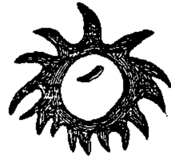
CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

THE ARROGANT ARCHAEOLOGIST

by Brian Fagan



Enforcement of antiquities protection laws in the United States is making a dent, but only a small one. The solution to the looting problem lies in changing public perceptions about collecting antiquities. The responsibility for bringing about that huge change lies with professional archaeologists—but we may be the greatest offenders, for we "have not made conservation, ethics, and public education the core of our archaeological enterprise."

For a moment I saw red, felt sheer blinding fury. Controlling myself with an effort, I gazed in disgust and horror at the ravaged shell midden. I was hiking for pleasure along the southern California coast and looting was far from my mind. Memories of the Slack Farm affair came vividly to mind, that notorious looting event that left a late prehistoric site in Kentucky looking like a scarred battleground (see Chapter 2, "Black Day at Slack Farm"). Every time I come across instances of pot-hunting, I find them harder to rationalize, and even harder to understand. Why do people do this? For money? To satisfy a lust to own a piece of the past? Is it sheer ignorance about archaeology and the importance of the past? Or are they seeking to emulate the fictional adventures of Indiana Jones? What makes me even madder is that few people seem to care that the past is vanishing before our eyes. Many of my nonprofessional friends just shrug and change the subject. You cannot entirely blame them: most would not know an archaeological site if it was right under their feet. Even worse,

some of my archaeological friends just shrug, and that's what makes me maddest of all.

John Neary (see Chapter 5, "Project Sting,") tells us that recent undercover operations have put a chill on some collecting activity in the Southwest. Clearly, these tactics, expensive as they are, work well and should be expanded. Looting statistics are daunting. According to Sherry Hutt, Elwood Jones, and Martin McAllister, authors of *Archaeological Resource Protection* (Washington, DC: Preservation Press, 1992), more than one-third of the known sites in the Four Corners region have been damaged by looters. Of the 1,720 violations reported in Park Service statistics for 1985 through 1987, only about 11 percent resulted in arrests or citations, and there were only 94 convictions.

If there is a solution to the looting problem, it is changing public attitudes toward the collecting of antiquities. This will take years, and will require a full-time commitment by hundreds, if not thousands, of professional archaeologists, not only in this country, but all over the world. It is our responsibility and cannot be left to teachers and bureaucrats. Yet, sadly, in many ways we are the greatest offenders. Our professional organizations condemn looting—they do so in uncompromising terms—but we have not made conservation, ethics, and public education the core of our archaeological enterprise.

Archaeologists live within a hierarchical value system that considers research, excavation, new discoveries, and publication the pinnacle of achievement. Anything else, for all their talk to the contrary, is secondary to these enterprises. Almost all doctoral programs in archaeology emphasize basic research. They produce narrowly focused academic researchers, future generations of professors who will themselves, in turn, train even more specialized archaeologists. The emphasis is often on high-profile research, where the chances of spectacular discoveries are higher than average, the potential for funding is considered promising, and the fieldwork will bring prestige, visibility, and, pinnacle of academic pinnacles, perhaps even a story in *The New York Times*. This is the kind of enterprise beloved of many academic deans and department heads, research that brings luster and financial resources to an institution. I am irresistibly reminded of the

expedition mentality that drove so much late nineteenth-century archaeology—the University of Pennsylvania's research at Nippur in Mesopotamia is a classic example. It worked at Nippur, indeed at Ur, in an archaeological world where there were so few professionals. Today, academic archaeology is big business, turning out hundreds of Ph.D. students a year, yet the old mentality and values drive the field. Why do we persist in producing more doctoral students in specialized fields that are already overcrowded when there is so much urgent work to be done on the global threat to the past? I suspect we do because it is, well, sexier to hire a specialist in Oldowan technology or Inka urbanism than in the impact of tourism on the archaeological record.

