

Chapter 10

Archeology as Activism

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Heritage and Violence

Archeological sites have become an important defining feature of a nation state; no nationalist agenda is complete without a World Heritage site. Rapidly globalizing postcolonial countries appear on the map symbolized by flags, national anthems, state flowers, and ancient monuments (Barkan and Bush 2003; Kohl 1998). But when heritage and national identity become synonymous with prominent cultural resources, politically motivated destructive impulses are given an effective target (Abu el-Haj 1998; Kohl and Fawcett 1995; Meskell 1998). The most famous recent example of this was the destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan in 2002 by the Taliban in an effort to seize control of the global identity of Afghanistan. Other examples are less widely televised or have their significance blurred, as when US and Polish troops' use of the ancient city of Babylon in Iraq as a military depot causing irreparable damage is reported as "a good and decent impulse, to protect the ancient site of Babylon" (McCarthy and Kennedy 2005) that somehow went innocently awry. Often when there is conflict over heritage, sites suffer destruction simply through the inattention of government officials who disregard looting, vandalism, and the recycling of archeological materials. In Babylon, "Vast amounts of sand and earth, visibly mixed with archeological fragments, were gouged from the site to fill thousands of sandbags and metal mesh baskets" (Deblauwe 2005).

Also common are situations in which preservation itself is a means of oppression, as when descendant groups have their cultural identity enforced and economic disadvantages naturalized by constant official and public rhetoric about cultural continuity, authentic heritage, and characterization of the poor as "traditional" and "living in the past." Poverty and the lack of material wealth are cast as the result of choices made by the poor, who in reality have no choice at all (Layton 1989). In a documentary about the identity significance of the perpetuation of traditional medicine, it is impossible to tell whether the people practice magic because they have chosen it over inoculation or because their economic disadvantages have left them with no choices that are intelligible to them (Dreyer 2004). In such cases, identity with romanticized ancient practice and material culture is an imposition of the

modern world system. There is no documentation on how frequently people imprisoned by involuntary identity with the past resort to site destruction.

But a significant amount of looting and intentional site destruction can be better understood as the result of conflicts over the role of heritage in the construction of identity and the real economic and political consequences of that identity on the global stage (Fowler 1987; Mbuswe-Samba 2001). Monuments and material culture all too often become weapons in this type of contest, and documented examples of this are commonplace (Gathercole and Lowenthal 1990). At a site where I was excavating, the owner of a nearby quarry once told me that he had bulldozed the sites around his quarry immediately after my predecessor stopped digging to ensure that the government would not interfere with his business. When archeologist Peter Matthews and his colleagues tried to remove an ancient Maya altar from Chiapas and relocate it for its protection, they were robbed and terrorized. At issue was an ongoing conflict between indigenous people and the Mexican government over land rights; the altar served as their evidence of the indigenous ownership of the land (Hoopes 1997). The Ayodhya riots provide another case in point: Hindus and Muslims worshipping in a shared space flew into a murderous destructive rage over the potential of an archeological report to attribute the origin of their mutually cherished temple to one religion or the other (Bernbeck and Pollock 1996; Bidwai 2003).

Clearly, the politics of identity are not all at the institutional level, nor are such emotions always aroused from the “top-down.” Identity may be tied to the material record of the past at a very personal level, as when treasure hunter Mel Fisher promotes his underwater looting as an authentic lifestyle. He presents himself as a crusader for individual rights and democratic opportunity for the ordinary person.

Mel Fisher suffered many personal losses to keep his dream alive during his 16-year search and endured over 100 court battles, which ended in victory in the US Supreme Court. The riches Mel Fisher, his team, and investors had worked so hard for all those years are finally theirs (<http://www.melfisher.com/>).

Fisher’s mantra is that he is fighting against the power of the privileged who would deprive him of his right to be as wealthy as they. The issue at stake here is class, and it should not surprise anyone that victims of exploitation often feel no compunction about practicing exploitation themselves, or that looters like Fisher find a sympathetic audience among the economically disadvantaged. Fisher has tied his practices to the well-advertised popular fantasies about luck and romantic adventure that also sell lottery tickets and movie passes. Ironically, educated art connoisseurs at one end of the social scale and admirers of Fisher at the other make a similar argument about entitlement due to them personally.

Global heritage organizations attempt to discourage such personal possessiveness with rhetoric and legal sanctions (Cleere 2000). But the problem for preservationists is that the emphasis their ethic places on the value of the material past as an important source of identity for both living people and nation states is exactly the factor that renders protecting it impossible (Brodie et al. 2001; Folorunso 2000). The text as written carries the seeds of its own destruction; there must be a way to divert the violent and destructive effects of personal and political identity from the

material record of the past. There must be a way in which the record of human history can be used to undermine attitudes of entitlement and hegemony rather than to reinforce them.

