

Archaeology and the Ethics of Collecting

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A major national magazine recently ran on its cover a photo of a handsome Maya jadeite mask, suggesting that the piece had originally been dug up by looters. The magazine also reported that the piece was for sale at an exorbitant price. The cover depicting this object and an article within the issue in defense of private collecting rocked the archaeological community, and underscored the growing rift between scientific archaeologists and art historians and epigraphers, who often use looted material in their research. The controversy also raised some ugly questions about the discipline of archaeology, the majority of them revolving around the deprivations caused by the intertwined evils of collecting and looting. It is important to ask, for instance, if the portrayal of a looted artifact on the cover of a national magazine raises its value on the illicit art market. Or is its appearance offset by educating the public about the serious problem of a burgeoning black market in looted antiquities? Even more controversial, however, is any stance sanctioning the collecting of illicitly recovered objects.

Some archaeologists feel strongly that every artifact shown publicly or used as a kingpin in arguments about ancient societies must have an archaeological pedigree—it must have been properly excavated. They must know precisely where it comes from to tell its story. Without any indication of its origins and context, it is deemed worthless by some, or at best unreliable. Many institutions, the Archaeological Institute of America among them, have taken strong stands against illegal traffic in antiquities and will not knowingly publicize looted objects for fear of increasing their market value.

The controversy concerns not only intent, but results. How can one defend, either directly or indirectly, the rape of the past? Doesn't buying the fruits of such an enterprise only make the collector an accomplice in the crime? Today's private collectors, however, usually point to the beginnings of archaeology to justify their attitudes.

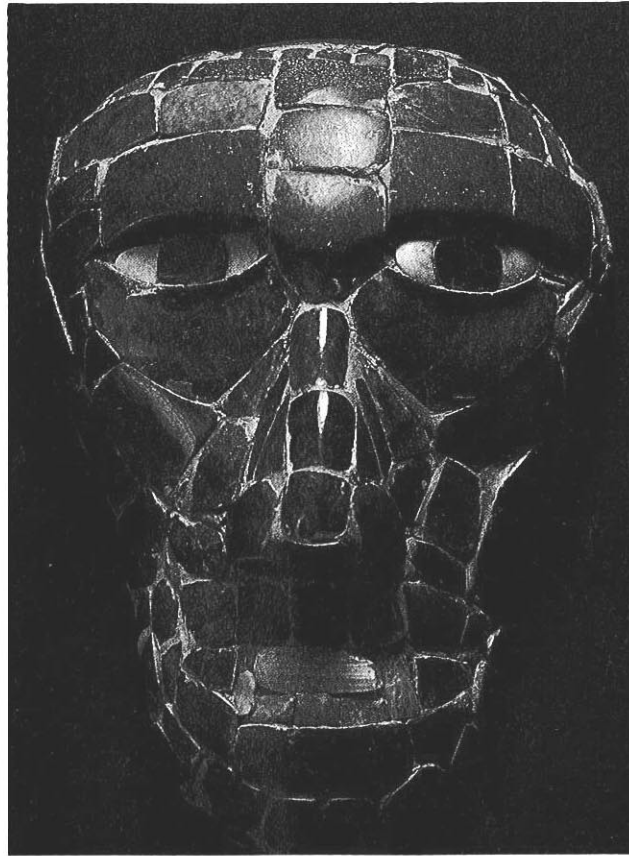
In its infancy, the discipline was primarily concerned with collecting artifacts. A number of prominent individuals

of the 1800s were indeed antiquarians or collectors. In that era, collecting was believed to be both a mode of science and a way to advance knowledge. But while the destructive excavation methods of the antiquarians may have been similar to those in use by looters today, even then antiquarians usually recorded at least some details about the context of their finds—something looters don't do.

By World War I, archaeology had grown out of this stage. Today, an archaeologist "collects" data and, more important, "collects" context. Collecting objects is not, in and of itself, scholarship. It is the collecting of information in a scientific way that characterizes archaeology. To liken the archaeologist and the looter to one another—as some have done—is to project a false and simplified version of what archaeology is all about. The ethical and moral responsibilities involved in carrying out archaeology are found in neither the world of the looter nor that of the collector. In fact, the looter and collector are so intertwined that neither could exist without the other. The case of the robbery of Mexico's National Museum of Anthropology on Christmas Eve 1985 serves as a grave warning. Here, the looters stole certain objects "on order," much as big-city car thieves steal a given make and model of auto. When people will rob an institution to satisfy the collector's greed, no cultural resource in the world is safe.

