

# OBJECTS OF STUDY: ARCHAEOLOGY AND MUSEUMS

by

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I was lured into speaking with you this evening because of a mistaken belief that I would have a soapbox to talk about the changing face of higher education. I have strong views about what is going on today, especially about the entry of for-profit providers of higher educational services. But in conversations with Peter Keller, I was subsequently surprised to learn that you actually wanted me to speak about archaeology and museums. Imagine my delight! Most people assume that college presidents are brain dead except when they are asking for money, so this opportunity at the Bowers is truly a rare and welcome chance for me to talk about my other passion—archaeology. And, of course, it's an opportunity for me to demonstrate that I'm not completely brain dead!

I am a southwestern archaeologist. I spent the early years of my career in archaeology as a professor. During the 1970s and 1980s I did fieldwork in nearly every part of the American Southwest. I have conducted large NSF-funded projects, worked under research contracts for the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management, served as principal investigator on a multitude of cultural resource management projects, and run numerous field schools for undergraduate and graduate students. For 12 consecutive years, I was in the field twice each year—spring and summer—seeking answers to the most basic questions about the development of Puebloan culture. I have written extensively on this subject. I have been fortunate to be part of major discoveries in the Southwest about the antiquity of maize agriculture, the development of craft specialization, the structure of long distance trade, and the emergence of large Puebloan towns during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

In all of this work, learning and discovery were propelled by the objects we recovered, the spatial and temporal relationships between them, the context of their discovery, and the physical properties that define them. These data, in turn, have enabled me to draw inferences about the structure and development of the social systems that produced them. Archaeology is fundamentally a study of objects (artifacts, if you will) and their coordinates—x, y, and z; or horizontal distance from the site datum along baseline and meridian, and depth below surface. The spatial position of an object in an archaeological site and the relationships among such objects are the principal data of archaeology. Of course, ecofacts and the attributes of the natural environment are also key, especially with the emergence of geographic information systems (GIS), satellite imagery, and remote sensing techniques as major tools of discovery and interpretation. But archaeology begins and ends with the artifact. Archaeological context—the time-space dimension—is only relevant in relation to the artifact; and archaeological interpretation is only relevant in relation to archaeological context.

As my administrative career in higher education developed, I was gradually pulled away from field archaeology and university teaching. Although I still teach and supervise graduate students, my last field season as a principal investigator was in 1987. During the ensuing 12 years, much has changed in the field of archaeology, so much, in fact, that I believe we now need to question seriously the traditional foundations of the field.

Tonight, I want to share with you what I believe are three very important changes in the practice of archaeology. Two of these changes have significant intellectual implications; one poses a direct threat both to the conduct of archaeology as a field of scientific inquiry and to the operation of a museum. These changes should affect the way a museum like the Bowers and the field of archaeology think about themselves.

The first major change is tied to the organization of academic departments in universities, and relates to the way archaeology fits into the lexicon of academic disciplines. In America, archaeology is one of the four subfields of anthropology. American archaeology has been closely allied with another subfield of the discipline, cultural anthropology. Since the turn of the last century, archaeological inquiry has been informed directly by the two arms of cultural anthropology, ethnography and ethnology. Both are rooted in the concept of culture, and focus on describing and explaining differences and similarities in the social structure, politics, and economy of human societies. Thus, the culture concept and the subject matter of cultural anthropology are also central to the practice of archaeology. Indeed, the concept of culture has been the sole domain of anthropology and archaeology for the last 100 years. During the last decade, however, this situation has changed radically.

Many scholars in disciplines of the social sciences and humanities—especially in history, sociology, the national and comparative literatures, philosophy, and political science—became disaffected during the 1980s with the questions, data, and methods of their own fields which they perceived to be overly Eurocentric and static. The aim of these scholars was to introduce a broader vision of the human experience into their fields through the study of cultural history and practices, especially in non-Western societies. This activity occurred under the theoretical rubric of post-structuralism and critical (read Marxist) studies. It resulted in the appropriation of the culture concept as a principal area of study by a host of other disciplines. It also spawned several new fields that have taken their place in the permanent academic structure of universities, often as departments—cultural studies, ethnic studies, public history, women’s studies, international studies, educational studies, and so on. These fields now identify “culture” as a proper subject of study, and many identify “ethnography” as a principal research methodology.

