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Is Archaeology Destructive or are Archaeologists Self-Destructive

Cover Page Footnote

The authors wish to express their appreciation to Lu Ann De Cunzo, David Starbuck, and John Worrell for their constructive comments following the presentation of a preliminary version of this paper at the 1992 CNEHA Meeting held in Glens Falls, NY.

IS ARCHAEOLOGY DESTRUCTIVE OR ARE ARCHAEOLOGISTS SELF-DESTRUCTIVE?

Pierre Beaudet and Monique Elie

The conducting of archaeological excavations for the purpose of research without the justification of eminent destruction is often referred to, in cultural resource management literature and elsewhere, as a destructive practice—one to be avoided whenever possible. The following pages discuss the validity of such a deferral approach to archaeological research both in reference to resource conservation and to understanding the past.

La fouille archéologique sans qu'elle soit justifiée par la destruction imminente d'un site est souvent qualifiée, dans la bibliographie de la gestion des ressources culturelles et ailleurs, de pratique destructrice à être évitée chaque fois que possible. Le texte qui suit questionne cette approche dilatoire de la pratique archéologique et s'interroge sur ses conséquences en ce qui a trait à la conservation des ressources et à la compréhension du passé.

"Archaeology is destructive!" Or so we are led to believe when reading international heritage charters, resource management documents and newspaper articles. Often written or inspired by archaeologists these well intended statements, when given out of context or without proper nuance, constitute not only a disservice to the protection of vulnerable cultural resources and the pursuit of knowledge but also a serious risk to the continuing development of the discipline in these times of meager financial resources and competing interests. Here, for instance, are two seemingly harmless examples of such fundamentally negative statements: The first comes from a Montreal newspaper article concerning the opening of a new history and archaeology museum. It reads as follows: "Par définition, pour creuser plus loin dans l'histoire, les archéologues doivent parfois détruire les sites déjà découverts" [trans.: By definition, to dig further into history, archaeologists must sometimes destroy sites already discovered] (*Le Devoir* 9, May 1992: E-5). The second was delivered to the door of all Québec City residents in that municipality's monthly gazette: "Comme les fouilles entraînent inévitablement la destruction de l'intégrité du site . . ." [trans.: As excavations entail the inevitable destruction of the integrity of the site . . .] (*La Gazette de Québec*, August 1992: 4) (FIG. 1).

The validity of making such statements as a means of underlining the significance of archaeological resources must be seriously questioned, for it may well be that students, the general public, and the heritage community itself are misreading their intent. Other, more positive strategies are called for.

Article 5 of the *International Charter for Archaeological Heritage Management*, adopted by ICOMOS in 1990, states that "Archaeological knowledge is based principally on the scientific investigation of the archaeological heritage" and that such investigations may be carried out using a wide array of methods from non-destructive remote sensing, through sampling, to total excavation—the latter to be favored, because of its destructive nature, only in the case of extreme necessity. It is further stated that excavations should be carried out principally on sites and monuments threatened by development, land-use change, looting, or natural deterioration, and that only in exceptional cases should unthreatened sites be excavated to elucidate research problems or to interpret them more effectively for their presentation to the public and, even then, that excavation should be partial, leaving a proportion undisturbed for future research (ICOMOS 1990: Art. 5).

These, in theory, are very sound principles with which we agree wholeheartedly. One

Les vestiges mis au jour sont minutieusement conservés et répertoriés. «Comme les fouilles entraînent inévitablement la destruction de l'intégrité du site, on ne peut y retourner pour vérifier un temps, l'âge est de la science»

Figure 1. An example of a negatively worded statement for public consumption. (*La Gazette de Québec* 12(4): 4. Ville de Québec, Québec City.)

may question, however, how they relate to the real world and how they are used or misused.

A first question we could ask ourselves, is the following. Does an archaeological excavation constitute the cultural heritage equivalent of cutting down the giant trees left standing in the surviving remnants of the primeval rain forests? The answer is surely yes, if one considers the trowel of the archaeologist the equivalent of the lumberman's saw. The culture-laden soil, lovingly covered by its protective mantle of leaves, or smooth asphalt, or shimmering blue water only begs, in its own quiet, unobtrusive way to be left alone to grow and to mature—into destruction!

