

The Conservation of Archaeological Materials

Current trends and future directions

Edited by

Emily Williams
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BAR International Series 2116
2010

Published by

Archaeopress
Publishers of British Archaeological Reports
Gordon House
276 Banbury Road
Oxford OX2 7ED
England
bar@archaeopress.com
www.archaeopress.com

BAR S2116

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ISBN 978 1 4073 0657 5

Printed in England by Blenheim Colour Ltd

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Oxford
OX2 7BP
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COLLABORATION AND COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT IN ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONSERVATION

Glenn Wharton

Abstract

The impact of archaeological conservation goes far beyond the decisions made by archaeologists and conservators. Constituencies with stakes in the long-term disposition of artifacts and sites include descendants of those who created them, contemporary residents adjacent to archaeological remains, and tourists. This paper provides a framing for collaboration and community involvement in archaeological conservation. It advances an argument for integrating public concerns into our research and decision-making, both to promote our own interests and to involve others who are normally left out of the conservation process. It also argues for increased activism on the part of archaeological conservators to inhibit illicit trade of archaeological materials originating from illegal excavation and plunder during armed conflict.

Introduction

In another paper in this volume, Watson establishes a conceptual framework for conservation by mapping the ‘land of conservation’. He asks if we are at war with our neighbors, and whether we speak different languages. This essay explores the borders of conservation’s professional territory by examining the nature of our collaborations with those outside of the land of conservation. I divide our work with others into four broad and overlapping areas:

- Public outreach
- Professional collaboration
- Community involvement
- The political and regulatory arena

Before discussing each of these four areas, I will establish the context for my thinking about the public face of archaeological conservation. First, we are not necessarily good at working on the public front. It is not where our initial career interests lie. Most conservators come to the field from a fascination with materials. Our research and our work revolve around the material artifact. The primary mission of archaeological conservation is to prolong the physical life of the artifact or site. We also preserve information from the archaeological context, including soil samples, pollen, and charcoal, for specialist research in fields such as prehistoric agriculture, animal husbandry, and nutrition.

Our research typically follows the scientific method of inquiry, starting with a hypothesis, then establishing parameters for testing, gathering data, and analyzing the data to prove or disprove our research question. This is entirely appropriate. Without the knowledge and skills we’ve acquired since the early days of scientific inquiry in conservation, we would not have methods for drying wet organic materials, unrolling papyri, and inhibiting destructive corrosion mechanisms.

Yet our field is beginning to recognize that objects have social lives, just as they have material lives. They accumulate meaning as they travel through time and space—from original manufacture and use, to burial, excavation, conservation, display, storage, and at times, reburial.

Values associated with artifacts accumulate. An object may have spiritual value in that people worship it. It may have didactic value for communicating understandings about the past through museum display. It can have political value when regimes adopt it as an ancestral symbol, and it can have economic value as an object of tourism or exchange. When we adopt a *values* approach to understanding artifacts, we quickly learn that these values are often in conflict. People want to use them for different purposes. This can lead to debate over *use* vs. *preservation*. Do we allow people to use up artifacts for their own reasons, or do we preserve them for the benefit of future generations? Examining embedded values in artifacts opens the door to questioning ownership and rights to excavated materials, and potential claims against conservation authority and decision-making.

As Caple suggests earlier in this volume, conservation is a social construct that shifts over time. The construct is built on commonly accepted professional values such as *minimal intervention*, *reversibility*, and *physical preservation*. As a field, we are constantly redefining these values and professional aims, by modifying our definitions, codes of ethics, and guidelines for practice.

Once we accept the lack of fixity in the way we define ourselves, the next logical step is to accept that others may have valid alternatives to defining our work. Other individuals and groups bring their own perceptions of archaeological conservation, from a general romance with the ancient past to spiritual, political, and financial reasons for preserving (or not preserving) archaeological remains.

