

Aerial Archaeological Training Week Poland 1998

by Cathy Stoertz

The Aerial Archaeology Research Group has become increasingly active in projects designed to reach a wider audience of archaeologists and others engaged in the management of cultural and heritage resources. Especially during the last decade both the need and the opportunities for liaison between archaeologists across the whole of Europe have expanded dramatically, and AARG has sought to play its part in the establishment of new networks for the exchange of skills and ideas.

In partnership with a variety of academic and national bodies, members of AARG have been developing a training course offering an intensive introduction to all aspects of aerial archaeology. The programme, based upon practical exercises and group discussion, aims to present aerial archaeology as an integrated process of reconnaissance and photography, interpretation, transcription and mapping, and associated research. It comprises a ground school, to cover the processes of interpretation and mapping by which aerial photographs may be used in archaeological research, and an air school to provide first hand experience in reconnaissance and photography. The prototype course, which took place in Hungary in 1996, attracted an international membership of colleagues from former Eastern Bloc countries.

AARG's second European training course took place in early July 1998 in Leszno, western Poland. This time, the course was primarily designed to meet the needs of the Polish Inspectors of Archaeological Heritage, and was sponsored by the State Service for Protecting the Historical Monuments of Poland, and the Institute of Prehistory at Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznan. Further assistance was received via a grant from the Association for Cultural Exchange, with moral support from the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England (RCHME) and its sister commission in Wales (RCAHMW).

Building upon the successful formula developed during the first course, a team of instructors was recruited from within the Research Group membership, and the AARG Repertory Company and Travelling Circus (two performances daily) took to the skies, and wielded the stereoscope, for a second time. The Ground School comprised Rog Palmer, Toby Driver and Fiona Small from the AARG committee, Dave MacLeod from RCHME (winner of the 1998 Golden Phrase Book Award) and Michael Doneus from the University of Vienna, with yours truly, the AARG Chairman, as Ringmaster (or Headmistress?). Otto Braasch co-ordinated the Air School and provided plane, piloting and air-borne instruction; a second aircraft and pilot, courtesy of the Czech Academy of Sciences, was arranged and accompanied by Martin Gojda. A number of logistical challenges were introduced by factors such as fewer aircraft and more

students than on the 1996 course in Hungary, coupled with an "interesting" runway and initially uncooperative weather conditions. Bob Bewley mastered the fiendish complexities of juggling 23 students into 2 (and later 3) aircraft on a daily basis, whilst also managing to solve "Braasch's equation" (long-range fuel tanks + short runway = lightweight passengers on first flight) with the utmost tact and diplomacy.

The practical organisation and advance preparation carried out by Paul Barford of the Polish Inspectorate and Wlodek Raczkowski and his students from the University of Poznan enabled the whole project to run remarkably smoothly and lightened the tasks of the teaching team in all respects. Among other things, support had been obtained from various sources in Leszno: films were supplied by Kodak, and local fast processing and printing allowed students to examine the results of earlier flights whilst waiting for their next sortie. The loan of 3 computers by a local firm allowed the Ground School to cover aspects of digital transformation and mapping more thoroughly than before.

There were the usual challenges and adventures: Northern European weather has defied even the most ingenious powers of organisation this summer, and virtually all flights were rained off during the first 3 days. Additional flights in a Wilga hired from Leszno airfield later in the week made up for lost air time, but were firmly placed in the "adventure" category by some students.

The official statistics - numbers of flights, air hours and photographs - are recorded below, but of course tell only part of the story. The long term achievements will be of much greater importance. Information received from the Polish Inspectorate indicates that several Inspectors have already organised funds and started flying, so the national air photographic archive is expanding even now. The task of integrating air photo information within a hitherto site-based Monuments Record is being faced: the almost philosophical questions of what constitutes a "site" and how to deal with landscapes produce eerie echoes of discussions still taking place within organisations which have had far longer to address the same issues.

Not for the first time, I was reminded that archaeologists are in the communication business - and, especially in the case of aerial archaeology, in the translation business as well. A great deal of translation was practised during the week in Leszno - sites into photos; photos into drawings and records and thereby into accessible information. Of course in an international group, literal linguistic translation and communication was also much in evidence, demonstrating as always that the informal achievements of a meeting like this are at least as important as the formal ones. From a personal point of view, it was the sort of experience that reminds me just how much I enjoy aerial archaeology and the community that surrounds it. It was a tremendous privilege to be given yet another opportunity to spread the propaganda a bit further.