Wagging the Dog

The space between the construction of identities through heritage and the repercussions of identity in social context is where archeologists promoting collaborative strategies are needed to change negative correlations and pre-empt violence and site destruction. Where possible, information exchange and collaboration should begin before the community in question has its heritage preserved by foreign intervention, displayed on the world stage, and auctioned in the global marketplace.

When power relations flow backward, when something that is usually a result becomes the cause, we say that “the tail is wagging the dog.” Since archeology – in its research, practice, and interpretation – so easily becomes the target of destruction and a tool of violent political action, it might be possible to “wag the dog” – that is, to get local people and various potential competitors who are involved in the globalization of ethnic, social, and national identities to think about heritage in constructive ways before serious conflicts get started. If people have information about the repercussions of the decisions they make about how to handle their material past before they make those decisions, they can better prepare for the consequences. The goal of course is to encourage various groups of stakeholders to think about the past in ways that pre-empt violence and divisive politics. But for this to work, archeologists have to learn to aid and abet grass roots political action by providing useful information.

A number of archeologists have argued for a collaborative approach among stakeholders but only anecdotal evidence of the success of such measures is available (Derry and Malloy 2003; Pyburn and Wilk 1995). Most global heritage preservation organizations (ICOMOS, UNESCO, UPO, WHC, CLT/CH, SC/ECO) assume that economic inequalities are the immediate cause of problems in cultural resource management (CRM) and base their programs of training and support on this assumption. But I believe the relationship is more indirect, because resource access is almost invariably filtered, for better or worse, through identity politics. One reason for the difficulties of global heritage organizations is that few of them are guided by ethnographic research on the local conditions that would identify these political issues in their local manifestations. Instead, research funds are spent on assessments of the condition and vulnerability of cultural resources and estimates of how much money will be required for consolidation, and what legal sanctions deter looting (Prott and O’Keefe 1984). Furthermore, such programs unreflexively use the definitions of heritage and preservation invented in and for wealthy nations as though such ideas reflect a global reality. Nonprofessional stakeholders are stereotyped as protective or disinterested or rapacious, with little real data on the context and origins of these attitudes. What is needed is a combination of research with a deeper level of collaboration at the same time that specific locally designed interventions are tested.

To some extent, there is no time for research whose goal is simply to define the problem. This is because the pace of site destruction is rapid in most areas, and also because the mere presence of preservation specialists can increase looting by drawing attention to an untapped resource. It is imperative that archeologists and other preservationists pursue their research with an applied component, and many international aid institutions have begun to regard preservation as a subfield of economic development. But while some recent global heritage management programs combine archeological expertise with political savvy and economic development theory, they seldom foreground the ethnographic context and the ethnohistoric relations that would make a true collaboration with local and nonacademic stakeholders possible. No other generalization about economic development efforts has achieved more empirical support than the acknowledgment that top-down strategies do not work; at best they last until the funds run out and the visiting experts go home (Cernea 1995). If CRM, including the protection of archeological sites, has a politically positive future in lesser developed countries, it lies in locally engineered sustainable creations that are culturally intelligible and show benefits that people can see.

On the other hand, efforts to improve CRM by involving a wider range of stakeholders, but without ethnographic expertise and training in applied anthropology, have resulted in attempts to foster collaboration among stakeholders that assume local knowledge and academic scholarship are simply two sides of the same coin. But traditional knowledge and acculturation into local values do not prepare a culture bearer to communicate effectively with development specialists, cultural resource managers, scientists, and other interested visitors. Science and scientific archeology as well as the preservation ethics of global organizations are specific forms of knowledge with a set of tenets that – while familiar to many and understandable by anyone – are not immediately grasped by people with no training or experience in these fields. Placing stakeholders with traditional backgrounds in a context with a group of trained academics, CRM specialists, and research scientists places them at a tremendous disadvantage, as is equally the case when archeologists expect to promote economic development in a traditional culture which they understand poorly. The result of this failure to communicate is that little genuine collaboration occurs, while unequal power relations are exacerbated under the surface; a situation that often leads stakeholders to link the archeological record of the past – even their own past – with agendas of the wealthy and oppressive politics (Pwiti and Ndoro 1999). In Brazil, for example, preservation of archeological sites is challenged by the complete sense of alienation that government intervention creates among the public (Funari 2001; Bezerra de Almeida 2003), despite the state's attempts to promote cultural resources as the property of all citizens. The fact that a site has government protection is actually a stimulus to vandalism as an expression of antigovernment sentiment.

