

Archaeology and politics

Introduction is archaeology a political practice?

According to the Cambridge dictionary Archaeology is “the study of the buildings, graves, tools, and other objects that belonged to people that lived in the past, in order to learn about their culture and society.”

Archaeology can often be imagined as a discipline that is rooted in scientific investigation and practice, with observation and reconstructions of past human lives. When you first look into Archaeology it looks like a practice only looking at excavating artefacts, and analysing the material remains and giving interpretations of the artefacts and the ancient societies its attached too. However the relationship between archaeology and politics is both complex and unavoidable. This is because archaeology deals with human past that can shape identities, cultural heritage and territorial claims, this can lead to power claims and structural changes to peoples heritages. Archaeology is often put in between political motivations, conflict and debates, the simple act of choosing what place to excavate, what to preserve and how to interpret the material that is found has significant political implications.

The research that is done may be influenced by national governments, the funding that is given to the Archaeologists or the cultural institutions that help them, while the interpretations of archaeological findings could be changed to support these ideologies like nationalist narratives or certain parts of cultural legitimacy, there can be archaeologists that will not agree to change what they find to fit these narratives.

In addition to this archaeology has a lot of historical roots in colonial expansion which has left a legacy of ethical and political questions, which involves ownership, representation and the reparations of artefacts. Issues with indigenous land rights, museum collections and heritage management, this demonstrates that the practice of archaeology cannot be easily separated from political contexts. This creates tension within the practice of archaeology between archaeologists themselves and government bodies.

The british museums way of sourcing artefacts

The british museum is positioned itself as a global centre for human heritage, as this museum has artefacts from all over the world such as the parthenon sculptures (Elgin Marbles), the Rosetta stone and other artefacts from Africa and Asia, which helps educate the public about the histories of these places.¹ However the accumulation and the continued possession of these artefacts are very political as they are rooted in colonial era practices which raises more legal and cultural questions, on whether they should or should not be able to hold these artefacts and whether they should give them back or not. Critics argue that what artefacts the museum holds

¹ Sommerlad, Joe. 2024. ‘Elgin Marbles: What Artefacts Have the British Museum Been Urged to Return?’, *Independent*, 3 December
<<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/elgin-marbles-greece-starmer-british-museum-b2657868.html>> [accessed 30 November 2025].

reflects a legacy of imperial power.² Artefacts were often moved during colonial conquests or treaties that were often not equal, this means that still holding these artefacts in London adds to the historical injustice and it denies the nations that these artefacts are from their own cultural heritage. For example many objects from the fortress of Maqalal which was looted in 1868 after a British military expedition, are still held by the museum, these items which the Ethiopian authorities have asked to be returned. In addition to this, the Parthenon sculptures are also a matter of diplomatic dispute since the 1980s, Greece has demanded that they should be brought back to Athens, arguing that they are a symbol of Greek cultural identity and national heritage.³

On the other hand defenders of the British museum argue that many of the artefacts were “legally acquired” under the laws and norms of the time when they were originally acquired. They also argue that the museum preserves the artefacts under stable conditions which makes them accessible to the public. One example of this would be about Chinese antiques that are now under scrutiny.⁴ Legally the Museum is under the British Museum Act of 1963 which forbids the museum from disposing most of its collections which prevents “de facto returns”, this means that the museum cannot return artefacts permanently unless they are duplicates or they are deemed unfit for the collections that the museum owns.⁵ This means that the British museum is unable to return artefacts regardless of the moral arguments. The debate over the museum's collections adds to how archaeology and museum curation are a political practice.

ethics of excavating areas of cultural significance

Excavating culturally significant sites raises ethical questions because this often clashes with cultural heritage and spiritual values of descendants or communities that they have descended from. Archeological excavation is destructive, once the soil is disturbed and objects or human remains are removed the original context is lost forever. Ethical guidelines recognise this and

² Sommerlad, Joe. 2024. ‘Elgin Marbles: What Artefacts Have the British Museum Been Urged to Return?’, *Independent*, 3 December
<<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/elgin-marbles-greece-starmer-british-museum-b2657868.html>> [accessed 30 November 2025].

³ Smith, Helena. 2022. ‘Group of British MPs and Peers Call for Parthenon Marbles to Return to Greece’, *The Guardian*, 18 June
<<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2022/jun/18/parthenon-marbles-must-return-to-greece-british-mps-and-peers-write>> [accessed 30 November 2025].

