

Ethics and the archaeology of world religions

Anders Bergquist

Introduction

This chapter is an attempt to diagnose the conflicts that arise between archaeologists and museum curators on the one hand, and those who speak for (or claim to speak for) communities of religious belief/practice on the other. It will be argued that conflicts over the excavation, study, conservation, and display of religiously sensitive material remains are best understood as instances of conflict between competing systems of meaning in a pluralist society, and that they are only resolved when there is a 'negotiated consent' or a capacity for 'bilingualism of discourse'. These terms will be explained in what follows. The examples are drawn largely from the archaeology of Judaism and Christianity and from western Europe, but specialists in the archaeology of other religions and regions may test the analysis offered here against examples taken from their own field of study.

Religion, archaeology, and the sacred

It will be impossible to escape terms such as 'sacred' and 'profane', but we have to be sensitive to their complexity. The notion of 'sacredness' can only operate *within* a religious system. It is a concept that may be attached to places, persons, times, or objects. For an archaeologist, conflict may therefore arise over the disturbance of a sacred place, the disturbance of human remains that are held to be sacred (either because of who they were in life, or because of the respect that a particular religious system has for any human remains), the conduct of archaeological work on sacred days or at sacred seasons (e.g. excavating on the Sabbath), and the excavation, conservation, and display of sacred objects. 'Sacredness' is also a concept capable of gradation. Within a religious system, places, persons, times, and objects are commonly graded in hierarchies of sacrality which may be very elaborate, and the location of a place, person, time, or object within that hierarchy will have important implications for the degree and

nature of the conflict that arises with respect to it (Jenson [1992], for example, shows how the grading of places, persons, times, and objects on a scale from profane to sacred is a key structuring principle of the ritual and cultural system set out in the biblical book Leviticus).

The concept of 'archaeology' also requires comment. Here it will be helpful to start from a minimum definition of 'archaeology' as a set of techniques of enquiry—excavation, typology, photogrammetry, radiocarbon dating, etc. In this perspective, archaeology ceases to be a discipline in itself, and is seen as a set of techniques that may be placed at the service of a whole range of disciplines—economic history, demography, anthropology, history of religions, etc. Archaeology becomes a means to an end, a way of pursuing 'something else'. We may note in passing that many conflicts between archaeologists themselves about the nature and purpose of archaeology are really conflicts between the 'something elses'—'my something else is interesting and important, yours is not'. Different aspects of archaeological technique may raise different issues of conflict. Excavation is a non-repeatable destructive experiment, which requires disturbance of place, and it takes place within a limited span of time. The conservation and display of artefacts, or of human remains, is not intrinsically limited in time, and need not be destructive—although it may include the removal of a sample for radiocarbon dating or DNA analysis. It is not surprising that the custodians of the Turin Shroud should have delayed permission for radiocarbon dating, until the dating technology had improved to the point where only a small sample needed to be taken (Damon *et al.* 1989:611). Those who are familiar with the complex interdenominational politics of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem will realise that it was a triumph of negotiated consent to secure permission for a photogrammetric survey of that most sensitive Christian site, the traditional Tomb of Christ (Biddle 1999). Permission for any invasive procedure at this site will be even harder to obtain. Finally, the application of any archaeological technique of enquiry will generate information, which may appear to confirm the beliefs and/or practices of a religious community, and be welcomed by it, or which may appear to subvert those beliefs and/or practices, and be experienced as threatening. This too will affect the nature of the conflicts that may arise.

'Religion' is a third concept that requires comment. Religions are complex adaptive systems. Leaving aside the fundamental question whether they are 'adaptive' in the sense that they are to be explained as part of the cultural equipment with which the human species adapts to its environment (Burkert 1996, Rappaport 1999), they are certainly adaptive in the sense that they develop in relation to their environment, and are in processes of long-term change. Judaism is a good example. In the time of Jesus of Nazareth, there was a wide variety of Judaisms (e.g. Sanders 1992). The defeat, by the Romans, of successive Jewish revolts between 66 CE

and 135 CE, and especially the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, radically reduced the possible ways of articulating Jewish practice. The destruction of the Temple effectively ended the institutions of priest-hood and animal sacrifice, and the various cultural and political establishments that depended upon them (see Hachlili, this volume). The triumph of Rome put an end to the political hopes of the Zealots, and destroyed the radical separatist community that left us the Dead Sea Scrolls. Only the legal and halakhic traditions of the Pharisees survived, to be developed through Mishnah and Talmud into the various schools of mediaeval rabbinical Judaism.

