Archaeology’s Perilous Pleasures

Author(s): David Lowenthal


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Archaeology's Perilous Pleasures

by David Lowenthal

An eminent historian reflects on some uses and misuses of the past. A response by a noted British scholar appears on page 67.

More than any other scholarly calling, archaeology surfs the crest of our obsession with heritage. Cults of bygone times and relics are omnipresent. Links with personal and communal legacies extend the desirable past from great monuments to humble shrines, from relics of architecture and art to remains of everyday folklife, from state and church archives to records of neighborhood groups and family life. Harking back to the most remote and forward to the most recent times, we embrace every epoch from the Palaeolithic to Elvis Presley.

The civic landscape reflects these burgeoning concerns. Themed museums and historic sites proliferate; history and genealogy multiply their devotees; historic preservation becomes a bellwether for urban renewal. Tragedy is hallowed along with triumph; today's ancestral past is as much mourned as cheered. Empathy with medieval serfs, dispossessed indigenes, African slaves, and Holocaust victims haunts popular consciousness. And in most of these backward-looking ventures, archaeology plays a unparalleled role.

What accounts for the discipline's new-found salience? Archaeology has long capitalized on public fascination with death and treasure, but its current popularity stems, I suggest, from three further attributes specific to the field. One is archaeology's unique focus on the remotest epochs of human existence, imbued with an allure of exotic, uncanny secrets hidden in the mists of time. A second is archaeology's concern with tangible remains, lending it an immediacy and credibility unique among the human sciences. The third is archaeology's patent attachment to pressing issues of identity and possession—of post-imperial hegemony and of ethnic cleansing, the retention or restitution of land and bones and artifact—that embroil First and Third World states, mainstream and minority people.

These three realms of discourse—antiquity, tangibility, and present-day relevance—are not, to be sure, confined to archaeology alone. While astronomy and paleontology claim concern with still more remote antiquity, art and architecture with material artifacts, public history and social science with present politics, archaeology alone uniquely embodies and exemplifies all three realms. Each promises potent new avenues for archaeological advances; each also portends grave risks for archaeological theory and practice. Let me spell out some of these promises and perils.

First, antiquity. Archaeology is not limited to humanity's deep past, but is closely aligned with it in the public and in most practitioners' eyes. Ancient remains arouse widespread awe: hardly a day passes without some rumored find that stirs us in proportion to its purported antiquity. By antiquity I mean not chronological date but time relative to context; no less thrilling than the cosmosically ancient is the more recent calendar age of a species, a tribe, a morpheme, or a sacred text. Finds dauntingly antique are mesmeric: a speck of possibly fossilized primordial organic Mars, single-celled eukaryotes and photosynthetic bacteria 2.7 billion years old, Mesozoic pines hidden over many millennia in New South Wales, the frozen body of a neolithic Alpine shepherd, the fragmentary adjudications of first-century Essene scribes near the Dead Sea, turf-wall traces of early Viking sojourns at L'Anse aux Meadows, Newfoundland.

Admiration of the ancient stems from the feeling that priority confers entitlement. We associate primacy with coming first, priority with being best. The first-born is traditionally blessed; first come, first served. The possession of land and chattels, rights to rulership and to guidance, are almost universally accorded to firstcomers, oldest offspring, original discoverers, those who precede others. The first to find a cure or a continent, to detect hidden treasure, to walk on the moon, or to cry "Bingo!" inherits fame or fortune; no one remembers who came next.
What is prior offers prestige and title; primordial origins connote divine aims and attributes; things indigenous are deeply rooted; long persistence betokens stability. Beginnings lost in the mists of time attest the community’s primordiality and hence its worth. Ancient origins, especially those predating written evidence, secure pride and fidelity to traditional values. Descendants of indigenes claim lands by dint of primordial occupancy. No wonder Canadian Inuit and Indians favor such terms as First Peoples and First Nations. The mantle of prior occupancy makes their entitlement morally unassailable. No claims are more potent than “This belongs to us because we were here first.”

It is tempting for governments and civic organizations to exploit the popularity of ancientness and origins. But for archaeologists it carries severe risks. One is that temporal primacy explains much less than it seems to do. The earliest sources of self, of society, of the species promise to reveal our place in the scheme of things. “Here is where time began,” proclaims an advertisement from the Israel Ministry of Tourism. “Here it was all born,” says the Prague Mozart Foundation of central European musical culture. “This is who we are because this is how and where we began.” We are apt to assume that to find how and when something began is to understand it completely, but this is sheer fancy. Origins explain little.