Do we assume that all of these values are equal? Absolutely not. I argue for taking them seriously in our deliberations, but carefully evaluating them in light of their motivations. After analysis, we should take action to either influence others with opposing values, or bring them to the table to negotiate compromised solutions. Some interests oppose our core values in ways that few of us can tolerate, such as illicit excavation, trade, and profiting from war booty. In these instances I argue for organized resistance, on all four fronts that I discuss in this paper.

It is increasingly difficult for us to deny our role in a heritage industry that commodifies the past and packages it for hegemonic narrations of history. Nor can we deny those who want to reclaim the relics of their ancestors. In

Colonial Williamsburg, artifacts are used to package heritage for tourism and tell versions of the colonial past that underscore ideals of democracy, liberty, and freedom for all.

We aren't the first field to become aware of interests in conflict with its core values. In 1973, Clark announced archaeology's loss of innocence, and by 1987 Shanks and Tilley suggested re-constructing anthropology based on recognitions of the 'other'. Today many anthropologists promote research methods that incorporate multiple understandings of artifacts in their interpretation and representation in writing or display.

Conservation is a much more pragmatic discipline. Whereas anthropologists and archaeologists can at least partially resolve conflict by representing multiple understandings, it is often impossible to represent multiple understandings in conservation treatments. Yet we can no longer afford to ignore voices that challenge our authority. We need models for hearing these voices and incorporating them into our decision-making and the actions we take on archaeological materials.

Our preoccupation with material research has not prepared us for cultural work. We do not ordinarily use social science methods of inquiry that include the human dimension and the messy values associated with the objects. I suggest that we take these research methods on board. At least some archaeological conservators should acquire skills to analyze social values associated with artifacts through interviews, surveys, focus group discussions, and ethnographic investigation. This will enrich the work around the borders of our field, in each of the four areas I outline below.

Public outreach

I use the term *public outreach* with reserve, since I believe we have a lot to learn from the public. Information should always flow both ways. Having said this, archaeological conservators do have knowledge and skills that are of interest to a broad public audience. If well packaged, public audiences engage in the technical work of conservation and what we learn from artifacts. This is a tool to further our goals—first and foremost to garner public support for fundraising. Informing the public about the treatment of dramatic finds and investigations that alter our understandings of the past can help produce a climate of support for funding the aims of conservation.

Our field has improved its techniques of getting media attention, with inroads into the *Antiques Road Show* on PBS, and *Art Detectives* on BBC. There are good examples of museum exhibits that showcase our work, and museum websites that feature technical analysis, conservation intervention, and even preventive conservation measures in archaeological repositories. Conservators are even put on display at times, working in galleries or behind glass walls.

Case studies from the Museum of London and the Maryland Archaeological Conservation Laboratory in this volume illustrate sophisticated examples of public outreach that go well beyond early initiatives to educate the public by simply placing our work on view.

Professional collaboration

We are accustomed to working collaboratively with researchers to perform technical studies that identify fabrication processes, determine authenticity, and date archaeological objects. This sort of collaboration has always been an integral part of our work.

On another front, many papers in this volume illustrate successful collaboration projects that involve government, non-government, and for-profit entities. One such project is the Mariners' Museum and National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration project to conserve, exhibit, and curate material from the USS *Monitor* site. Others presented here include the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, the Homol'ovi Research Program in Arizona, and the Gordion archaeological site in Turkey.

As with public outreach, collaboration with other professionals and agencies can help leverage our efforts to *reveal*, *investigate*, and *preserve* archaeological remains (cf. Caple, this volume).

Community involvement

Meaningful community involvement in the conservation process is more difficult to conceptualize and to achieve. It involves identifying those with interests in the disposition of archaeological materials, and giving them a seat at the table in our research and deliberations. Some indigenous communities with stakes in our decisions about what to conserve and how to conserve objects have their own systems of care, access, and storage. Others believe that spirits reside within objects that could be killed, for instance through oxygen deprivation or toxic fumigation.

These interests can challenge our core value of preservation, and introduce fractious identity politics to our otherwise remote field of work. They can directly challenge our authority over the heritage of others, and create divisions within our own ranks. Many conservators are not fully in support of repatriation and reburial, and have difficulty with the concept of sharing conservation authority with non-professional stakeholders.