This same skewed value system pays lip service to teaching, conservation and resource management, and the administering of the archaeological record. But, when push comes to shove, these subjects take a back seat to research. Yes, much academic research is carried out under the rubric of cultural resource management—survey, excavation, and mitigation—aimed at preserving or recording sites before they vanish under bulldozers. But very often academic research, especially excavation, proceeds without consideration of conservation issues or site management whatsoever. In fact, many academics are woefully ignorant of the extent of the damage to the archaeological record, forgetting that their own annual digs are also eroding the same human archives, often at breakneck speed. How many academics pause to think about conserving a site before they dig it? Surprisingly few . . . .

Very few archaeology graduate programs anywhere expose their students to issues of conservation, ethics, and basic archaeological values—unless they are curricula specifically addressing cultural resource management. Out of curiosity, I telephoned a random selection of archaeology graduate advisers at major universities around the country and asked them what ethics and conservation courses were taught to graduate students. Almost invariably, these topics were sidelines. "Oh, we talk about reburial in one lecture," one well-known archaeologist told me in a tired voice. "But it's very political. The Ph.D. is, after all, a research degree." What arrogant nonsense!

The looting problem is not going away. The Park Service alone reports a 40 percent increase in violations over the past few years, and you can be sure that its statistics are just the tip of the iceberg. At the same time, one learns that at least 100 archaeologists with Ph.D.s in Maya archaeology are looking for permanent employment. Unemployed classical archaeologists could almost form a professional society. These people may be excellent scholars, but they are not the kind of archaeologists we need in such large numbers today. We need people who will devote prestigious careers to conservation, to research into the fundamental problems confronting the archaeological record. Without such research, we are, both government and academics, fumbling in the dark.

Basic research is important to the vitality of our discipline. But do we need so many, ever more trivial studies when fundamental, admittedly less glamorous issues need our attention? Fascinating opportunities await the ambitious scholar, fundamental research as important, if not more so, than much of the basic inquiry that fills our journals. What is the psychology of collecting? What is it that impels people to transform their fascination with the past into a lust to own it? The last definitive work on this subject was done, I believe, in the 1920s. What do we know about the psychology and culture of professional pothunters and looters? Can such research help us develop tactics for combating looting? What about archaeological tourism? What are the effects of tens of thousands of visitors on the rich archaeological record of, say, Britain, Egypt, or Mexico? What strategies are archaeologists developing in collaboration with governments everywhere to minimize the impact on the finite archaeological record? I know of no Ph.D. program in this country that places a high priority on research of this type. Everything is theory, fieldwork, and publication. About the only organization concerned with these issues on a global basis is the Getty Conservation Institute. The Getty's efforts are invaluable, as are those of other international organizations, and of the Archaeological Conservancy closer to home.

I have been told by colleagues that research into such questions is "unimportant" or "marginal." What utter nonsense in this day and age, when the archaeological record evaporates around us daily. Surely we

must now take a close look at our own value systems and priorities, at archaeological ethics and curricula. How do we, as professional scholars and practitioners of a noble art, intend to insure its survival for our grandchildren to enjoy?

Yes, this is a column written in the heat of anger, soon after walking over looters' trenches. But this anger will be channeled into a closer look at my own teaching of graduates and undergraduates, and into more columns that look at the ethical issues of archaeology and at conservation. After all, we cannot do much to steer the public's fascination with the past into benign and nondestructive directions unless we clean up our own act. Our own comfortable, sometimes arrogant attitude is much divorced from reality. It is time we took stock. We owe it to our grandchildren, if nothing else.

Brian Fagan teaches archaeology at the University of California, Santa Barbara. He is a well-known author of archaeology textbooks and a contributing editor for Archaeology.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

