

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

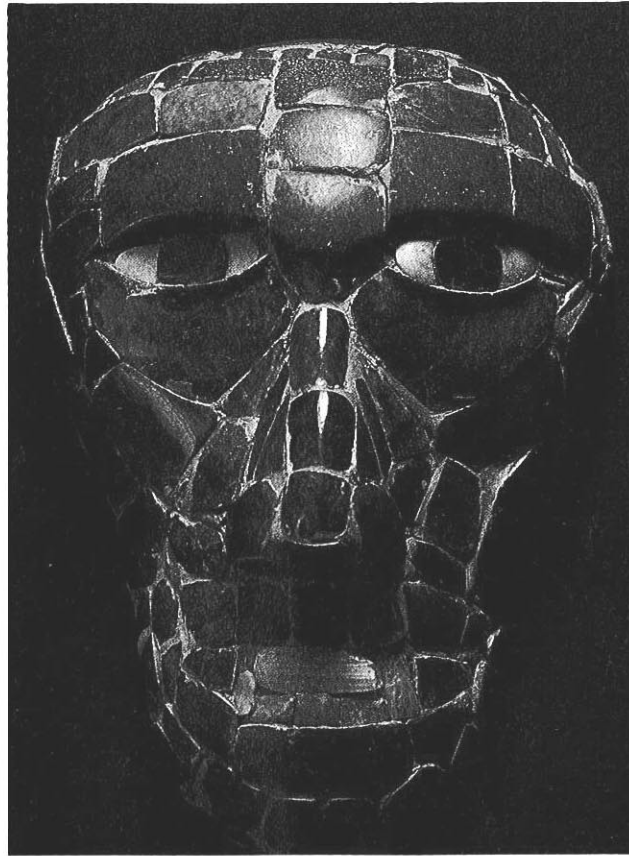
of the 1800s were indeed antiquarians or collectors. In that era, collecting was believed to be both a mode of science and a way to advance knowledge. But while the destructive excavation methods of the antiquarians may have been similar to those in use by looters today, even then antiquarians usually 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-