I do not suggest handing over all authority to anyone who challenges us, but I do argue for developing research methods that identify and assess multiple claims to archaeological remains. Models for achieving this are already evolving. The National Museum of the American Indian and the Arizona State Museum have established programs for incorporating Native American concerns into their research and decision-making.

Odegaard (1996) developed a 'matrix' approach to conservation research that combines a broad range of

cultural and physical criteria in developing a carefully considered conservation plan. Elsewhere I have published a model for ‘participatory conservation’ that not only involves negotiation and collaborative decision-making, but also uses the conservation process as a tool to research relationships between contemporary cultures and the past (Wharton 2002). The government of New Zealand developed a program for training Maori conservators (Clavir 2002). This is a particularly compelling method of addressing indigenous concerns, since these individuals are equipped to assess their cultural knowledge and western conservation practices on their own terms.

Political and regulatory arena

The arena of governance is the fourth area of interface with the public in archaeological conservation. Conservators have their own professional codes of ethics and guidelines for practice. In addition, there are charters adopted by national and international organizations, and laws that impact our field. Some of these regulatory functions govern the work of conservators, and others govern activities outside the field that work with archaeological remains. These codes, charters, and laws change over time, reflecting the values and concerns at play in current debate.

Sease (1998) and others have written about changes in conservation codes of ethics and standards for practice. In recent years, the *American Institute for Conservation*, the *United Kingdom Institute for Conservation*, and the *International Council of Museums–Committee for Conservation* all shifted from identifying a single-nature view of the objects we treat to more relativist notions of ‘cultural significance’, ‘intangible value’, and ‘conceptual integrity’.

Similarly, national and international organizations expanded their criteria for authenticity to include living traditions that actively use and re-fabricate their material heritage. The *Burra Charter* provides the means for integrating intangible values associated with place into conservation, and the *Declaration of San Antonio* lists culturally sensitive indicators to determine the authenticity of a site.

The *Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act* (NAGPRA) provides the legal structure for claims to repatriate artifacts from museums, UNESCO adopted conventions to prohibit illicit trade of cultural property, and the *Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict* establishes a protocol to protect archaeological remains during armed conflict.

To be most effective in preserving archaeological remains, archaeological conservators need to exercise greater force in regulations governing illicit trade. Starting in our own laboratories, conservators in private practice and in museums should ask about the provenance of questionable materials. We can participate in authenticity studies, and voice concern in the media

about the flow of antiquities across borders to galleries and museum collections.

In her paper in this volume, Sease provides background and guidelines for conservators working in areas of armed conflict. During periods of civil unrest, warring regimes may actively protect or destroy archaeological sites, which are seen as symbols of national identity. With the breakdown of policing and civil order, looting of museum repositories can destroy years of work by conservators and collections managers. As Sease suggests, archaeological conservators are well positioned to work on the ground with the Blue Shield and other organizations to help prepare for potential disasters during times of war, and help in recovery activities in war’s aftermath. Our skills in documentation, packing, and emergency treatments are the bases of much of this hands-on work. We can also advocate for increased legislation and development of protocols, starting with having the United States become a signatory to the Hague Convention.

Conclusion

The public and professional borders of archaeological conservation are diffuse and lively. Although conservators by definition and by nature focus on materials, the implications of our work are financial, cultural, and political. We stand to gain professionally by recognizing these implications on all scales. Most immediately, we can increase financial support for our work through raising our profile in the public eye and developing collaborative projects with other professionals and agencies. We are also in a position to facilitate communication, and access to archaeological collections by indigenous representatives. To some extent, NAGPRA and charters that recognize the social significance of cultural property provide framework for these activities. Through our own research and advocacy, we can play an important role in the fight to curtail illegal export of excavated materials. A more activist conservation has the potential to preserve archaeological materials in the lab and at excavation sites. The seeds of this work are already in evidence within many papers presented in this volume.

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Biography

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