The recent spate of community-based collaborations by ethnographically naïve archeologists has achieved mixed results, though little evidence has shown up in the literature, which mostly claims positive results by describing good intentions. However, careful investigation can turn up irate local editorials, instances of violence targeting either the archeological sites or the archeologists digging them, and evidence

of utter confusion divulged in newspaper interviews. In candid conversations, archeologists frequently admit cynicism if not fatalism in regard to the potential for success of their plan to “do the right thing.”

My own approach has been to pull back and think more carefully about who may best be able to guide me in my desire to advocate for local people and promote respect for a nonviolent human heritage. While it would be a mistake to exclude the voices of any stakeholders from the conversations that must underlie community collaborations, I think the first choice of cultural advisors must be the local professional archeologists who can already speak the language of the academy and who are familiar with tenets of Western science. There are locally rooted or experienced specialists working in or very near any culture area who know how to broaden the perceptions of traditional scholars and government officials without setting up a false and obstructive dichotomy between science and religion or other traditional values. In other words, the beginning conversations should be between archeologists and the local people most prepared to deal with a Western scholarly perspective, and proceed gradually into communication with less accessible groups of stakeholders.

This position may seem high-handed, but an example will clarify the rationale. I was hired by USAID in 1984 to go to Yemen to see why the American agricultural extension college intended to improve the production of food in domestic kitchen gardens was not working. American experts were being introduced to teach gardening techniques, but the young Yemeni men who came to the school were not returning to their villages to help their neighbors grow vegetables but instead were taking their certificates of graduation to urban centers and applying for white collar jobs. A small amount of research showed why this was the case: only women grow kitchen gardens and women from small traditional villages who depend on kitchen gardens cannot travel much less be taught by foreign males. But the lesson I learned from talking to Yemeni women about this situation is one that applies to any cross-cultural collaboration: no group of people is made up of identical units.

Within the group of people who could be identified as “Yemeni women” were women of a variety of faiths and a variety of degrees of conservatism. There also were women of different social status and different age grades. A few of these – for example, women of low status who were past child bearing – *could* talk to male extension agents. Others of extremely high status, having been educated outside Yemen at universities in Europe and Egypt, would be able to take extension training and communicate their knowledge to key women in local female domestic networks. So the way to help Yemeni housewives and the way to reach vulnerable stakeholders in the game of heritage management is to understand and use existing social and cultural networks, rather than to bring them to an alien “table” that is already set with foreign implements and strange table manners for serving unpalatable ideas.

Archeological knowledge and the framework of heritage development have potential benefit for people who find such information and its bearers suspect and potentially dangerous. But in truth, archeology and global heritage *are* potentially dangerous and archeologists are definitely to be suspected. Nevertheless, it is precisely because of the dangerous repercussions of claims about the past and heritage

identity that research and preservation issues must be brought to the attention of stakeholders so that they know what their stakes are. Archeologists must explain themselves in a way that allows them both to teach and learn, but that also makes it possible for ordinary people who are vulnerable to global forces to understand what is at stake for them and their future when the archeologists and the tourist developers and the preservationists come to town. We have information that stakeholders need, and they have information that we must have before we can behave responsibly. So, I am arguing that the first stage of collaboration and communication be aimed at a middle ground of people with both local knowledge and experience with outsiders rather than at the extremes of experience and perspective that make conversation impossible.

Participatory Action Research

The conundrum for all outreach efforts to support CRM is that attempts to place stakeholders in lesser developed countries on a more equal footing internationally still must depend on the greater economic resources of developed nations. Collaborative research and training is argued to be a way to equalize power relationships among participants, but the role of the staff developer must change from the top-down provider of information to that of facilitator who establishes an atmosphere that is conducive to conversation in which all participants share their expertise (Richardson 1994).

The real shortcoming of most collaborative attempts is the archeologist's lack of knowledge about how to collaborate. Vague admonitions to "do local ethnography" barely help, because what is really needed is an approach that does not require archeologists to become professional ethnographers but to do the following:

1. Gather enough information about the local context to identify stakeholders and determine what archeological knowledge and heritage management have to offer them.
2. Learn how to share their knowledge so that its usefulness is apparent in the local context.
3. Develop sufficient rapport with stakeholders to design collaborative heritage projects that alert people to the danger of identity politics.

