

Conducting Ethical Archeological Research Today and Addressing the Field's Problematic Past

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Introduction

Archeologists have made great strides in building a concrete ethical foundation over the last few hundred years. Archeologists no longer massacre native groups and plunder villages for precious treasure to bring home. Today's archeological studies are conducted in a significantly more ethical manner when compared to those just one hundred years ago. However, this does not mean that the field of modern archeology is free of ethical dilemmas, or that it is disconnected from the lasting impact of its dark past. While some issues are much more pertinent today than others, the academic community must recognize the problematic presentation of their predecessors' research and work to conduct future studies within a modern moral framework that allows archeologists to ensure that they do not repeat the same mistakes of those who came before them.

Colonial Archeology

When examining ethical issues in archeology, the effects of colonialism on modern day historical narratives cannot be ignored. Most artifacts sourced under colonial systems were not acquired ethically and consensually. However, despite this, many European countries are content to ignore their history of brutal colonialist exploitation and how it impacts the world today.¹

In 1897, the British armed forces overran the kingdom of Benin, committing numerous atrocities. Among these acts was the looting of numerous bronze statues which have since been dubbed the "Benin Bronzes." These highly sought after pieces now reside in museums and private collections around the world, often changing hands alongside exorbitant sums.

Unsurprisingly, the method through which the Benin Bronzes were sourced is rarely discussed by

¹ Haynes, Suyin. "European Museums Keep Talking About Repatriating Colonial Objects. African Artists and Curators Have Ideas on How to Actually Make It Happen." *Time*, Time, 20 Oct. 2020, www.time.com/5901806/african-artifacts-museums.

the individual collectors and museum curators who preside over these artifacts' preservation and presentation. Like many other aspects of Western historical research on those considered to be "other", the nature of the bronzes' presentation reflects the dark reality of Euro-centric historical narratives where artifacts are not pillaged but instead are "discovered". Unfortunately, the case of the Benin Bronzes is typical. Many museums containing historical artwork display treasures that were lifted from the hands of the oppressed and presented as the discoveries of their oppressors.²

Right now however, the world of archeology is going through powerful changes in its approach to the modern implications of the wrongdoings of colonial regimes. While government leaders like the French Prime Minister Emmanuel Macron are making empty promises about consulting with top academics regarding this issue, there are also serious scholars and activists who are working to make real change. The solution most universally considered by academics and artists (and to some degree Macron himself) to be effective is the large-scale repatriation (the act of returning something to its country of origin) of artifacts.³

Despite Macrons promises, repatriation in France is moving extremely slowly. Twenty seven objects were planned to be repatriated in 2017, however as of September 2020, the French government has only followed through with one object.⁴ On the other hand, pro-repatriation activism is powerful in France today and Congolese activist Mwazulu Diyabanza is one of the activists at the forefront of the movement. His first protest that garnered him notoriety took place at the Quai Branly Museum, which houses artifacts from former French colonies. Diyabanza

² Monks, Kieron. "A Curator's Museum Is Filled with Looted African Art. Now He Wants It Returned." *CNN*, Cable News Network, 3 Dec. 2020, edition.cnn.com/style/article/brutish-museums-benin-bronzes/index.html?utm_term=link.

³ Nayeri, Farah. "To Protest Colonialism, He Takes Artifacts From Museums." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 21 Sept. 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/09/21/arts/design/france-museum-quai-branly.html.

⁴ Méheut, Constant, and Antonella Francini. "France's Colonial Legacy Is Being Judged in Trial Over African Art." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 30 Sept. 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/09/30/arts/design/france-african-art-trial.html.

entered the museum and after bringing attention to himself and while streaming the event online, lifted a funerary post from its stand and walked out of the museum. He was stopped by security before he left, but his work was not yet over. Soon after, Diyabanza conducted a similar protest at the Museum of African, Oceanic and Native American Arts in Marseille where he was again stopped by security. He faced multiple charges of attempted theft and was tried in court in September of 2020. Unfortunately the court refused to look at the issue of repatriation despite it being so essential to the case and punished him solely on the basis of attempted theft.

Diyabanza's case only added fuel to the fire in the fight for repatriation in France, putting France at the center of conversations regarding repatriation, as other European countries such as Germany, have had no issues facing their past colonialist actions.⁵

However, while repatriation is hailed by many as the solution to the issue of stolen artifacts, it is not without opposition. The primary argument against repatriation is that African museums do not have the resources to preserve important works. Ghanaian writer Yaa Addae presents a powerful analysis deconstructing this viewpoint. She argues that it is rooted in a paternalistic view of Africa and that it only serves to reinforce centuries old international and racial hierarchies formed during colonial occupations.⁶

Fortunately, in spite of the clear declarations of support for the status-quo made by those in control of the situation (mostly by politicians), there are members of academic circles like Yaa Addae who are making progressive and empathetic arguments regarding repatriation. Another prominent academic fighting for repatriation is Dan Hicks, a curator at the Pitt Rivers Museum of the University of Oxford. He has played a pivotal role in the fight for repatriation, as he is among the few "old guard" academics who are involved in the movement. Hick's most important

⁵ Méheut, Constant, and Antonella Francini

⁶ Haynes, Suyin

contribution to the fight for repatriation was his book "The British Museums" where he argues for the return of objects and for profound changes in the way we present narratives surrounding art and history during the age of European imperialism.⁷ Because of the greater awareness among academics, alongside the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement and other activism, the balance of power in the debate for repatriation is shifting, albeit slowly, towards a fairer and more ethical resolution.⁸