Pinpointing “how and where we began” is grand heritage rhetoric but poor history. “Archaeologists and the media all want to know what the oldest site is,” said Australia’s premier archaeologist John Mulvaney in a recent interview. “That’s the wrong question. It’s more important to work out what the people were doing—what sort of society they had.” Pinpointing the oldest is often only a semantic quibble, for beginnings depend on how we define what has begun. Tracing change and continuity from a before to an after tells history more fruitfully than does finding and dating an event without antecedent. Claims of precedence and primordiality moreover cause immense grief. Obsession with ancient subjugation exacerbates national, religious, and ethnic strife all over the globe. Ulster Catholic recall of William of Orange, Serb memories of the fourth-century Battle of Kosovo immure the present in outworn shibboleths.

But no evidence, historical or archaeological, can ever settle such contests. To rivals who claim an older past, chauvinists often retort that that kind of past doesn’t count. Thus, some French repudiated Lucy; then the world’s oldest found hominid, as an alien African. And Greeks, besotted by any trace of Philip of Macedon, dismiss English prehistory as irrelevant. So what if Stonehenge is older than the Acropolis?
Greeks knew their history goes back two and a half millennia, while the English had no “real” history before 1066.

In fact, ancient priority embodies no inherent merit; it merely lends comfort to those persuaded that they alone incarnate some uniquely ancestral essence. There is no intrinsic virtue in having been the first occupants, the first explorers, the first to stamp culture on the face of nature, or lineal descendants of any of these. All ancestries, foreign as well as domestic, are equally aboriginal. Millennia of global history entitle migrants no less than stay-at-homes to the legacies of myriad restlessly migratory, continually intermixed ancestors.

Tangibility is the second archaeological trait I find alike enticing and troublesome. The very term “fieldwork” typically suggests unearthing treasures of high value, beauty, and historical significance. More than any written record, the earthy substance of sites and artifacts lends them a compelling immediacy, makes them convincingly real. Archaeological finds around the Mediterranean, from Pompeii to Paestum and the pyramids, have brought classical, biblical, and Pharaonic history newly alive to millions. And sites such as Ireland’s Tara, Spain’s Numantia, and France’s Alésia figure as precious national icons of identity.

Locales and remnants of ancient grief and glory have long been prime foci of tourist pilgrimage. But today we treasure ancient sites and relics for other reasons than our forebears did. Two centuries ago, the attrition of monuments induced elegiac reflections on the brevity of life and the evanescent power. “Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair,” pronounced Shelley’s Ozymandias. Today morbid meditation is passé; we cry havoc at physical decay and seek to conserve at all costs.

What explains this mounting concern to see and to save relics of antiquity? Partly it is their heightened visibility. Electronic and other media replace verbal messages with visual images. Vivid depictions of nature and culture display the whole sweep of planetary history to mass audiences as never before. And archaeology, more than any other calling, inspires spectacular presentations from coffee-table picturebooks to television programs.

Ostensibly truth is a powerful spur to the popularity of the tangible. Never mind that faking is everywhere rife; the sheer solid existence of an artifact or a site compellingly attests its authenticity. The very materiality of archaeology’s stock-in-trade conveys an conviction absent from mere tales or texts. Telling the truth about the past is the supreme archaeological cachet, whether or not realized in practice. Indeed, curators and site interpreters eager to claim they are showing history as it really was, warts and all, sanctify their enterprise as “archaeologically correct.”

From Petrarch to Freud, archaeological analogies have captivated scholars seeking truth in history and memory. Renaissance devotees of antiquity resurrected both buried artifacts and buried texts; they compared restoring classical learning with rescuing physical relics. “Deciphering historical knowledge under the visual or verbal surfaces,” in the American historian Thomas Greene’s phrase, “the reader divines a buried stratum as a visitor to Rome divines the subterranean foundations of a temple.”

Four centuries later the same metaphor fuelled psychoanalytic recovery of memory. Freud repeatedly equated psychoanalysis with prehistoric excavation: “unearthing unconscious memories,” “digging to find representative ‘traces,’” he likened himself to Schliemann quarrying another Troy. Yet thought analysts even more fortunate than archaeologists, whose significant evidence may well have been destroyed, whereas for excavators of memory “all of the essentials are preserved; even things that seem completely forgotten are present.” Unlike the analyst, moreover, the archaeologist could not check his constructs with some surviving Trojan or Babylonian.

An oft-claimed virtue of the archaeological enterprise, superior truth is perhaps its most powerful appeal. Material evidence is held to provide a healthy corrective to the biases of written history based on scribal records confined to a small cadre of privileged and prejudiced elites. The past these elites recounted largely ignored or trivialized the role of women, children, manual workers, non-whites, non-Europeans—most of the human race. Properly interpreted, tangible remains reveal the true history of this heretofore silent majority—people without history, in anthropologist Eric Wolf’s phrase. For, unlike words, things do not lie. “Archaeology has preempted the written record,” proclaims this journal’s editor (ARCHAEOLOGY, September/October 1998), “with discoveries that illumine the actual rather than the imagined past.”