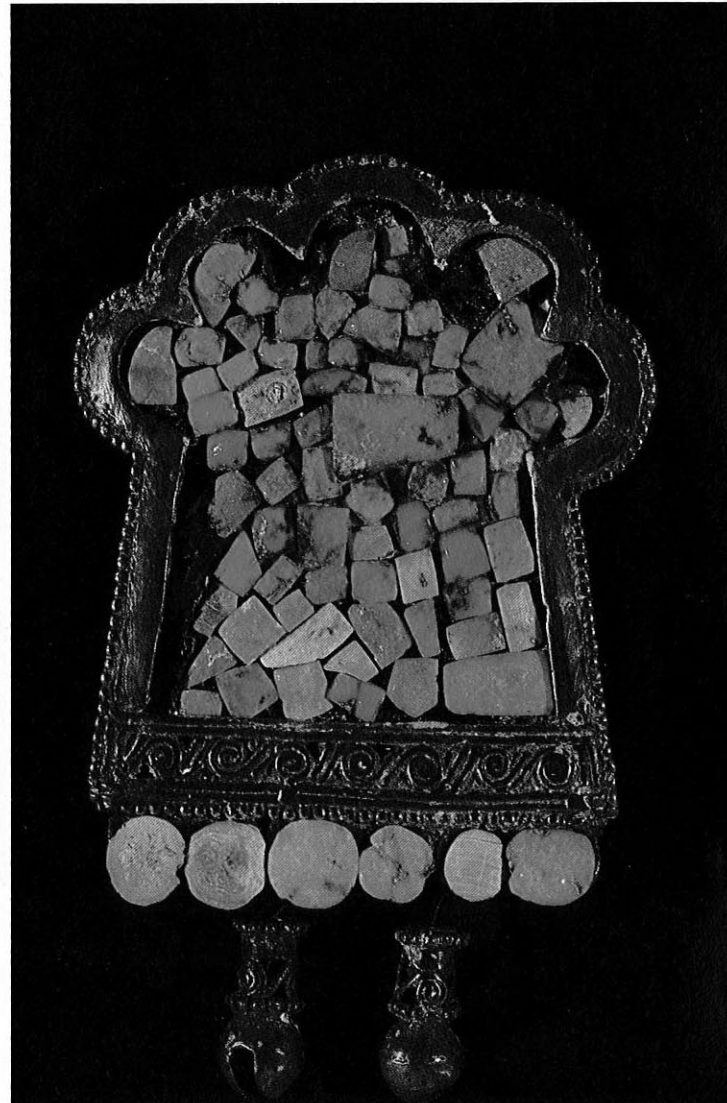


This rare jadeite mask, excavated at Santa Rita Corozal, Belize, is similar to one dug up by looters and offered for sale at an exorbitant price.



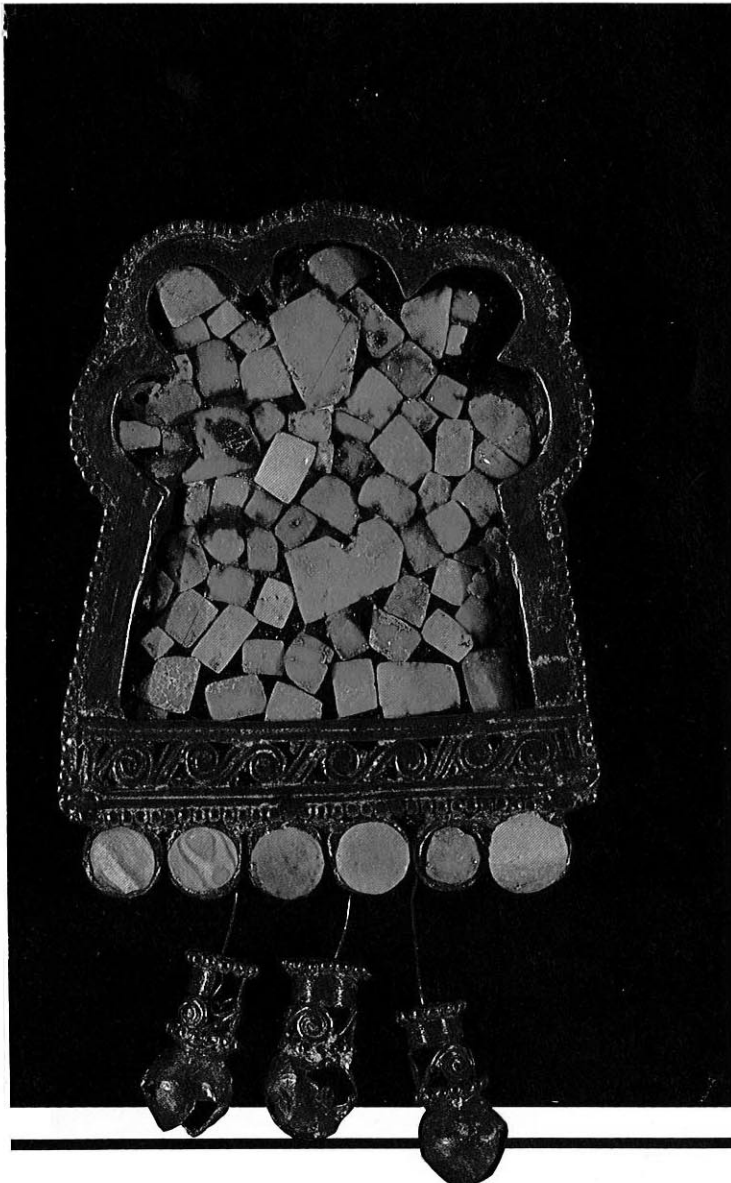
quences of the methods and attitudes of researchers that went before them. The first big archaeological and anthropological museums developed out of the antiquarian attitudes of the 1800s. For them, amassing artifacts was one way to increase their prestige and reputation. They therefore sent out expeditions 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

