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PART 1

INTRODUCTION

Today archaeology is in fashion. In the following pages we shall seek to establish the reasons for the somewhat belated popularity of a subject which was long regarded as tedious and even slightly absurd.
Gilbert Charles-Picard (1972, p. 6)

The massed weight of archaeological storage boxes demonstrate daily the success of archaeological investigators in convincing museum staff of their claims for institutional immortality.
Susan Pearce (1997, p. 48)

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Chapter 1
What for Whom?

What is archaeology, what are museums, and what is museum archaeology? What is their value and purpose within wider politics, society, and culture?

Introduction

Ask members of the public what it is they might see if they visited a museum and, along with paintings and dinosaur bones, most would say archaeology. They might not use that word. It might be to see treasure, or old things, or mummies, or old stone tools. Museums are, and have always been, associated with the objects unearthed as evidence of ancient civilizations and peoples. These objects are considered to be treasures: valuable, rare, and vulnerable.

Like the great world art galleries, the "great ancient civilization" museums, such as the British Museum, the Louvre, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art (to name the most obvious three), are global tourist sites whose identity is deeply rooted in the global psyche. They hold items that everyone has heard of: (The Elgin (or Parthenon) Marbles, the Rosetta Stone, the Venus De Milo, Winged Victory). These objects are considered treasures because they are from the ancient world, were made by somewhat mysterious ancient civilizations, and were dug up from the ground or recovered from the bottom of the sea by great adventurers from the past. But more than this, they are tangible evidence that "we" had a civilized past, and by displaying them and visiting them, "we" have a civilized present. Their power has grown *because* they are in great museums behind thick glass and are protected from thieves or even from being touched. They were once great symbols of power, and they have been transformed into symbols of power once

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more. These symbols somehow reflect power onto those who come to view them.

The great national and regional museums, almost all designed to look like classical temples, are a key component of the Western world-order that is based on a linear progression of civilization from the Middle and Near East of Egypt, Babylon and Assyria, through Greece and Rome the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance to the Enlightenment (and, as discussed in Chapter 2, archaeology has not only helped create this past but has couched its own mythology in this past). Other world cultures, however complex, sophisticated, or important in the story of humanity, have traditionally been seen as side shows to this grand narrative. And largely, this is, as it still is in museums, often literally with artefacts from other cultures occupying basements, annexes, or not present at all.

This is one facet of museum archaeology. There are others. Museums are also the place where many people initially, and most often, come into first-hand contact with real archaeology, the archaeology of stratigraphy and stone tools, and broken pots and skeletons. The irony of this is that archaeological study is all about context, association, and assemblage: what is found gets most of its value from where it is found and what it is found with. Yet, by studying and preserving archaeology for others, archaeologists remove these meanings. Objects are taken away from their sites and away from the things with which they were found. They are cleaned, conserved, given labels, and put in glass cases. Archaeologists are then irritated that visitors do not easily understand their "true meaning."

Finally, museums are where local pasts are explained. Local museums display local archaeology for local audiences. Community archaeology takes place, as do educational and public programmes. The past is "brought to life" by actors and craft demonstrations.

But much archaeology does not go on in museums, or is in any way closely linked to museums. Similarly, most of what museums do has absolutely nothing to do with archaeology. A model has emerged for archaeology (see Chapter 3), where

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money, resources, strategy, and direction has minimised the role of museums and the vision of archaeology that they might espouse. Similarly, it could be argued that in the early years of the twenty-first century, in seeking a socially inclusive, contemporary, and "relevant" role for museums, archaeology has been pushed to the periphery as a main museum subject: a complex dead subject about the long dead. Despite this, and possibly because of the challenges this poses, some incredibly innovative and considered museum archaeology is now taking place.

Archaeology will not go away now that it has been created. An interest in the past seems universal – how it is negotiated by different presents may change, but the raw material will maintain its fascination. Only time will tell whether museum archaeology is actually changing. In 1981, Barry Cunliffe wrote about regional museums that still offered "a slice through time," about blockbuster exhibitions that wowed visitors, possibly by offering "gold and gore," and about new "real-life simulations" that were "all good family fun" and were "catching a corner of the public imagination." He went on to muse on the contribution of TV and publishing to the public's experience of the past. Its patrician manner aside, is this much different to what a modern survey would find? New political dogma and new theory are changing things at some levels. Merriman (2000, p. 22) has argued for a new museum archaeology that acts as a "transaction" in which communities are much more actively involved both in the curation and exploration of the archaeological resource and in the discussion of its interpretation with professionals who see their role as enablers and educators in the widest sense.

Museums and archaeology are now global phenomena, as described in Chapter 5, although both originated practically and philosophically in Europe and "The West." Western Culture is still the dominant force in world museum archaeology, but museums and archaeology will now be found everywhere. Museums and archaeologists can be found in places even McDonalds has so far failed to penetrate. As such, this is also a subject that is bedevilled by the sheer range of its scope.