Humor aside, to suggest that archaeological investigations—or “excavations” to use the four letter word—are fundamentally destructive, and should therefore be avoided whenever possible, constitutes both a denial of the multiple dangers faced by archaeological sites in the real world and of the extremely significant contributions of archaeological research to the understanding of past lifeways, material culture, and other related aspects of history and human behavior.

One rarely hears of restoration architects describing their own work as being destructive. Yet there also material remains, witness to a building's history are often removed layer by layer. Paint and wallpaper are peeled off, wooden floors sanded, the patina washed off. Is the resource being saved or destroyed?

Somewhere along the way archaeology has developed an image problem, one in great part created by archaeologists themselves.

The Real Threats

The real threats menacing *in situ* archaeological resources—aside from the practice of archaeology itself—are as numerous as the directions from which they come. Some dangers come readily to mind while others are more pernicious. Natural factors such as shoreline erosion; agricultural drainage practices; road construction and other linear link projects; urban sprawl and redevelopment all come to mind as potential sources of destruction. Others are less evident. These include some most unlikely culprits in, theoretically, very secure environments. For instance, the development of government-administered historical or natural parks for public use or purposes of interpretation and the restoration of historic buildings and landscapes, even though well intended, may turn out to be, in themselves, causes of severe resource fragmentation or destruction, when conducted with a too-narrow purpose in mind.

The risk of inadvertent destruction of sites is the greatest, of course, when the presence of significant archaeological resources is poorly documented or unknown. Fortunately, however, either in response to specific impending threats or as part of systematic cultural resource management policies, the presence of archaeological resources in particularly sensitive or promising areas is better documented as site-specific or more extensive surveys and resource inventories are undertaken. For example, Parks Canada has been particularly active in this area. As new park master plans are drawn, or old ones revised, archaeological resource inventories are systematically carried out in view of present and future management and development requirements (Guimont 1992a, 1992b; Drouin 1985; Piédalue 1992). Historic core sectors of several cities like Montreal, Québec, and Kingston have also been the object of such undertakings (Desjardins and Pothier 1984; Pluram Inc. 1984; Groupe Harcart 1988; Moss and Rouleau 1990). In fact, much of the work accomplished by archaeologists over the last several years has been directly related to either the preparation of such documents or to ensuing mitigation.

"Cultural Resource Management" Versus "Hands-on Archaeology"

A second question we could ask ourselves is the following. Does the traditional, potential study, survey and inventory approach to cultural resource management where sites are located, occasionally sampled, ranked and coded for the purpose of conservation or mitigation suffice to ensure the effective protection and understanding of our buried or submerged cultural heritage? Or does the principal tool of archaeological resource management in use today fall short of the mark by providing cultural resource managers and preservationists a false sense of security like the ostrich with its head hidden in the ground?

Pot hunters or looters, we suspect, would say this: not only are site surveys and resource inventories enough, but they should be made public, because, after all, they were produced with our tax dollars (FIG. 2)! However, contrary to current trends in cultural resource management, these less scrupulous "friends of the earth" do not share the "hands off" or "least is best" approach to archaeology. In fact, as heritage agencies ponder on whether or not sites should be left alone for future generations of better trained and better tooled archaeologists, or wait to excavate extensive portions of a site until the dawn of imminent danger, less scrupulous individuals, or for that matter developers pursuing more legitimate interests, are practicing their excavating techniques and destroying or carrying away knowingly or inadvertently significant pieces of the archaeological picture.

To illustrate the seriousness of these threats in an area where archaeological sites abound, David Starbuck stated the following:

the increasing use of metal detectors and the growing market for looted antiquities is having a devastating effect upon many of the sites within the Hudson River/Lake George/Lake Champlain corridor, where most of the sites are privately owned and virtually unprotected. Looted buttons and coins sell for hundreds of dollars, and treasure-hunters have spoiled so many sites that ours may truly be the *last* generation able to conduct significant archaeological research on 18th century military sites. (Starbuck 1993: 2)

Thus, even though they constitute an essential element of archaeological resource management, inventories with their coarse identification, location, and graded valuation of sites are, in all but perfectly secure conditions, insuf-



Figure 2. Digging for treasure!

ficient to ensure the protection of many *in situ* archaeological records. Further, it is far from certain that mitigation, a generally reactive and piecemeal approach to archaeological intervention based on imminent threat, serves well the objectives related to reconstructing the past through the systematic recovery and analysis of data.