The evolution of academic disciplines and the emergence of new ones are good things, since they expand and revitalize intellectual inquiry. But a consequence of this activity has been a serious loss of compass in anthropology. Moreover, the field’s primary subdiscipline of cultural anthropology has moved away from a focus on ethnography and ethnology. Cultural anthropology has become increasingly fragmented, as cultural anthropologists have sought to define themselves in new ways in order to differentiate themselves from those who study culture in the other social science and humanities fields. The American Anthropological Association, long the stronghold of anthropological ethnographers and ethnologists, now has 32 different

sections devoted to cultural anthropology that split the field into increasingly narrow areas of inquiry (e.g., anthropology and the environment, anthropology of religion, of consciousness, of work, of Europe; the association for psychological anthropology, for urban anthropology, for humanistic anthropology, etc.). Archaeology has been a casualty in this fragmentation of the discipline because research on material culture and the context of its use (a major domain of ethnography) is accorded low priority. As a result, archaeology finds itself increasingly isolated from cultural anthropology. This major change has occurred while anthropology itself struggles to gain direction amid a new mix of scholars who study culture.

The second change affecting the practice of archaeology is primarily theoretical. It is related to the changes in anthropology I have just described, and it impacts directly the mission of museums like the Bowers. The change involves the rejection of prehistory. That is, as shocking as it may first seem, many archaeologists and anthropologists believe that the concept of prehistory is no longer intellectually valid. Let me explain.

Last year, I attended a professional meeting -- the long-standing Chacmool Conference -- that was held at the University of Calgary. A large group of archaeologists, cultural anthropologists, historians, and linguists met over two and one-half days to discuss and debate the meaning and purpose of archaeology and its role in discovering, describing, and explaining the human past.

I mention this tonight because archaeology, along with history and anthropology, are fields (along with the biological and physical sciences) which undergird the mission of all museums of cultural and natural history. As you well know, the collective goal of these museums is to educate the public about the wonders of our world. The Bowers does this through the acquisition, curation, and exhibition of objects, materials and information, and through active programs of public education that interpret and explain the diversity of human cultural expressions found on the planet.

The take-home message from the Chacmool Conference was twofold: First, the consensus of the assembled group, indeed, one increasingly echoed by the larger profession of archaeology, is that the term “prehistory” has ceased to have intellectual integrity and operational meaning. In fact, most agreed that the term is actually pejorative, and that its use disparages the rich and deep historical traditions of Native Americans who do not conceive of their 12,000-year plus occupation of the continent before the arrival of Europeans as a precursor to history.

It is important to note that rejection of the term prehistory has parallel meaning for historians. History, broadly conceived, is more than the interpretation of texts and the written word. It is or should refer to the entire record of human experience, written and unwritten. But the methodologies of traditional history do not go beyond the written word. Therefore, other methods and interpretive models are required to piece together the full story—of peasants, slaves, commoners, workers, specialists, and the middle class—that is not written. Here is where the historical disciplines coalesce around the goal of holistic explanations of the human past. Consequently, reanointing archaeology as an historical discipline brings history and archaeology back together once again as interpretive siblings. This is hardly a novel idea. In fact, it was first envisioned by Ptolemy Philadelphus in the third century B.C.!

Second, there was general agreement at the Chacmool Conference that the discipline of archaeology is more properly considered the “anthropology of long-term history,” not just a science of the past. In other words, archaeologists no longer grudgingly concede that the record of all human activity is historical. This is more than a small point, since the explicitly scientific archaeology of the last two decades has denied historicism. The maturation of the field has thus produced a new recognition among archaeologists that history matters. To read this history, archaeologists must use the techniques and methodologies of their own discipline, as well as those from history (textual analysis), anthropology (ethnography and ethnology), linguistics (lexical analysis), and the natural sciences (physico-chemical analyses, imaging, computerized data crunching, and the like) to uncover the past, describe its sweep and detail, and explain key episodes of culture change.

Importantly, the explanation of culture change continues to unite all of these historical disciplines and focuses archaeological attention on the big questions of human endeavor and experience. These big questions include, among others, issues related to migration and settlement, the differentiation of past human lifeways, the emergence of villages, the adoption of agriculture, the formation of towns and cities, the development of trade and systems of exchange, the elaboration of ritual and religion, the establishment of political systems, the role of warfare, and the rise of the state. For American archaeologists, it also includes native contact with European populations beginning 500 years ago, and native accommodation with the modern world.

These messages from the conference, though perhaps a bit opaque and windy, have great relevance for the idea of a museum. A museum is, after all, “a spot dedicated to the Muses” where the mind can, in the words of Lawrence Weschler “attain a mood of aloofness above everyday affairs.” A museum is a kind of “wonder cabinet” that contains the marvels of nature and the genius of human expression. The secret of a great museum, however, transcends the objects it houses by creating a history from the marvels and the genius.

