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978-0-521-67796-7 - An Introduction to Museum Archaeology

Hedley Swain

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AN INTRODUCTION TO MUSEUM ARCHAEOLOGY

An Introduction to Museum Archaeology provides a comprehensive survey and synthesis of all aspects of current museum practice relating to the discipline of archaeology. This book is divided into four separate, but related parts. It begins with a discussion of what is meant by museums, archaeology, and museum archaeology and includes a brief survey of the history, legal foundation, and global geographic spread of museum archaeological practice.

The second part of this book deals with collections in all of their aspects. This includes subjects such as the looting of illicit antiquities, the major challenges posed by the ever-mounting quantity of material from archaeological excavations, and the very recent debates over the place of human remains in museums. It also discusses conservation and research.

The third part deals with the use of archaeological materials and methods in displays, exhibitions, and public and educational programmes. Drawing heavily on examples, it deconstructs the different challenges posed by trying to tell archaeological stories in museum buildings and on related sites.

The final section sums up the state of museum archaeology in the early twenty-first century and discusses the major issues that museum archaeology is currently confronting. There is also a detailed list of every museum and exhibit mentioned in the book, each with a Web address and an exhaustive list of references.

An Introduction to Museum Archaeology provides an essential text for anyone studying museums, archaeology, or cultural heritage, and it is a reference for those working in these fields. It is full of detailed information, and it discusses concepts and provides the context for current debates.

Hedley Swain is Head of Early London History and Collections at the Museum of London and chair of the British Society of Museum Archaeologists. He is an honorary lecturer at the Institute of Archaeology, University College London, and a tutor at Birkbeck College, University of London. Swain has published widely on museum and archaeological matters and is the author of several major surveys of museum archaeology in Britain.

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HEDLEY SWAIN
Museum of London



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For Bryony and Finlay

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At the end of the lawn was a large summer or Moss House (the subject of many a poetic lay). The walls were constructed of sturdy limbs of trees ranged side by side, and covered on the outside with dry heather, while the inside was lined with moss. Shelves were fixed around formed of elm branches cut so as to leave the bark on the front edges; and on these appropriate supports were arranged the numerous urns and larger objects found in the barrows. On either side were smaller cells constructed on the same plan, but more open; in these were many of the larger fossils, notably a very fine slab of coal measures shale's with very beautiful remains of fossil plants. On the floor of the centre compartment was a plan of the temple of Avebury, formed of large pebbles to represent the stones and form the main circles. The two avenues branched off right and left leading to the smaller cells mentioned above. In the centre of one of these was a circle of the pebbles to represent the head of the serpent, according to Stukely and others.

(A description by his daughter Elizabeth of the display of William Cunnington's collections in his garden at Heytesbury, as quoted in Annable and Simpson 1964, p. 5.)

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PREFACE

This book tries to capture the nature of museum archaeology (the discipline of archaeology as it affects museums) as it exists at the beginning of the twenty-first century. This is a huge and amorphous subject. It includes great museums, such as the Louvre and the British Museum, as well as small district museums. It deals with the conservation and ordering of excavation archives and the looting of cultural heritage. It deals with major political quandaries such as the fate of the Parthenon Marbles and prosaic practical problems such as how to write display captions. From this, the idea that emerges is that museum archaeology has a rather strange double existence. Two personalities inextricably linked by history and a shared vocabulary but otherwise largely distinct. One half is that of the classic archaeology of Carter and Schliemann with its Egyptian mummies and Greek vases displayed as decorative arts, denuded of context and brushing shoulders with a world both of classic scholars and also of private collectors and auction houses. The other half is that of the local archaeological contractors uncovering vast assemblages of mundane domestic pottery sherds and contributing to local authority museums. Such museums try to provide contextualised galleries replete with reconstructions and dioramas, content for national archaeology days, and for young archaeology clubs, to try and make archaeology relevant to modern communities.

The book is divided into four parts. Part 1 gives the background, history, and context for how museum archaeology currently operates. Part 2 deals with collections – the things dug up by the antiquarians, archaeologists, and looters. Part 3 looks at how these collections are communicated through

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museum galleries and programmes. Part 4 includes a list of every museum and gallery mentioned in the text.

The book tries to deal with the subject globally. If you look hard enough, you will probably find museum archaeology of one form or another in every town in the Western world and in every city in the world. However, inevitably, it is primarily a story of Britain, Europe, and North America because this is where the most museums, the most money, and the most museum archaeologists are located; and this is where the museum archaeological tradition developed. As such, the “West” is referred to often. It is a descriptor that is much used and abused but has relevance within the context of museum archaeology. It is used to describe a geographical location, a philosophical and cultural outlook, an economic grouping, and a state of mind.

However, in many of its examples, this book is unashamedly London-centric. I have spent most of my life living in London and a good proportion of it working for the Museum of London. Since its creation in 1976, the Museum has always had field archaeologists undertaking excavation in London; has always had permanent galleries drawing heavily on archaeological finds and methods; and has always had public and educational programmes, including temporary exhibitions, that make use of archaeological discoveries and knowledge. In the last 10 years, we at the Museum have grappled with many, although not all, of the issues facing museum archaeologists. The major exception is that despite London’s multicultural, multiethnic nature, we have not dealt directly with Indigenous peoples. However, in 2005, I spent most of the year working on guidance for British museums dealing with human remains and claims for their return. Hopefully, this has given me an insight into this particular world.