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Archaeology, as described in this chapter and in Chapter 3, covers everything from the excavation of Tutankhamen's tomb to a survey of Cold War remains in the British countryside. A museum archaeology experience can be anything from a visit to the Louvre, to a demonstration of prehistoric basketry at a small local museum.

Definition of Museums

Museums have been a common part of modern Western life for more than 150 years and a common part of global life in the last 100 years. Every town has a museum, every city has several, and every major city has many, including very large and impressive ones that often act as a key communication node or focus. Like libraries, shops, and sporting arenas, they are so much part of the fabric of human geography that they are more-or-less taken for granted, whether they are used or not. The majority are publicly funded, a reflection of how they developed, but also of their role as keepers of a culture's collective and tangible past and as credentials of a peoples' civilized values.

A definition of museums is quite easy to find as the museum profession, itself, has found a need to provide one. The UK Museums Association (MA) defines museums as "institutions that collect, safeguard and make accessible artefacts and specimens, which they hold in trust for society" (agreed by the MA in 1998). Whereas, the International Council of Museums (ICOM) define museums as thus: "a non-profit making, permanent institution, in the service of society and its development, and open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits, for the purpose of study, education and enjoyment, material evidence of man and his environment" (ICOM 1996).

These definitions provide useful summaries. They also tell us what museum professionals think museums are not. Perhaps most importantly, if there is no collection, then there is no museum. Where the definition fails is by not recognising any sort of dynamic. Museums must surely be not just collections, although these are essential, but must also include

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the people who manage and interpret these collections and a public who respond to this interpretation. This is a two-way dynamic. The collections are nothing unless the people who manage them are active in trying to understand them and interpret them for a public. Similarly, the public, whoever they are (See Chapter 11) must be active in receiving the interpretation of the collections and must also, through active involvement and criticism, influence not only the interpretations that are being created but also, at a very fundamental level, the collections that are being formed, and how they are being managed. So a museum should be a dynamic set of negotiations. Unfortunately, it too often remains a one-way process.

Just as museums can only exist with a public whose interaction justifies their existence, Susan Pearce (1997, p. 47) has observed that museums are a manifestation of their time and place, and, as such, need to redefine and reexplain themselves for each age. However, as Pearce also notes, museums have a certain gravitas that does manage to transcend passing trends. For her, museum authority is based on "the power to arbitrate upon material culture, to decide what is 'valuable' or 'interesting' and what is not." This goes to the heart of the place of objects within human culture and the way we place values on these objects. A society that did not think objects could have more than a purely functional role would have no place for museums as museums are currently perceived. Of course, public museums and museum collections are only one way that valued artefacts from the past have been and are dealt with. Egyptian mummies were once ground down as medicines, cathedral treasury exhibitions hold holy relics, and many artefacts are held in private collections and traded for profit.

Definition of Archaeology

Museums are perhaps more easy to define than archaeology, which is less tangible and seems to be expanding with time. Museums are things, entities. The term "archaeology" is often used as a general description for the ancient past, particularly

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prehistory and classical civilization, whether revealed through excavation and fieldwork or not. Archaeology is not a period in the past, however, vaguely defined, it is a methodology used to try and understand human behaviour in prehistory (the period before historic records), history, and for some, the present. For prehistory, it is arguably the only method. For the historic period, it is one method used alongside historic records, personal testimonies, photographs, and others. So, as I discuss in the next section, strictly speaking, there are very few, if any, archaeology museums or museum archaeology displays and exhibits. But there are many museums that tell prehistories and histories that use material recovered and understood using archaeological methods.

A definition of archaeology and what it encompasses is not as simple as it once was. The dictionary definition of archaeology (archaeologists themselves seem not to have worried too much about self definition) gives us "the excavation and subsequent study of the physical remains of earlier civilizations" (*Chambers 21st Century Dictionary*) or "study of human antiquities, especially of the prehistoric period and usually by excavation" (*Concise Oxford Dictionary*). These definitions rightly highlight the centrality of material culture – objects, things, to archaeology. They also both highlight the idea of the past. This seems straightforward, but some would argue that archaeological methods have a relevance to any period including the present. Nevertheless, it is the case that archaeology is of most relevance to prehistory because, for this period, archaeology is the only prime evidence. Using the emergence of anatomically modern humans this means that archaeology is the only evidence for about 200,000 years of a human past for which history can contribute about 5,000 years of evidence. Going back as far as the emergence of the hominid ancestors of modern people, archaeology contributes some 3,000,000 years of evidence. Yet, picking up any written "history of mankind" shows that it is only with the arrival of historical records that human history gets serious – most such books give the first 200,000 or 3,000,000 years an introductory chapter before getting down to the business of history.