But where do these heated differences of opinions come from and who are the various parties that are concerned with ancient artifacts? Archaeologists, art historians, epigraphers, museums, government officials, collectors, looters, and dealers each have their own concerns. But who are the rightful guardians of the past and what are the responsibilities that go hand-in-hand with such guardianship? Professional obligations cannot be ignored. Looted or fraudulent pieces have sometimes been made respectable by noted scholars, either through publication or exhibits. The authentication and valuation of non-pedigree pieces constitutes irresponsible behavior.

The archaeologists of today have inherited the conse-

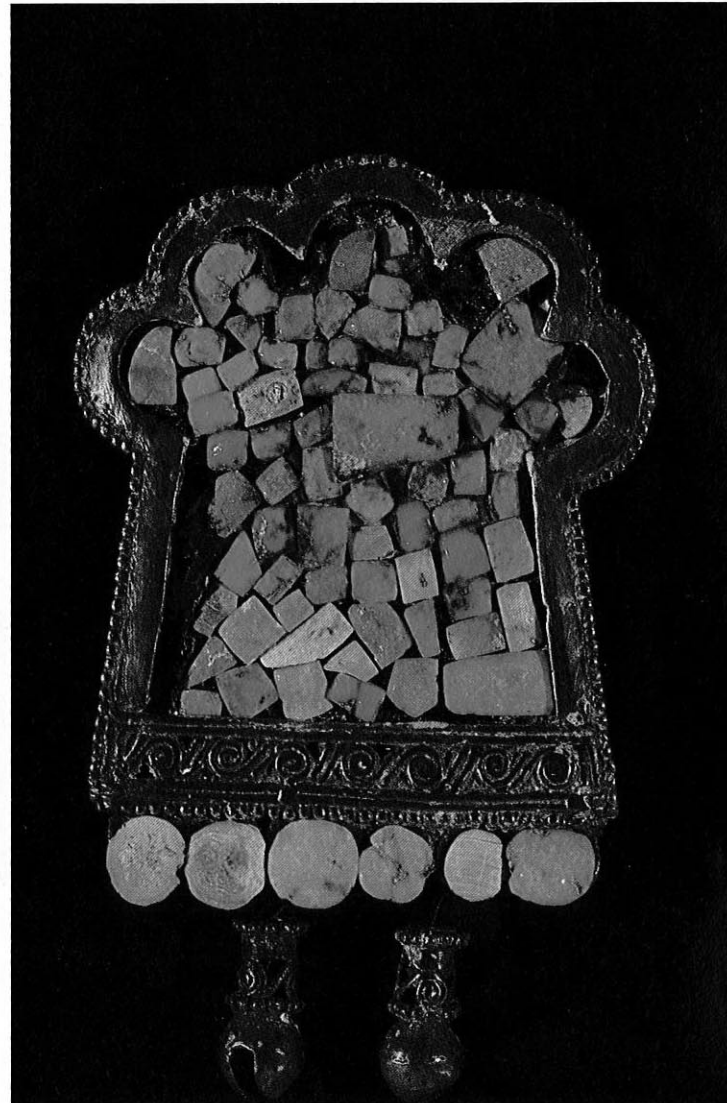


This rare jadeite mask, excavated at Santa Rita Corozal, Belize, is similar to one dug up by looters and offered for sale at an exorbitant price.