Archaeology, particularly outside the United Kingdom, and for a whole series of historical, cultural, and practical reasons, blurs disconcertingly with other subjects, most notably history, ethnography, and fine and decorative arts. The same object might be categorised, curated, interpreted, and displayed under any one of these headings depending on its history and circumstances. This will be discussed further in later

pages, but it also gives me the opportunity to be liberal with my examples and to follow where the discussion is allowed to lead me.

Throughout the world, a series of very loaded terms have developed historically to describe archaeological and historic periods. These include such terms as *Classical*, *Stone Age*, *Roman*, *Viking*, *Neolithic*, *First Nation*, and so forth. All of these terms are specific to particular times and places and, most importantly, to those who have invented them and use them. But they remain the only easy way we have of describing certain archaeological periods and cultures in a way that most will understand. For this reason, I have tended, throughout the book when describing sites, objects, galleries, and theories, to use the most commonly used descriptor. Occasionally, this will jar: what is the point of identifying how false the term *classical* is in one chapter, if I then use that very term to describe an archaeological gallery in the next? However, as they say, life is too short.

Museums are unreal, almost surreal creations. They have created a place for themselves in the world, where, through a slow process of self-authentication, they have come to be authenticated by wider society. Scratch the surface and it is easy to identify the weaknesses of that authenticity. One wonders if museums would be created if they did not exist. Similarly, archaeology, along with its near relative palaeontology, has a strange position amongst academic disciplines. A subject of complex, often tedious, scholarly research, it has also caught the widest public imagination. In popular culture, it has cross-fertilised, for better or worse, with treasure seeking, tomb raiding, and the supernatural. Nevertheless, there is something special about museums and about archaeology. I have a passion for both. I hope this book will make a contribution to their particular and shared mythologies.

Hedley Swain
Summer 2006

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ABBREVIATIONS

ADS	Archaeological Data Service
AHPA	Archaeological and Historic Preservation Act (USA)
AHDS	Arts and Humanities Data Service
AIA	Archaeological Institute of America (USA)
AMA	Associate of the Museums Association
APPAG	All-Party Parliamentary Archaeology Group
APVA	Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities (USA)
ARC	Archaeological Resource Centre, York.
ARPA	Archaeological Resources Protection Act (USA)
BCRPM	British Committee for the Reunification of the Parthenon Marbles
BM	British Museum
CBA	Council for British Archaeology
CIA	Congress of Independent Archaeologists
DCMS	Department of Culture, Media, and Sport
DES	Department of Education and Skills
DIG	Detector Information Group
DoE	Department of the Environment
EH	English Heritage
ERA	Education Reform Act
GEM	Group of Educators in Museums
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HERs	Historic Environment Records
IAA	Israel Antiquities Authority (Israel)
ICOMOS	International Council on Monuments and Sites (International)

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ABBREVIATIONS

ICOM	International Council of Museums (International)
ICON	Institute of Conservation
IFA	Institute of Field Archaeologists
INAH	Instituto de Nacional Antropología y Historia (Mexico)
LAARC	London Archaeological Archive and Research Centre
MA	Museums Association
MAP2	Management of Archaeological Projects, 1991 English Heritage publication.
MDA	Museums Documentation Association (now known as MDA)
MLA	Museums, Libraries, and Archives Council
MoRPHE	Management of Research Projects in the Historic Environment, 2005 English Heritage publication
NAGPRA	Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (USA)
NMAI	National Museum of the American Indian (USA)
PACE	Palestinian Association for Cultural Exchange (Palestine)
PAS	Portable Antiquities Scheme
PPG16	Planning and Policy Guidance Note 16, Archaeology and Planning
RAO	Registered Archaeological Organisations
ROB	Rijksdienst voor het Oudheidkundig Bodemonderzoek (Netherlands)
RCAHMS	Royal Commission for Ancient and Historic Monuments Scotland
RCAHMW	Royal Commission for Ancient and Historic Monuments Wales
RPA	Register of Professional Archaeologists (USA)
SAA	Society of American Archaeology (USA)
SHA	Society of Historical Archaeology (USA)
SMA	Society of Museum Archaeologists
SCoPA	Standing Conference on Portable Antiquities

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SMRs	Sites and Monuments Records
SOPA	Society of Professional Archaeologists (USA)
SSN	Subject Specialist Network
STOP	Stop Taking Our Past
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (Int.)
UNESCO 1970	Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export, and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property (Int.)
UNIDROIT	Institute for the Unification of Private Law (Int.)
UNIDROIT 1995	Convention on Stolen and Illegally Exported Cultural Objects (Int.)
VTC	Virtual Teaching Collection
WEMACRU	West Midlands Archaeological Collections Research Unit
WHAM	Women, Heritage, and Museums
YAT	York Archaeological Trust