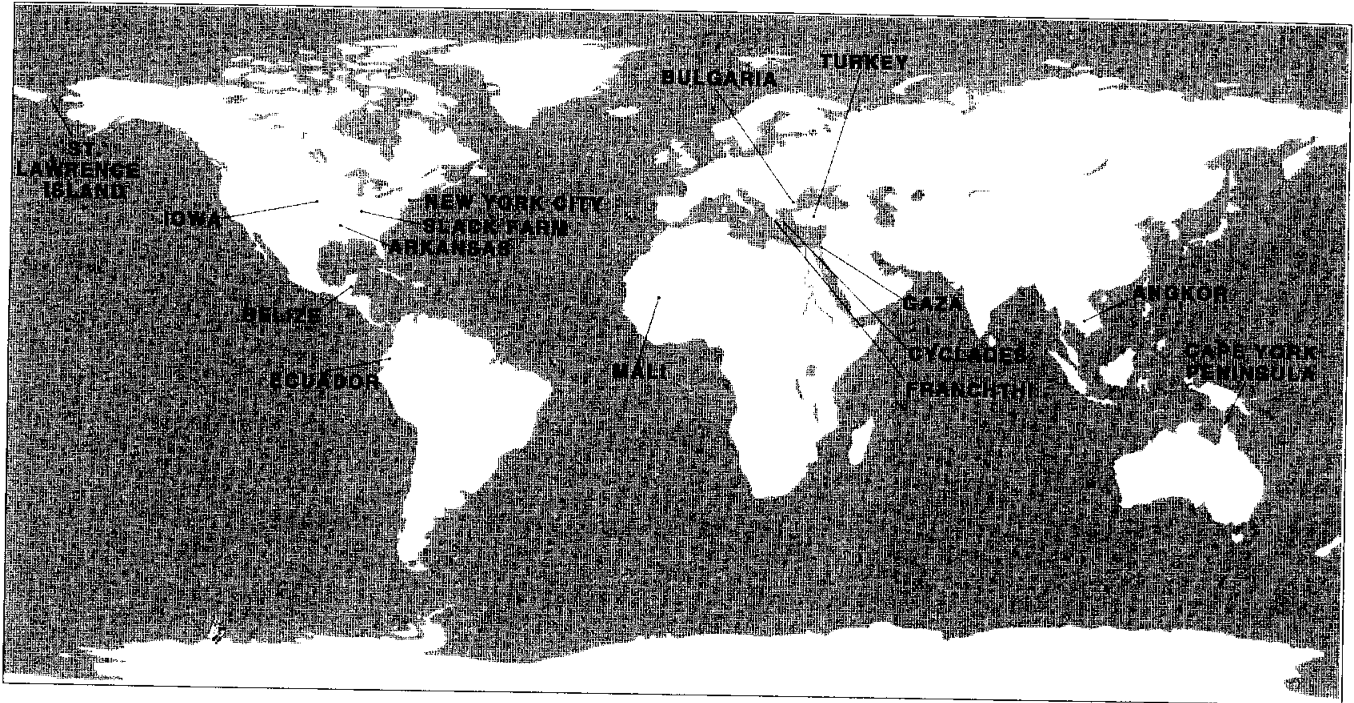
1. What external values contribute to the hierarchical value system in archaeology described by Fagan?
2. In what ways is contemporary academic archaeology a big business?
3. How could U.S. graduate (and undergraduate) programs do a better job of addressing the issues Fagan raises?
4. What career opportunities could be developed by and for archaeologists whose training includes or focuses on conservation and heritage management?
5. How could these less glamorous issues be made more glamorous?

6. What is the psychology of collecting?* How could research in this field help develop tactics for combating looting?
7. What is the impact of tourism on the archaeological record? (For one example, see Lynn A. Meisch, "Machu Picchu: Conserving an Inca Treasure," *Archaeology*, Nov/Dec 1985: 18–25.)
8. What strategies are archaeologists developing with governments to minimize the impact of tourism on the archaeological record?**

*For recent studies on this question, see John Elsner and Roger Cardinal, eds., *The Cultures of Collecting* (London: Reaktion Books, 1994); and Werner Muensterberger, *Collecting, An Unruly Passion: Psychological Perspectives* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

**See K. Anne Pyburn and Richard R. Wilk, "Responsible Archaeology Is Applied Anthropology," in *Ethics in American Archaeology*, eds. Mark J. Lynott and Alison Wylie (Washington, D.C.: Society for American Archaeology, 1995), 71–76.

Locations Mentioned in the Book



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Karen D. Vitelli

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