The same point could be made by exploring the consequences for Judaism, as a religious system, of the Enlightenment, or the Holocaust, or the creation of the Jewish state of Israel. Christianity is, similarly, a complex system involved in processes of long-term change; Hopkins (1999) has recently drawn attention to the huge gap between what a Late Antique Christian would take for granted as normative in Christian practice, and what a typical present-day western European Christian might expect (see Lane, this volume). Major world religions are varied within themselves, and typically marked by diverse schools or communities of belief and practice; and the trend of the long-term process of adaptive change is often towards increased internal variety (but not always; Judaism as it developed after the year 70 CE was initially a narrowing of the spectrum; mediaeval Catholic liturgy tended to become more standardised over time). The long-term historical process of a religion may even end in its extinction. It is significant that specifically religious objections are not raised to the excavation of the sacred places or sacred objects of a 'dead' religion: Etruscan artefacts, or Dacian temples, or Graeco-Roman altars. This is confirmation that the ethical issues are not intrinsic to places or objects that have been held sacred, but are issues of conflict between *current* discourses.

Modern revivals of 'dead' religions are a fascinating case, precisely because they beg the question of how it will be determined whether a religious discourse is current or not. Present-day British Druids are the product of a romantic eighteenth- and nineteenth-century revival, and are not historically continuous with any religion of pre-Roman Britain (Piggott 1974). The noisy summer solstice confrontations at Stonehenge can be construed as attempts by modern Druids to assert their right to be taken seriously as a current religious discourse, attempts which are resisted by the historically sophisticated community of archaeologists (Chippindale *et al.* 1990 offer a fascinating cross-section of these competing voices). But to say that the excavation of a Graeco-Roman temple does not raise *religious* objections is not to say that it is value-neutral. Conflicts over what is appropriate in the archaeology of religions are closely intertwined with conflicts over what political causes one's archaeological enquiry might

be used to support or resist, or how museums should behave in a post-colonial age. It would be unrealistic to suppose that we can disentangle ethical issues arising from the 'sacredness' of a site or artefact from issues arising from their 'political charge', even if they are logically distinct. Yigael Yadin's presentation of his work at Masada (1966) is a classic example of the intertwining of the religious and the political; Mesckell (1998) has brought together similar examples from eastern Mediterranean and Middle Eastern archaeology.

The point that religions are systems of meaning in process of adaptive change has an important bearing on the question sometimes raised, whether archaeologists should undertake work which could disturb the foundation of a religious community's belief/practice. This anxiety is unfounded. Two mirror-image observations are in order:

- (a) When archaeological enquiry leads to conclusions congruent with the claims of a religious community, archaeologists do well to be suspicious. The work of the Franciscan scholars Bagatti and Testa on a range of early Christian sites, including Nazareth and Capernaum, is instructive. Their religiously motivated desire to fashion a link between their archaeological evidence and events or places recorded in the New Testament has led them to press their evidence too hard: it is not impossible, but simply difficult, to sustain the proposition that a structure with early Christian graffiti excavated at Capernaum is the house of the Apostle Peter (Bagatti 1971, Taylor 1993 [this structure is now preserved under a glass floor at the centre of the late 1980s Roman Catholic church at Capernaum, a neat example of the coincidence of religious veneration with archaeological display]). The difficulty is the same as that involved in the attempt of the distinguished Roman epigraphist Margherita Guarducci to identify the remains of St Peter—the evidence is pressed beyond what the archaeological community would think possible (Guarducci 1989, Bergquist 1991). But there is no *ethical* issue at stake here, only one of ordinary scholarly judgement. Guarducci's interpretation, like Bagatti and Testa's, has straightforwardly to compete in the market place of archaeological interpretation.
- (b) When archaeological enquiry leads to conclusions contrary to the claims of a community of faith, then it is important not to underestimate the robustness and adaptability of religious discourse. All religions are involved in processes of long-term adaptation; the archaeological evidence is simply part of the environment within which a religion will change. There is no need for archaeologists to have tender consciences because radiometric dating techniques show the world to have been created long before 4004 BCE. Those who are committed to believing in Archbishop Usher's seventeenth-century chronology will find ways of continuing to do so—they will argue, for instance, that God has deliberately inserted misleading evidence into the fabric of creation to test the faith of the faithful (see Insoll, this volume). It is

an intriguing thought-experiment to wonder how Christianity would develop if a group of archaeologists were able to prove (*per impossibile*) that a particular set of bones excavated in Jerusalem were indubitably the bones of Jesus of Nazareth. Certain materialist articulations of the doctrine of the resurrection would become unsustainable, but Christians would go on believing in the resurrection of Jesus: the religious system would adapt to this new feature of its environment.