Participatory action research (PAR) is what archeologists are looking for (Kemmis and McTaggart 2001; Robinson 1996). PAR has a long history in lesser developed countries, especially Latin America. Recent work on collaborative ethnography and anthropological research for grassroots knowledge utilization provide crucial models and principles for conducting such participatory research. PAR literature argues that an action research strategy can take emerging solutions into account without sacrificing verifiable results.

PAR is founded on the assumption that the first goal is intersubjectivity; that the first order of business is cross-cultural and interpersonal understanding (McTaggart

1997; Sankaran 2001; Schensul and Schensul 1992). The heritage researcher and promoter must attempt to make sure that local people comprehend the research design and the project goals. Putting what scholars think of as important questions into intelligible language in a local context can only have a salutary effect on science, since an accurate exegesis of research on the origin of civilization to Iraqi villagers or the collapse of civilization to Guatemalan refugees must make local people appropriately aware of the ideas driving the visitor's interest. This is information they must have in order to choose their level of participation. Equally important is that such communication will force the visiting archeologist or preservationist to take the political context of their efforts into account. Gone are the days when the expatriate researcher could ignore local impacts because "*they* will never know."

The most appropriate examples of this strategy for archeologists come from applied anthropology where many versions of PAR are used. One particularly apt example is Bentley's work on crop pests with a group of subsistence farmers in Honduras (1992, 2000). Bentley gathered interested participants at the Zamorano extension college for long enough to explain scientific information about the life cycles of the insects that were affecting the yield. A year later, the farmers returned to Zamorano and taught Bentley how they had used their new information to reduce predation on their food supply. The object of heritage education is to similarly provide information on strategies and consequences of CRM that can be used by participants to solve their local problem themselves in sustainable ways.

This means that at the planning stage it is not possible to say exactly how this will be done. Various areas of teaching, study, and collaborative analysis (about preservation, tourism, museums, stakeholders, grant writing, looting or subsistence digging, methods, and technology) are well documented as relevant to establishing politically effective and economically successful CRM programs. Literature on implementation of programs addressing these topics needs to be summarized for local stakeholders. However, PAR research argues that top-down training – in which experts deliver predetermined solutions and data sets – does not have a lasting or a generative effect. Archeologists are more appropriately conceived as advisors. We must acknowledge that we are also stakeholders who have an interest in preservation, but that our interest is not the only one nor is our perspective necessarily the correct one in a particular local situation. We have the right to make our case, but we must also accept that there will be times when we lose the argument and will have to step aside.

For example, several archeologists promoting community museums have documented their positive interactions with local communities, but some of the resulting institutions have the aura of a successful sales pitch rather than a truly collaborative enterprise. In several instances, community museums have already disappeared along with their alien promoters. Stakeholders in these targeted communities need to be introduced to experts in museum studies, who present technical information in intelligible and locally relevant terms. But after the information has been imparted to them, these stakeholders must be asked to consider how museums ought to play a role in CRM in their own communities and how museums might be used to improve communication among stakeholders and diffuse or avoid politically volatile interpretations of heritage. This involves discussion of the types of

museum that are possible in lesser developed countries, turning the conversation back to the expert for more information on extant programs. The importance of including local academics in this process is clear because negotiating the complexities of local government, indigenes, tourism, academia, and other groups of stakeholders is never going to be as familiar to a foreign scholar as to a local one.

Global organizations such as UNESCO and USAID, backed by huge capital and hundreds of experts, are struggling to achieve global standards of heritage management. However, the same wealth that these organizations invest also serves to undermine the development of sustainable and independent solutions in places where local people have little chance of replacing the start-up funds. Furthermore, it is the authority and power entailed by the control of resources that makes the strategies followed and advocated by such institutions seem disconnected, and even suspect, to people at the local level. Most efforts to improve the practice of CRM focus on the needs of the archeological record, rather than on the needs of people whose lives and identity intertwine with the material past on a daily basis.

We desperately need a better understanding of strategies that work and do not work in the development of sustainable CRM programs, and we need to know whether it is possible to design such programs to mitigate political hostilities in the face of globalization. Our goal must be to begin grassroots movements that will reorient CRM from a source of locally irrelevant or politically dangerous knowledge, ethnic circumscription, and economic capital to assume a more positive political authority in the future we create from the past. This does not mean that archeologists are, or should be, neutral. Moral philosophers like Moody-Adams (1997) have made it clear that respecting another culture does not mean refusing to engage with its members in critical discussions about ethics and moral decisions. And radical empiricist/phenomenologist Michael Jackson (1998) has argued that a democratic process of exchange and collaboration is the implicit goal of all social science through the development of intersubjectivity and cross-cultural understanding. Archeologists have an agenda worth promoting; the problem is making sure our voices speak to the political present and ensuring that the informed voices of other constituencies are also heard and understood.