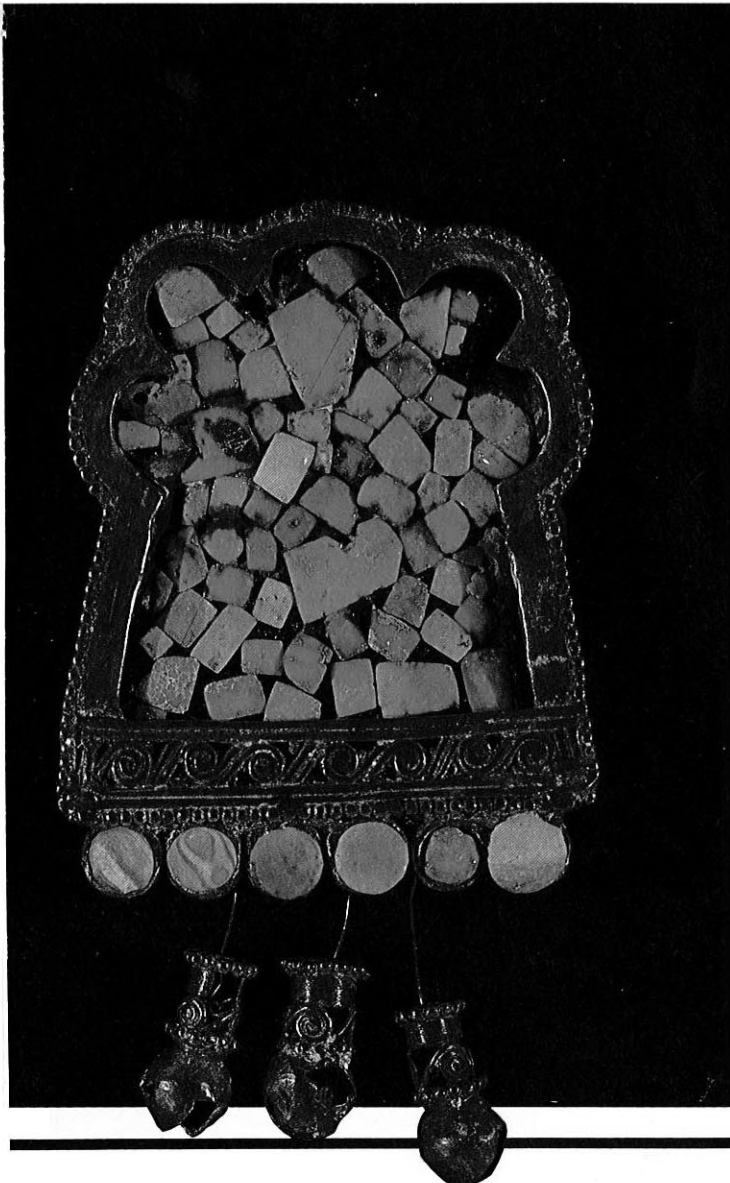
quences of the methods and attitudes of researchers that went before them. The first big archaeological and anthropological museums developed out of the antiquarian attitudes of the 1800s. For them, amassing artifacts was one way to increase their prestige and reputation. They therefore sent out expeditions to collect large numbers of pieces. With the advent of foreign nationalism in the 1950s and with the beginning of scientific archaeology in the 1960s the traditional collection-related roles were re-defined. Most archaeological and anthropological museums broke away from their previously mandated role. Now expeditions were sent out less to collect pieces than to make spectacular finds and collect data. By the early 1970s many museums openly discouraged looting and actively hindered unfettered collecting: they did this by refusing to purchase or acquire by donation collections devoid of archaeological context or pedigree. Yet even then these same institutions had not yet fully broken away from the collecting mentality. Once they had gained prestige by mounting a large long-term archaeological expedition that continually "collected" significant discoveries, many sponsoring institutions often did not then go on to provide sufficient post-field support: they failed to process the mountains of collected data, or even to fully publish their findings in a timely manner. Archaeology may be defined as "controlled destruction": whatever is excavated must be fully recorded because it can never be precisely restored to its exact context. Full publication of archaeological investigations allows a recreation of this context. To put it simply, archaeologists do not and should not dig unless they can expect to fully record and then publish their findings. These go far beyond the pretty pots and objects that form the sole interests of the collector.

Not writing up and not publishing findings is irresponsible. However, non-archaeologists need to understand that for every day spent in the field, *at minimum* seven days are required for processing, analyzing and writing.



The effigy cache vessel (far left), excavated at Santa Rita Corozal in 1980, was later stolen from the Belize Department of Archaeology and is probably now in a private collection. Had the gold and red cylindrical tripod (left) and the gold and tourquoise earrings (below) not been archaeologically recovered, they would never have been ascribed to the Santa Rita site. Similarly, it would have been difficult, out of context, to identify the "ritual bloodletters" (right) as one of four bacabs that, in Maya thought, held up the sky.