It is in this context that museums of cultural and natural history rise to meet their challenges, and fit with the revisionist thinking I’ve outlined. If archaeology is no longer specifically linked to cultural anthropology, instead becoming the anthropology of long-term history, the museum is the vehicle whereby such histories are demystified and shared with the public. Museums are thus vital in efforts to construct holistic explanations of the past. Through the acquisition, curation, and exhibition of objects, materials and information, and through active programs of public education that interpret and explain the history of the planet and its occupants, museums advance understanding of our natural world. This is a notable and noble accomplishment, and one that adds great value to our time.

This ethos is captured in the goal statement for the Bowers Museum: “The Bowers is now the only institution in the country with the goal to preserve, study and exhibit the fine arts of the Americas, Africa and the Pacific Rim. The Museum's collections of historic artifacts and pre-Columbian, Native American, Oceanic, and Asian art are irreplaceable windows into civilizations both ancient and modern. These collections are displayed and maintained with the

belief that learning about other people through their arts will lead to a greater understanding of ourselves, as well as a fuller appreciation of the marvelous diversity of the human family.”

And this brings me to my third and final point: the practice of archaeology as most people know and understand it, and the mission of museums like the Bowers are out of step with, and increasingly in direct legal conflict with the current laws and regulations governing the collection, analysis, and curation of archaeological materials. I am referring specifically to the Native American Graves Repatriation Act of 1990 (P.L. 601.101), or NAGPRA.

In the US, this law makes it difficult, if not impossible to collect systematically, curate for the long-term, or analyze using a comparative perspective Native American material culture. Section 7 of the law, for example, deals with the repatriation of Native American human remains and objects possessed or controlled by federal agencies or museums. It reads, in part, that if the cultural affiliation of objects of cultural patrimony from a particular Indian tribe or Native Hawaiian organization is established, then the Federal agency or museum shall expeditiously return such remains upon the request of a known lineal descendant or of the tribe or organization.

The law goes on to state that where cultural affiliation of such objects has not been established, the objects shall be expeditiously returned if the requesting Native group can show cultural affiliation by a “preponderance of the evidence” based upon geographical, kinship, biological, archaeological, anthropological, linguistic, folkloric, oral traditional, historical, or other relevant information or expert opinion.

In other words, if a museum like the Bowers has in its collection Native American objects of known or unknown cultural affiliation, then the material must be returned or “repatriated” to the appropriate Native group. While the law makes the process sound simple, the repatriation of material culture is anything but simple. Deep antiquity, incomplete culture histories, past Native American mobility and migration, as well as population resettlement and the reserving of Native American groups by the U.S. government create a complex web of relationships between living Native groups and the collections housed in the different museums of the country. Moreover, despite the wealth of data about what happened in the past, data linking ancient populations to modern ones have generally eluded archaeologists. As a consequence of this lacuna in understanding, most claims of cultural affiliation under NAGPRA are being resolved by simple propinquity. That is, geographical proximity, not kinship, biology, or archaeology has been the driving force in repatriation of artifacts. This reductionist metric has given rise to major disagreements between archaeologists and Native Americans, and open hostility about several crucial archaeological finds, including the Kenewick skeleton, important Mohican village sites at Waterford and Leeds Flat, the Gabrieleno village of Puvungna that sits under Cal State-Long Beach, and a large assemblage of artifacts spanning a 1,300 year period from the Tonto National Forest of south-central Arizona.

The disagreements generally pit the process of scientific discovery against Native American oral traditions and claims of sovereignty and autonomy. These are tough issues, to be sure, and my intent is not to go farther in describing them. There is, however, but a single result for archaeology: NAGPRA is resulting in the systematic, nationwide dismantling of extensive museum collections of Native American material culture. In effect, NAGPRA is draining

museums of the very collections that are their lifeblood. More important from an archaeological perspective is the fact that NAGPRA has made it virtually impossible for future archaeologists to collect systematically and analyze comparatively archaeological materials relevant to the study of past Native American social, political, and economic systems.

My final point tonight is one of summation. The existing legal framework governing the repatriation of Native American material culture, coupled with equally dramatic changes in practice and theory in the social sciences and humanities have dramatically altered the way archaeologists are pursuing their profession in the United States. These changes also recontour significantly the landscape of public interpretation for museums. Both museum specialists and archaeologists need to remake their fields without the historic and fundamental dependence placed on objects. In the developing “virtual” world, such a sea change may be possible. Museum specialists and archaeologists have certainly begun to engage these issues, but the hard reality of the situation is that no one yet has set forth a workable framework for doing archaeology or pursuing museology in the absence of objects. Without such reinvention, neither archaeology nor museums can exist. But if Cirque du Soleil can have a circus without animals, then perhaps we can study and represent the past without objects. This is certainly my hope.