The most difficult aspect of community-based archeology is the factor of time. Despite the effort to speed up the process of information exchange by employing PAR, establishing the trust that must precede information sharing in a wholly new area will be achieved slowly. Furthermore, the trust required will almost always become the foundation of a permanent relationship among the various stakeholders. Gone are the days when archeologists could dig it up, write it up, and go home.

Development Begins at Home

I have recently begun a project in Central Asia to test these ideas. My interest in the area began with the observation that CRM is almost nonexistent in the region, while an interest in the promotion of tourism is developing rapidly (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1 Ready for tourists. (Photo: Anne Pyburn)



Fig. 2 Tourist rugs with “traditional” designs. (Photo: Anne Pyburn)

Markets for artifacts are few but they have the potential to explode along with tourism. Interest in heritage has begun to rise, beginning with the renewed emphasis on local artists, especially those using “traditional” designs and styles, and on practices associated with ethnicity (Fig. 2).

The most dramatic of the latter is the unfortunate resurgence of bride kidnapping, forbidden under Soviet rule, which has the advantage of being a globally stigmatized practice, making it a powerful identity marker on the world stage.

In this social context, I predicted that archeological sites would rapidly begin to appear as national symbols. Kyrgyzstan (where my own research is focused), along with neighboring republics, occupies the territory traversed by the Silk Road, which supported a magnificent variety of cultures with major architectural monuments and material signatures. Today villages are nestled in valleys strewn with ancient burial mounds and dotted with Buddhist, Muslim, and Christian sites as well as remains of various other cosmologies. A small but impressive group of Soviet-trained local archeologists are attempting to document this vast resource without contemporary technological aids. Local communities are aware of the archeologists' work and are interested, but they do not loot to any significant extent because there is no local access to the antiquities market.

Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan have recently begun to experience political tension resulting in part from the arbitrary Soviet political boundaries laid down to create the Central Asian republics. These nations encompass people with the same and closely related heritages, but the sense of commonality that once existed is eroding. Recent political events in Uzbekistan drove a number of Uzbek citizens into Kyrgyzstan where many have relatives. The refugees, whose departure infuriated Uzbek officials, were put in an internment camp in Kyrgyzstan where they were characterized by the Uzbek media (which reaches across the border) as dangerous dissidents and terrorists. Local Kyrgyz residents complained bitterly about their unwanted guests until a group of leaders was taken to see the camp. Their visit provoked immediate recognition of common experiences and interests, led to family-to-family interaction, and resulted in the voluntary contribution of food to the refugees. The incident suggests that the window of opportunity to reestablish cordiality is closing but not quite shut.

To address an emergent political conflict likely to heighten interest in heritage identity, I devised a plan to encourage a small village in Kyrgyzstan and another small village in Uzbekistan to create community presentations that consist of their own photos and maps of local resources. This is a strategy that has had some success elsewhere (Chapin and Threlkeld 2001). The villages invited to participate were selected by Kyrgyz and Uzbek archeologists and the curators of the respective national museums, who also will be involved in guiding the collaboration. The village displays will be created using a hand-held GPS and a camera that villagers will use to document what they know – and think – about their material past. The job of the consulting archeologists will be to learn about local interests and knowledge at the same time that they explain what they know about CRM, national interests in archeology, and global politics. When these exhibits are completed, villages will trade their “museums” across national borders. At the end of the project, villagers and the curators of the two national museums of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan will be invited to the US to meet with Native American elders about their approach to heritage in the global arena. This is to ensure that the decisions made by people in the program about how to ultimately handle their material heritage are independent of my ideas as much as possible.

This project already has shown the predicted results. That is, after three months of effort by myself and two assistants, attempts to go beyond basic linguistic competence and establish local trust have failed. I expected this, without knowing how

the roadblocks would manifest. In this case, the Soviet legacy of “collectives,” which oriented people to a façade of community cooperation thinly covering a totalitarian hierarchy, creates certain expectations of community-based programs. Thus far, people have not responded well to being asked about their preferences and interests in national identity and heritage. Clearly this project will take many years.

On the other hand, as anticipated, archeological sites are beginning to appear as national icons. At the first celebration of the Tulip Revolution that took place this year, a huge banner touting the beautiful resources of the many regions of Kyrgyzstan was displayed in front of the nation’s capital. Three of the six regions were represented by archeological sites.

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