⁴ Alberge, Dalya. 2024. ‘Chinese Artefacts in Repatriation Row Were “given Willingly” to British Museum’, *The Guardian*, 20 July
<<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/article/2024/jul/20/chinese-artefacts-in-repatriation-row-were-given-willingly-to-british-museum>> [accessed 30 November 2025].

⁵ Expert Participation. 1979. ‘British Museum Act 1963’, Statute Law Database, 31 January
<<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1963/24>> [accessed 30 November 2025].

archaeologists are encouraged to use minimally invasive or non destructible methods for example remote sensing and ground penetrating radars wherever it is possible to do so, to reduce damage to the culturally important sites.⁶ However not all excavations are able to use these methods and many communities object when it comes to culturally sacred places, like burial grounds and do not want these places to be disturbed. For example the discovery of the ancient bones of the Kennewick man in Washington triggered an intense debate between scientists who wanted to study the remains and Native American tribes demanding the remains to be reburied under their traditions.⁷ The legal and ethical tensions between the scientific interests of the remains and the respect for indigenous beliefs shows that when excavating a site like this can lead to a lot of cultural disrespect.⁸

In addition to this the removal of artefacts from sites can often reflect inequalities and colonial legacies. Some scholars argue that many objects discovered during colonial era excavations were taken without proper consent or respect from the local communities of these sites, and the removal of the artefacts added to the cultural dispossession.⁹ Today even the ethics of owning things from the past is often contested with a question of who has the right to excavate and interpret and possess the artefacts and remains from these culturally sacred sites.¹⁰ However archaeologists that work by using careful archaeological work argue that excavation can contribute to shared human knowledge and that they can preserve sites before they are destroyed by development, erosion or even looting. Ethical archaeology when it is done with the communities contribution and consent and respect for these descendant groups can provide very valuable insights into human history while minimilising damage to these sites of cultural significance.¹¹

⁶ Welker, Eden. 2024. 'Archaeological Ethics and World Heritage: Protecting and Preserving Cultural Resources', in *Guide to Archaeology* (Pressbooks).

⁷ 'With Bones in Contention: Repatriation of Human Remains'. n.d. Onlineethics.org
<<https://onlineethics.org/cases/graduate-research-ethics-cases-and-commentaries-volume-1-1997/bone-s-contention-repatriation?>> [accessed 30 November 2025].

⁸ Sinclair, Anthony. n.d. 'The Reburial Issue', Liv.ac.uk
<https://pcwww.liv.ac.uk/~sinclair/algy399_site/reburial.html?> [accessed 30 November 2025].

⁹ Guest User. 2025. 'The Ethics of Archaeology: Who Owns the Past?', *The Archaeologist*, 5 February
<<https://www.thearchaeologist.org/blog/the-ethics-of-archaeology-who-owns-the-past?>> [accessed 30 November 2025].

¹⁰ Viii, Henry, and Thomas Jefferson. n.d. 'Archaeological Ethics', Encyclopedia.com
<<https://www.encyclopedia.com/science/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/archaeological-ethics?>> [accessed 30 November 2025].

¹¹ 'Archaeological Ethics and Law - Crow Canyon Archaeological Center'. 2023. Crow Canyon Archaeological Center -, Crow Canyon Archaeological Center, 3 February
<<https://crowcanyon.org/archaeological-ethics-law/?>> [accessed 30 November 2025].

issues of excavation of marked tombs

The excavation of marked tombs, especially ones belonging to historical or religious figures raises serious ethical, cultural and methodological issues, and the story of Howard Carter's discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb in 1922 adds to those tensions.¹² While Carter's find brought to light a huge amount of ancient Egyptian artefacts (5398 objects) ranging from golden masks to everyday items that offered massive insight into 18th dynasty funerary practice and material culture.¹³ However the process of excavation and the removal itself had many problems. Critics have accused Carter of looting; a previously unpublished 1934 letter by the prominent Egyptologist Alan Gardiner accused Carter of giving a scarab amulet which "has been undoubtedly stolen from the tomb of Tutankhamun".¹⁴ Further scrutiny revealed that jewelry fragments originally observed on the mummies wrappings later appeared among items in Carter's personal effects after his death. These actions violate a core principle of Archaeological ethics, that finds from the grave or tomb are part of a collective cultural heritage and are not for you to take as personal loot.