Resource inventories and site surveys certainly constitute positive and essential aspects of archaeological resource management. In view of the real threats at hand and the general lack of awareness concerning the potential value of archaeological resources on the part of land owners and users, however, more has to be done.

But why bother at all with the identification, evaluation, and registration of archaeological sites or resources, if they are not going to be investigated anyway? Why indeed may we ask, are archaeological sites so rarely deemed to be prime for excavation in the absence of imminent peril or an acute need for site specific information? Is it that the data and material remains they hold, are of so little interest that their excavation is not worth the investment, or to the contrary, that their value lies not in their potential for understanding the past but in their sheer unexplored presence under our feet?

The message conveyed by archaeologists and archaeological resource managers on the

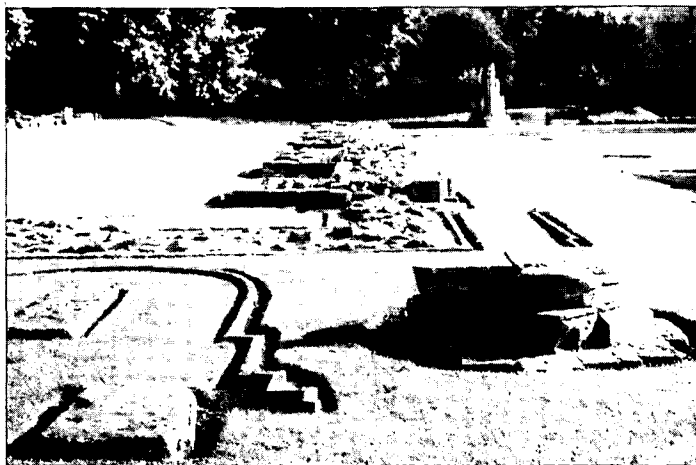


Figure 3. Tracing walls for interpretation. (Photograph by Pierre Beaudet.)

subject often seems ambiguous, if not contradictory, particularly to persons outside the profession but whose influence on archaeology can be considerable. Through our growing dependency on the current dictums of cultural resource management as the sole justification for action, archaeological sites are gradually becoming less and less accessible as meaningful and often unique sources of data to be organized, analyzed, and understood. Rather they become a burden to be carried, a problem to be managed. No wonder, in such a context, that archaeologists are developing a defensive and apologetic attitude towards archaeological excavation to the point, in some cases, of negating its value as a most effective and rewarding technique of research.

It is as if archaeologists, themselves submerged by the proliferation of potential studies, impact evaluation statements, site surveys, and mitigative interventions have lost sight of the benefits—or the hope of ever carrying out any other form of archaeological research program.

In this context of archaeological retrenchment, the recent completion of Delaware's management plan for historical archaeological resources by the University of Delaware Center for Archaeological Research (De Cunzo and Catts 1990) and its acceptance by the State Historic Preservation Office (De Cunzo and Catts 1992: 2) constitutes a most promising overture. Not only does it call for the protection of

resources through the identification, evaluation, and registration of sites, but also for the development, within the framework of clearly defined historic contexts, of broad and site-specific research programs and strategies for the recovery and analysis of data necessary to further understand Delaware's historic past (De Cunzo and Catts 1992: 2–6, 29–35).

Whether or not Delaware's initiative will prove to be the exception or the rule and its management plan the effective tool it promises to be, remains to be seen. In the meantime, however, care must still be taken, for, under the guise of preservation, all that archaeologists may be allowed to do once sites have been identified is to trace their outline on paper and the edge of their architectural features in the ground . . . leaving their contexts both vulnerable and unexplored. Wall tracing (FIG. 3), a practice strongly rejected several years ago may thus find legitimacy at the expense of knowledge, leaving us unable to gather the archaeological data required for research and the effective and accurate presentation of buried resources through such means as 3-D modeling and virtual imaging.