Modern Archeology

While addressing the wrongdoings of colonial archeologists is a crucial part of conducting more ethical practices, conducting more ethical research as archaeologists uncover new material today is also important. The ethical sourcing of materials continues to be an issue today as archeologists have to choose to either compete or cooperate with looters at some sites. To many it is unclear what archeological looters are doing and what effect they have on the archeological process. Are looters conducting their own digs? Are they stealing from digs that are ongoing? In reality looters do a bit of both. They steal from dig sites, and raid known ruins above ground for material to sell and turn a profit.⁹

The most famous case of archeologists and looters cooperating is that of archeologist and UCLA professor Christopher Donovan and his research on the Moche people of what is now Peru. Donovan contacted looters, and in exchange for keeping their work a secret, was allowed to photograph and document stolen artifacts. Upon being discovered, discussion of the ethics of

⁷ Monks, Kieron

⁸ Phillips, Barnaby. "Nigeria's Opportunity for Return of Benin Bronzes." BBC News, BBC, 11 Sept. 2020, www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-54117905.

⁹ Miller, Arthur. "Archaeological Looting: A New Approach to the Problem." Expedition Magazine, Penn Museum, 1982, www.penn.museum/sites/expedition/archaeological-looting/.

Donnovan's research was immediately called into question by his fellow scholars. However, while many criticized his methods, Donovan, as well as a non-insignificant group of archeologists, argued that if looting occurs, than archeologists should take advantage of it so as to not lose out on valuable research material. This is a compelling argument, however it is not without many flaws. While this argument does condemn looters it also indirectly justifies looting by not taking any stance against it.¹⁰ Instead, if actions that clearly combat looting are taken, there would be no need for this symbiotic relationship to exist in the first place.

Looting is such a difficult topic in how it relates to archeology because while some archeologists do benefit from it, they are not what makes the business lucrative, nor is archeological research a significant contributor in driving people to looting. In this way, looting is a much deeper issue when approached from a more economically focused perspective. On one hand looters are just locals trying to make a living, but on the other they are also supplying an under-regulated international market for antiquities. It is for this first reason that cooperating with looters can be considered an acceptable moral stance.

While being an entirely different kind of issue than looting, tackling the ethics surrounding the unearthing of dead bodies and artifacts from culturally significant sites, as well as who owns the material found is a pressing one. James O. Young presents a concrete framework through which one can approach artifact ownership where there are four candidate owners of a given find. These candidates are: specific individuals, a cultural group, a nation, or humanity as a whole. Young then argues that while heavily dependent on the cultural significance of an object, the most reasonable claim to ownership is usually a cultural group.¹¹ In

¹⁰ Alexander, Brian. "Archeology and looting make a volatile mix." *Science*, vol. 250, no. 4984, 1990, p. 1074+. *Gale In Context: High School*, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A9220776/SUIC?u=watkinson&sid=SUIC&xid=a79abd96>.

¹¹ Scarre, Christopher, Scarre, Geoffrey, Et. Al. *The Ethics of Archaeology: Philosophical Perspectives on Archaeological Practice*. Cambridge University Press, 2008.

modern archeology this issue has been especially prevalent in research done on Native American burial sites. While still flawed, the response to this particular case may serve as a model for archeologists on how to approach other research. Today many sites are protected by the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA). NAGPRA requires that communication occur between researchers and tribes before during and after studies, however this was not always the case.¹² In one more extreme example, archeologists studied the Pawnee people for more than fifty years without ever making any effort to communicate with them. Archaeologist, and director of the Arkansas Archeological Survey Thomas J. Green explained that "The shocking thing is that [archeologists at the site] really haven't spent time talking to the Indians". Despite this lack of communication, during this study archeologists dug up sacred and culturally important burial sites and took artifacts and remains with them for research with no intent of returning them.¹³

It is situations like these that NAGPRA was put in place to prevent, and for the most part it has succeeded in achieving its goal. However it does not come without its disadvantages. The primary argument posed by archeologists against the bill is that NAGPRA calls for the eventual reburial of stolen bodies currently in storage as well as those dug up in the future. Additionally it reduces the speed at which research can proceed, by mandating that archeologists consult with tribes before, during, and after a dig. This is concerning to many archeologists who are afraid that they will have less material to study and thus their livelihoods will be threatened. This concern has spread to other anthropological fields as well, creating a significant body of

¹² "NATIVE AMERICAN GRAVES PROTECTION AND REPATRIATION REGULATIONS." Electronic Code of Federal Regulations (ECFR), Dec. 1995, www.ecfr.gov/cgi-bin/text-idx?SID=c7215f6c021e3fc67f4a0660fde5612b&mc=true&node=pt43.1.10&rgn=div5.

¹³ Alexander, Brian

academics who believe that they are and will continue to be victims of a policy protecting those whose important cultural relics and sacred burial sites are excavated without permission. This is morally concerning as they are making themselves out to be victims when in reality all that is being asked of them is to act with respect towards a group who have entrusted them with important cultural materials.¹⁴

Conclusion

The field of archeology has come a long way regarding conducting research ethically, however there are still many areas wherein the more ethically sound path is not the one taken by those in charge. It is the duty of archeologists everywhere to face the impact of past research on people today, to fight for the rightful owners of material, and to apply those same inclusive, empathetic, and broadly morally sound principals as they weigh their options for sources of materials. They have an obligation to respect both those whose history is being studied and the cultural significance of materials they are permitted to use.

¹⁴ Morell, Virginia. "An anthropological culture shift." *Science*, vol. 264, no. 5155, 1994, p. 20+. *Gale In Context: High School*, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A15303170/SUIC?u=watkinson&sid=SUIC&xid=8a43be62>. Accessed 23 Nov. 2020.