In addition to Carter's accusations of theft, the handling and excavation methods Carter employed also illustrate how exploration of marked tombs may damage or desecrate the remains. When Carter's team removed Tutankhamun's mummy in 1925, they used chisels, knives and saws to extract jewelry and amulets embedded in resin that had hardened over centuries, dismembering parts of the body to retrieve these valuables.¹⁵ The treatment of the

¹² Marchant, Jo. 2010. 'Tutankhamun – the Secrets of the Tomb Go Online', *The Guardian*, 17 July <<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2010/jul/18/tutankhamun-website-howard-carter-tomb>> [accessed 30 November 2025].

¹³ Marchant, Jo. 2010. 'Tutankhamun – the Secrets of the Tomb Go Online', *The Guardian*, 17 July <<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2010/jul/18/tutankhamun-website-howard-carter-tomb>> [accessed 30 November 2025].

¹⁴ Alberge, Dalya. 2022. 'Howard Carter Stole Tutankhamun's Treasure, New Evidence Suggests', *The Guardian*, 13 August <<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2022/aug/13/howard-carter-stole-tutankhamuns-treasure-new-evidence-suggests>> [accessed 30 November 2025].

¹⁵ Alberge, Dalya. 2022. 'Howard Carter Stole Tutankhamun's Treasure, New Evidence Suggests', *The Guardian*, 13 August <<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2022/aug/13/howard-carter-stole-tutankhamuns-treasure-new-evidence-suggests>> [accessed 30 November 2025].

excavation site would today be considered deeply disrespectful especially given the sacred nature of burial sites and human remains.

Moreover, the excavation carried out under colonial power dynamics, foreign archaeologists supported by western patrons, excavating royal Egyptian tombs raises questions about cultural imperialism and ownership of the past¹⁶. At the same time the local Egyptian population had little control over the excavation or the fate of the objects, the promises then standard under partage agreements are now viewed as exploitative, often favouring European institutions or individuals over the source country's heritage.¹⁷ There is also the issue of recognition and credit to the Egyptian labourers of the time, including children in some reports. Who physically carried out much of the excavation is anonymous and unacknowledged while the western figureheads receive fame for discoveries.

At the same time defenders might argue that without the excavation the tomb might have been looted or destroyed, or deteriorated beyond repair. But these justifications do not erase the fact that the excavation of marked tombs, especially royal or significant burials, involves moral and cultural responsibilities. The example of Carter and Tutankhamun illustrates how excavating a royal tomb can turn into an act of appropriation not simply just a discovery, and to why many now question whether some tombs should ever have been opened.¹⁸

Internal prejudices

Archaeologists are not immune to internal prejudices which can shape how they interpret and present past societies. Even unconsciously assumptions about “civilisation” and “primitive people” or cultural superiority may change the choices of which sites to dig and what findings are considered significant. For example there is a tendency in Eurocentric archaeology to prioritise monumental architecture that undervalues ordinary dwellings or artefacts from societies outside western traditions. This bias skews our understanding of past human diversity and everyday life. Similarly preconceived ideas about what is “civilised” and what “barbaric” cultural practices may lead to selective reporting or interpretation of burial rites, gender roles, or social structures in ways that conform to modern stereotypes. In addition to this these prejudices can affect how archaeologists treat human remains, these attitudes that are shaped

¹⁶ N.d.-b. Thebritishacademy.ac.uk
<<https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/blog/how-20th-century-colonial-politics-shaped-story-tutankhamuns-tomb/>> [accessed 30 November 2025].

¹⁷ N.d.-b. Thebritishacademy.ac.uk
<<https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/blog/how-20th-century-colonial-politics-shaped-story-tutankhamuns-tomb/>> [accessed 30 November 2025].

¹⁸ Seshan, Thulasi. 2022. ‘9 Controversies Surrounding King Tut’, Mental Floss, 18 October
<<https://www.mentalfloss.com/history/king-tut/king-tut-controversies?>> [accessed 30 November 2025].

by cultural or religious bias might influence whether the remains are respected, studied or discarded. This sometimes leads to the dehumanization of the dead in summaries or reconstructions, these biases can turn into authoritative narratives that marginalise indigenous voices or alternative historical perspectives reinforcing colonial era power dynamics. Additionally archaeologists internal prejudices regarding culture, race, social complexity, or modern assumptions about the past shape archaeological practice affecting what we recover, how we interpret it and which stories humanity are validated and which are hidden

conclusion

In conclusion archaeology is a political practice, due to the factors in how archaeological excavation sites are managed and treated. For example the british museum and how it sources its artefacts through its colonialist history and unfair treaties, ethics of excavating areas of cultural significance such as native american sites, issues of excavating marked tombs such as Howard Carter and how pocketing artefacts is unethical and finally the internal prejudices of archaeologists and how they affect excavations.

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