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The *Oxford Dictionary* definition also emphasises the importance of excavation, the prime method of the archaeologist. Excavation is at the actual and romantic heart of archaeology. Archaeologists dig in the ground to uncover evidence, and the finds that they piece together by making a painstaking logical analysis of what they find. That these uncovered finds are occasionally great treasures from the past gives archaeology its romantic allure. It also sets up the first tension in the relationship between the archaeologist and the museum. Museums are all about things and as such the finds of archaeologists are perfect for them. But archaeology and archaeological meaning is all about association and context. It is almost impossible for the museum not to take away this association and context and create new ones as part of the process of collection and display.

Most new definitions of archaeology move beyond a simple study of the past through excavation. Archaeology has become so much more than just digging. It involves the study of human landscapes and human material culture (artefacts) in all of their manifestations. It has developed many ways of studying, categorising, and thinking about the past. Many of these are borrowed from other disciplines but are often given a new perspective, and many overlap with other subjects. It has become purer, more theoretical: "the objective study of the material remains of the past in order to lead to a greater understanding of past human societies" (Merriman 2000, p. 20). Although Merriman dismisses this definition in favour of a postmodern model by accepting that rather than accumulating more and more truth, archaeology carries out an ongoing negotiation between past and present through the study of material culture. As with museums, any definition of archaeology should include a dynamic process. One that involves review within the profession but also one with the public for whom archaeology is undertaken. Again, for museums, this dynamic is often missing.

The study of material culture leads to observations about the past. But archaeology has always been more than this. It has always sought to understand what was happening in the past and how human society developed at different places

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and at different times. And, for this reason, throughout the history of archaeology, there has seen a central conflict at the heart of the discipline that is particularly relevant to museums, and their purpose to educate and entertain. Archaeology has built its reputation on delivering scientifically verifiable facts that help develop prehistories and histories about a past that can never be proven. As Gathercole and Lowenthal (1990, p. 3) stated, "There can be no archaeologically achieved final truths or wholly objective interpretations." Year-after-year, its methods become more complex and detailed, and it reveals more and more fascinating things about the past. But we all know that many of its biggest questions will never be answered definitively. Whatever archaeologists do, whatever new discoveries are made, no one will never know exactly what Stonehenge looked like in 2,500 B.C. or what the exact motivations were of those who built it.

This is relevant to museums that need to decide what they are going to tell their visitors. Should they communicate the past to the public as "tablets of stone" (James 1999, p. 128) or as an open question to the visitor? The less that is known about the past, the harder curators have to work, and, therefore, often the more imaginative they are in thinking about the past and how it can be interpreted and explained. So, for example, thought on prehistory has often led archaeological theory and display practice. But again, how should intepretations of the past be communicated to the public? Most archaeologists would agree that their discipline is about the study and understanding of people. As such, the obvious way for museum archaeologists to connect with their audiences is by telling personal stories. But is it possible to empathise with someone living 5,000 years ago? Were the people in the past "just like us," or "other," or were they both similar and different? And how is this communicated to a public through museums? One of the things that makes museum archaeology so challenging and thrilling is that it forces archaeologists to confront the limitations of their evidence.

Archaeology, as a discipline, also overlaps uncomfortably with other disciplines, and this blurring is often emphasised

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in museum displays and categorisation, and through the language used. "Classical" archaeology often strays into the world of decorative and fine arts and also ancient and classical history. The archaeology of the nonclassical, non-European world is often blurred with ethnography and anthropology. Local archaeologies blur with local and social histories. This blurring is often confused further by different uses of these terms in different places. In North America, *anthropology* and *archaeology* are often more-or-less the same thing, archaeology objects turn up in ethnography displays and vice versa, and no need is felt to distinguish between the two. Cultural or social anthropology has an incredibly powerful, but often unspoken, influence on archaeological interpretations. All of these terms in their normal lazy use also perpetuate colonial, racist, and Eurocentric value sets.

Finally, and despite all of the above, archaeology has the ability to do three things: (1), reveal things about the past, and possibly the present that were not previously known; (2) to help to understand the world better through the study of these things; and, finally, (3) through its physicality and methodology to make people think differently about the world around them, and to interact with it. It is often the failing of archaeologists and museum archaeologists that they too often mistake the first for the second and often ignore the power of the third altogether.

Definition of Museum Archaeology

So, museums are institutions that collect material culture, manage it, and interpret it for a public. Hopefully, this takes place in a dynamic fashion where the public has an influence on what is collected and how it is interpreted. Archaeology is the study of past, and occasionally present, human cultures through its material culture and the use of the material culture to create new prehistory and history. Again, this should also include, but often does not, a dynamic link to a public who influence what is studied and how, and the interpretations that are put on it. The common link is the material culture, the

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