Yet these claims are deeply flawed. Its visible, tangible character makes archaeological evidence uniquely gripping, but by the same token incomplete and deficient. From material remains alone we can merely speculate about past minds, hearts, and memories; only recorded words, whether feigned or sincere, reveal nuances of consciousness and intention, forethought and hindsight. Devotees of cognitive archaeology have not yet extracted traces of thought from relics. Not only are relics mute; they are also static. Where-as a past recurred and recorded can convey a dynamic sweep.
through time, tangible survivals in general yield isolated moments, not a diachronic palimpsest.

That material evidence gives archaeology a special claim to indubitable truth is likewise delusive. Tangibility lends credence to physical relics. Here we are, they seem to say; you can see us, even touch us; why doubt the reality of your senses? But sense impressions are notoriously fickle. And the data that relics convey are elusive and slippery.

Undue faith in sensory evidence, especially at monumental sites, diserves archaeology’s claim to objective truth. The powerful impress of vivid ancient locales privileges erroneous myth over historical evidence. Josephus’s tale of mass suicide at Masada is known to be an invented compage of classical lore, disproved by history and archaeology alike. But the enduring salience of the site induces the viewer to experience Masada as a transcendent reality.

Evidence from structures and objects is deficient in other respects as well. One is their relative longevity. Nothing material lasts forever; the best-husbandred relics ultimately expire. More than textual evidence, the material past risks being misinterpreted owing to differential decay. Because things built and made for elites almost always outlast everyman’s goods and chattels, material remnants are bound to warp how the past is viewed and understood.

Recent efforts to depict eighteenth-century Colonial Williamsburg more comprehensively, including the presence and lifestyles of its many slaves, shows how disparities in tangible remains subvert historical neutrality and perhaps even reinforce historical bias (see Further Reading, page 90). Much of what belonged to Williamsburg’s elite endures and has been exhaustively inventoried. But of the slaves—more than half the population—virtually nothing material survives. To depict slave life, replica huts had to be furnished with generic bedding, utensils, clothing. The incongruity is flagrant—and bizarre. The elite appear inactul, contextualized, explicit detail; the faceless, unprovenanced slaves are generalized, undifferentiated. No contrivance can redress the gross imbalance of what survives in the archaeological record.

Archaeology’s third special claim is its relevance to current social and political issues. For a discipline ostensibly about the past, and notably about prehistory, archaeology is strikingly enmeshed in passions and prejudices of the present. Beyond most who delve into bygone eras, archaeologists seem aware—even happily aware, that the past is no longer a “foreign country,” as British novelist L.P. Hartley termed it 50 years ago, but rather is part and parcel of the present; what they dissect and disclose is ever freshly reborn. No wonder archaeologists become prominent in politics: they often exemplify national feeling, especially in newly ex-colonial and otherwise beleaguered countries.

That many archaeologists are willing and able to confront salient current issues head-on is just as well. They have little choice but to do so; the present refuses to let them alone. Far more than other disciplines whose remit is the past—history, paleontology, geology—archaeology must reckon with current conflicts of property, heritage, law, and stewardship. When not totally banned, fieldwork in foreign lands, even in one’s own, now requires endless negotiations over land rights, labor forces, ethnic and racial interests, disposal of spoils. National sentiment and professional ethics fetter archaeological modes of data disclosure, conservation, infrastructure, training, and long-term accountability.

What archaeologists do and how they are viewed has momentous, perhaps fateful, import for icons of national identity, tribal claims to indemnity, artifact restitution, site pilfering and looting, the faking of relics, the smuggling of art and antiquities. These activities also seal the future viability of their own profession. It is rightly said that archaeology often seems less a science than a vendetta. Meanwhile, their manifest immersion in present-day concerns privileges archaeologists in the public eye. They are often looked to—save by treasure-hunters and collectors—as zealous, disinterested guardians of the public cultural heritage against malevolent private greed, corporate neglect, and selfish chauvinism. Some appear in the public eye as champions of fidelity of context, against collectors’ site-destructive avarice. Atoning for callous and ethnocentric precursors, archaeologists today embrace minority rights, indigenous restorations, and self-denying bans of every stripe.

