be downloaded from SAAweb. ☐

Bill Lipe is SAA representative to the ROPA Transition Board and Vin Steponaitis is SAA president.

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