For those in doubt or having forgotten the major contributions of hands-on archaeological research, a scanning of your bookshelves would be in order. There you will discover that much of the knowledge that we take for granted today in several areas of material culture research and the study of settlement patterns,

lifeways, foodways, and other aspects of human behavior, emerged as the result of the numerous large and small-scale archaeological projects conducted during the 1970s and 1980s (Cover). Particularly bountiful as sources of data were those years when excavation did not require an imminent threat of destruction to be undertaken. Despite the limitations of some of these early investigations, most of them still serve today as major sources of fodder for current research projects either through first time analysis of data and material remains or through the re-examination, along new perspectives, of what was recorded and recovered more than a generation ago.

For instance, the Fortress of Louisbourg, a National Historic Site located on Cape Breton Island in Nova Scotia, was the object of major archaeological research conducted primarily during the late 1960s and during the 1970s. The main purpose of these investigations was extremely site specific: to provide data for the accurate reconstruction of fortifications, streetscapes, buildings, and the furnishing of interiors as well as to provide information required for the interpretation of the site. These original goals were generally attained as those who have visited this National Historic Site may confirm. But, as several reports, studies, and articles testify, the productive life of the archaeological data and material remains recovered from Louisbourg was only beginning. Significant studies in material culture (Barton 1981; Smith 1981; Myles and Jones 1992), military architecture (Fry 1984), foodways, and so on have since been produced or are still being initiated today, some 20 years following the initial investigations. Further, the artifact collection assembled as a result of this research now constitutes one of the richest sources for the study of French-period material culture this side of the Atlantic, and with proper curatorial and conservation practices it will continue to serve this purpose for a very long time.

Archaeological Research as Cultural Resource Management

Sites should be allowed to speak, not in spite of cultural resource management, but as one of its most proactive elements. In fact, in the presence of so many destructive agents, a structured and well financed archaeological ex-

cavation program based on properly developed research designs should be at the center of any effective cultural resource management policy.

The implementation of strong and effective measures calling for the systematic identification, evaluation, and registration of resources and the application of proper mitigative actions when warranted are certainly steps in the right direction. However, these regrettably generally apply only to a very small percentage of our states and provinces, leaving the rest of the land ill-protected by weak and rarely enforced legislation. And where they apply, their use most often only serves the purpose of crisis management.

Archaeology awareness and information initiatives being taken by archaeological associations and certain public administrations are also positive, if not, essential actions. But here again, their impact remains limited mostly to a rather narrow audience of students and adults most often already sympathetic to archaeology. Such actions should nevertheless be encouraged and amplified for, as we well know, public support is central to the success of any effective archaeological resource conservation strategy.

Cultural resource management policies where site excavations would be considered part of a conservation strategy instead of being decried as an agent of destruction would certainly help dispel the growing ambivalence towards archaeology in general and the archaeological approach to understanding the past. No longer would it be necessary, as is now often the case, to camouflage the dig as field school, as survey, or as mitigative action. But how are we to convince decision makers and those who control the purse strings that such an approach is correct? That excavation can be more than the solution of last resort?

Let us not be mistaken. If all we produce, with the current cultural resource management spending, are tedious technical reports and databases pertaining to sites sampled or salvaged, the well will soon dry up. If archaeologists do not work hard at making their sites speak to a wider audience either through displays, appropriate publications, and other means, the value of these dormant resources, both in the eyes of the public and of the heritage community itself will soon decrease, and funds required for their protection will become even harder to come by. Thus, if archaeology is

to stand on solid ground, not only will archaeologists have to promote their work including excavation as a worthwhile pursuit of knowledge and an effective tool of conservation but also learn to communicate beyond the boundaries of their own discipline. The presentation of research results in attractive formats and accessible language, either in book form or otherwise, should cease to be the exception, and become the rule!

Such a positive attitude towards archaeology, where research and conservation objectives would be viewed as converging rather than as contradictions, could surely serve as fertile ground for the development of productive funding strategies. In such a context universities, heritage agencies, avocational groups, and the general public could join together, in each their own way, to ensure that archaeological resources receive the attention and treatment they deserve.

Does archaeological research constitute the destruction of our cultural heritage? The answer is no! Particularly in the face of the continuing absence of other strong, effective protective measures that can ensure the integrity of these vulnerable cultural resources.

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