These commitments, in large measure unavoidable, are laudable in principle, but they are also costly and hazardous. They drain time and effort, funding and esprit de corps. They demand of archaeologists a level of highmindedness that is often neither attainable nor credible to outsiders. And they sometimes willy nilly feed, rather than allay, chauvinist and acquisitive appetites and the warping of history that archaeology genuinely deplores. Archaeologists, of course, are not immune to pressures to conform to national, ethnic, and personal agendas and priorities. What excavator can wholly ignore government or tribal behests now for urgent effort, now for discreet delay, pleas here for a blind eye, there for forceful intervention? With the myth of the selfless academic today exploded, to assume a stance of scientific objectivity is to invite public antipathy. Elsewhere, as the Harvard anthropologist Michael Herzfeld’s A Place in History (1991).
showed for Rethimnos, Crete, the very term “archaeologist” becomes a byword for officious, bureaucratic meddling in local community affairs.

Excavations are famously the pawns of personal ambitions and nationalist goals. Almost everywhere, archaeologists have sought to justify the ethnic, racial, linguistic, religious, and cultural bases of their state or people. Many if not most digs reflect entrepreneurial hubris; even refuse sites become icons of collective identity. Of Schliemann’s obsession with finding Homer’s Troy and his wholesale removal of layers that did not fit his Trojan image, the American writer Neil Asher Silberman concludes that “archaeology was not the handmaiden of history, it was the delivery boy of myth.” Few German archaeologists hesitated to document the ancient Teutonic sites and artifacts that Nazi prestige demanded, nor Soviet scholars to counter German ethnogenetic expansion with a contrived inflation of Slavic antiquities.

When 1980s excavation pointed to the Japanese imperial family’s probable Korean ancestry, archaeologists swiftly sealed the tombs to safeguard the legend of unbroken descent from the sun goddess. Little wonder, for prewar archaeologists had been dismissed, even arrested, for questioning the imperial myth. The Romanian dictator Nicolai Ceausescu lauded prehistorians for validating his country’s claims: “with every excavation, the archaeologists are bringing to light more evidence, proving that it is here, in this land...that the bones of the forefathers of our forefathers’ forefathers are to be found.”

In America, too, what gets excavated and how reflects not just scholarly aims but partisan and professional heritage needs. Some archaeologists are importuned to certify tribal sagas in legal preceedings, testifying that this or that people came first and kept collective faith making them one with present-day descendants; other are paid to deny such claims. Those who take on worthy causes may succumb to presentist fallacies, attributing present modes of thought and action to folk of the past. For example, archaeologists who re-examined seventeenth-century Narragansett Indian remains in a Rhode Island cemetery in the 1980s concluded that skeletal postures and grave goods proved resistance to white assimilation. Their concurrence with current minority virtues pleased present-day Narragansets, for continuity of tribal identity with like-minded ancestors gained them tribal pride and Federal privileges. But it ignored or denied a known ethnological and archaeology that, according to the American archaeologist Michael Nasser, attested past racial and cultural synthesis. Empathy may not have been the sole reason for positing past solidarity and cohesion; only an explanation congenial to the tribe enabled archaeologists to maintain access to the site.

Education, information, and other heritage benefits of archaeology here and there outweigh the interests of private—personal, tribal, national—possessors and claimants. But if broader stewardship ideals have begun to actuate some public policy, they are still far from being translated into widespread behavior. Routinely distorted for nationalist aims, the archaeology of the Caucasus—opposing Azeri and Armenian views of the genesis of the carved stone crosses in Azerbaijan—has in this decade fuelled one of the former Soviet Union’s bloodiest conflicts. As long as national and ethnic rivalries endure, the past will continue to be perverted for political purposes. Disparities of wealth and stakeholding in much of the world will long preclude any consensus that excavation is for mainly scholarly purposes. As long as impoverished folk in heritage-rich lands have to sell antiquities to feed their children—and perhaps to school them to behave otherwise—there will be no halt to looting and destruction.

We like to suppose our age of enlightened codes of ethics and reforms of practice vouch for an archaeology today that is on the whole more highminded, socially responsible, and intellectually reputable than before. But the nineteenth-century archaeologist who catered to nationalist bias, the curator who rejoiced in acquiring mummies because they would be safer in the British Museum than in any tomb in Egypt, the explorer who purloined tribal African treasures, the consul official who bribed looters of Chinese antiquities, were generally acting in accord with ethical standards we now condemn.

Yet, as I suggest above, certain other preconceptions inherited from these less enlightened times still endure in the archaeological profession. Devotion to priority, to tangibility, and to contemporary relevance have brought the discipline many genuine benefits. Archaeology, however, would benefit from acknowledging the harm as well as the good that such devotion has wrought. It might enable archaeologists to face up more frankly to often justified public doubts about the rectitude of the discipline.