Projecting these post-field rates, it is not surprising that it takes years for final reports to appear. If one's emphasis is solely on collecting, the rest of the data are expendable. Today's archaeologist and, indeed, today's responsible institution, does not take such a narrow view. Rather, whatever is collected needs to be placed into its context to be understood; this takes time and forms the basis of the scientific enterprise. The end result of this long-term process is a final report that not only deals with past ways of

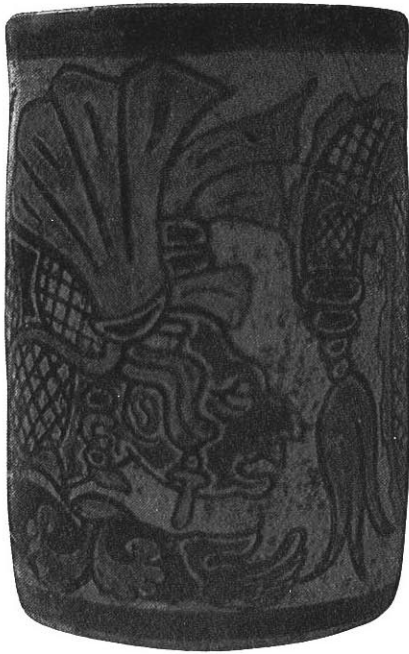


life and cultural processes, but also permits the reader to recreate the excavated archaeological record and to cross-check archaeological interpretations.

Modern archaeologists have a series of commitments, contracts and responsibilities that they did not have in the past. Most often these ethics or rules of conduct are understood by working archaeologists, but the general public is largely unaware of them.

While the primary task of archaeology is to answer scientifically questions about ancient societies, through their very research archaeologists become enmeshed in a wide network of relationships that involves not only their work but the plans and goals of their colleagues, the local public and the government. Once an archaeologist begins work at a site, he or she has usually made a commitment not only to the collection of data from that locale, but also to the physical preservation of the site once excavation ceases. Preservation of a site is accomplished either through backfilling of all excavations, or consolidating the site for viewing by tourists, in conjunction with government offices in charge. Such a stabilization and reconstruction program is part of the ethical responsibility of modern archaeology.

Apart from responsibilities to the site being worked on, the archaeologist also submits published reports on his or her research to the government offices in charge of archaeology and to colleagues within the overall discipline. In a wider sense, this responsibility also extends to guardianship of data. Archaeologists recognize that they do not physically own any of the items they are digging up. Rather, these items generally form part of the patrimony of the country in which the excavation is taking place and they rightly belong to the people of that country. Likewise, the data collected through archaeology ultimately should be used by the wider profession and the public. These data, however, must remain fully in the hands of the archaeologist until full publication. Only then can such material be placed in a permanent archive, preserved for



This cylinder of unknown provenance was photographed in the Peten of Guatemala and is believed to be fraudulent. As such, it represents one of thousands of forged pieces sold to unsuspecting institutions or individuals.

use by other scholars.

Perhaps the most obvious responsibility of modern archaeologists centers on the published articles, public lectures and museum exhibits that should result from their activities. For these are the only ways that archaeologists can fulfill their primary obligation to the public—in return for public funds. Still, major questions are currently being raised by archaeologists about just how to do this and how much to tell. Should all data be made openly available to everyone or should some finds be hidden? Does the open display of national treasures encourage looting and collecting? The archaeologist must attempt to educate the public concerning its collective responsibility to the past patrimony. This responsibility should involve the open sharing of data with non-archaeologists through lectures, exhibits and newspapers. Nothing found in or by archaeology should be intentionally hidden.

In certain countries there has been a recent trend in the opposite direction. Rather than fully educating the people as to their past, news of important finds made by archaeologists are sometimes suppressed from public dissemination. Pictures of rare finds are not shown in public forums and archaeologists make no mention of them.

Suppression of data can create a dangerous situation by making archaeologists and government officials untrustworthy in the eyes of the public. If the data are not made available, some might unknowingly ask how the archaeologist is different from a looter. And who is to know where these unpublicized finds might end up? A lack of openness or honesty is not in keeping with ethics of scientific archaeology. But still there is sometimes fear that increased knowledge will lead to even more looting and destruction.

In Belize, there is a concerted effort to educate all Belizeans as to the necessity for preserving the past. This effort is being carried forward by the Department of Archaeology, archaeologists working there, and the Association for Belize Archaeology, a local group interested in prehistory. Major new finds are presented in public ar-

chaeological displays throughout the country's districts and archaeology is taught in elementary school. This enlightened approach is raising the consciousness of the nation about the importance of preserving the past. As a result, the public is increasingly helpful in preserving both sites and artifacts.

Beyond the problems involved in excavation, analysis, preservation and dissemination of information, the archaeologist is faced with another dilemma. Should looted pieces and collections be used side by side with carefully excavated material? Archaeologists who do not include unidentified objects in their interpretations share an outlook that embodies three major points: First, these looted or collected items do not provide the full story; they are not associated with other artifacts or a particular location that can provide a context.

Second, non-provenanced material originally derives from illegal excavation and using these objects indirectly legitimizes the artifacts and the looting from which they are derived. Professionals are concerned that the use of such objects may also drive up market value and increase looting.

Third, because of the high demand for archaeological objects in the public sector, many of the looted pieces on the art market today are either fakes or repainted vessels that bear little resemblance to the originals. There is no assurance that the interpretations made from them are valid. It is in fact often difficult to distinguish a fraud from the real thing.

Some collectors and art historians feel that a rich world of iconography and glyphs has been opened up by the collection of looted pots of unknown provenance. Any responsible archaeologist would question this assertion, for it is not known whether such materials are real or repainted. The use of iconography founded on non-provenanced vessels is likely to introduce false interpretations, for the modern forger is just as skillful and innovative as the ancient artist. Even if some of these vessels should prove genuine, a much richer world of iconography and associations has been destroyed by removing the vessels from their contexts. Archaeologists do not ignore or discard data that can be utilized by epigraphers and art historians, even though their goals are different. This collection of all data by the archaeologist leads, in fact, to the problem of lag time between data collection and full publication.

Epigraphers, by definition, are predominantly interested in hieroglyphic texts while art historians are primarily interested in single vessels and their iconography. Such information can be rapidly disseminated because it comprises such a small amount of the data recovered through archaeology. Yet hieroglyphics and single objects form only a part of the repertoire that the archaeologist seeks to publish.

Collecting is big business. Archaeology is not. Business ethics, in which the dollar is supreme, is not compatible with archaeological ethics, where contextual data are worth more because they provide a fuller picture of ancient peoples not discoverable solely from the iconography of decorated artifacts. These interpretations of prehistoric life are the goals of archaeological science. The

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collector of artifacts needs to be made more aware of the invaluable nature of archaeologically collected pieces—and of the fact that information gathered about the relationships and meaning of such items may be worth far more than the object itself. It would be far better if collectors could be persuaded to spend their time and money in support of legitimate archaeological research. Such work would not only produce beautiful objects, but would also result in the contextual data needed to make archaeological interpretations of the past. And more important, collectors could experience the thrill of discovery, and the multitudes of meaning, that can be derived from the accurate placement of objects in their context. This experience might prove far more satisfying than mere ownership of a looted pot.

Today, collecting and profit go hand-in-hand. The unfortunate truth is that if collectors were not willing to pay exorbitant amounts for artifacts, destructive looting would not be so rampant. Nor would fraudulent archaeological materials so often be introduced into the marketplace. The argument that collecting “saves the past” only clouds the issue. A looter is not salvaging materials. He is only helping to destroy the past—for a profit. Most sites are

not in danger from any other source but the looter's pick. And untouched archaeological sites are rapidly becoming an endangered species. Private collecting simply encourages further looting, and from an archaeologist's viewpoint it is wrong.

Some would argue that the responsibility for curtailing looting lies not with the collectors but with government officials. But many countries are only now realizing the invaluable nature of their past. Most countries have solid laws against such activity, but not the manpower to enforce them. The responsibilities to curb looting, however, go beyond enforcement and educating the nation's people. They also rest with the country to which the looted items ultimately go. The simple fact that customs checks are made when one is entering but not when leaving a country means that the country entered has more chance of detecting a looted piece than the country of departure. Beyond this, curbing of looting requires an educated public unwilling to purchase items not rightfully for sale.

The dispersal of looted artworks into the world is a direct result of the existence of an art market to support such activity. Responsible museums and individuals have recognized that their obligation to the public precludes the ownership, authentication and valuation of such objects. It is now time for collectors, also, to realize their responsibility to the cultural patrimony of the world. □