Case studies

We may now examine some particular cases, to see how conflicts between archaeologists and religious practitioners can be construed as conflicts between different discourses or systems of meaning. We may consider first persons, and then objects. Anyone who watches the reactions of the general public in a gallery of Egyptian funerary archaeology will realise that difficulties surrounding the display of human remains begin as questions about the recognition and evaluation of human identity. There are two variables: whether the remains create a strong sense of human identity or not, and what kind of value is placed upon them. The average Roman or Anglo-Saxon skeleton does not create a strong sense of human identity, and, being scarcely persons, their display is seldom controversial. The Late Neolithic/Chalcolithic body discovered on the Hauslabjoch in the Tyrolean Alps in 1991 ('Otzi the Iceman') is better preserved, and it has been possible to reconstruct in some detail his clothing, his diet, and the circumstances of his final journey in the Alps (Spindler 1994). This makes it impossible to escape a strong sense of his personhood, which has led to public controversy over the permanent museum display of his remains in Bolzano (Malone and Stoddart 1998:4).

Archaeologists are less likely to be troubled by the display of human remains than members of the general public. This is partly because (like funeral directors) they work with them regularly; at a deeper level, it is because they have learned to invest them with a new kind of value. Human remains become data which contribute to the mass of knowledge and insight which the archaeologist is building up, and data are intrinsically good. This valuing of the human remains within a new scientific system of meaning outweighs the widespread initial instinct to leave the dead undisturbed. When people do not inhabit a frame of reference within which this new value can be given to human remains, so that there is nothing to set against the initial instinct to leave the dead undisturbed, and/or when that initial instinct is religiously reinforced (either in respect of all human remains, or in respect of these particular remains because they have a special significance within a religious system), then it will be harder to negotiate consent for

excavation and display. Conflict will persist until the balance of values can be struck differently. Hubert (1988) has helpfully gathered together numerous examples of this kind of conflict, especially in Australian and North American archaeology; the conflict is frequently articulated around a demand that archaeological evidence be 'reburied' (Layton 1988 includes several essays on this theme).

The excavation of Jewbury, the Jewish burial-ground of mediaeval York, has become literally a textbook example of consent withheld (Rahtz 1991:46–9). Excavations in 1983 recovered an extensive sample of the mediaeval Jewish population of the city: clearly material of considerable scientific value. There was no significant protest within the city; that is, for the people of York the balance was struck in favour of the 'scientific' value of the human remains. The Beth Din (i.e. religious court) of the Chief Rabbi in London was informed of the excavation, but took the official view that the burials were not Jewish; the orientation was unusual, and there were no artefacts or inscriptions to prove beyond doubt that this was a Jewish cemetery. This opinion ran entirely counter to the expert opinion of the historians and archaeologists of mediaeval York, and may be seen as a move by the Beth Din to avoid a contest between 'scientific' and 'religious' discourses. The excavation then came to the attention of orthodox Jewish circles in Gateshead. In the face of their vigorous protests, which also led the Chief Rabbi to change his mind, the bones had to be reburied before they had been studied. For the Jewish objectors, the prohibition on disturbing human remains was religiously reinforced, and they struck the balance in favour of leaving the evidence in (even, returning it to) the ground.

The withdrawal of consent at Jewbury can be contrasted with the less well-known excavation of several near-contemporary Christian bodies at St Albans Abbey (Biddle and Kjølbye-Biddle 1980). Before dissolution in 1539, this was one of the richest and most powerful Benedictine houses in England. In 1978 the Abbey, no longer a monastic house but now the cathedral of an Anglican diocese, set about building a new chapter house on the site of the chapter house of the mediaeval abbey. During excavations, the remains of several mediaeval abbots and other important persons were recovered. It was possible to identify them precisely, from epigraphic and literary evidence. They provide a skeletal sample of unusual value to a mediaevalist—precisely identified, and belonging to a very particular stratum of mediaeval society. They had names familiar from the mediaeval chronicles of St Albans—Paul of Caen (who built the great Norman tower), John de Cella, Robert of the Chamber (who was not an abbot, but was accorded the privilege of burial in the chapter house because he was the father of a Pope). These were, in short, well-known historical personalities, but no objections were raised to the excavation and meticulous analysis of their bones (Figure 7.1). Once the archaeologists



Figure 7.1 The remains of Robert of the Chamber, father of Pope Adrian IV (courtesy The Cathedral and Abbey Church of St Alban)

had done their work, the same remains were reburied in front of the High Altar of the cathedral, under a magnificent new carved memorial slab (McKitterick and Cardozo 1992). The office of Vespers of the Dead was sung by monks from Benedictine houses across the country; the Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster, himself a Benedictine, presided over the service (Figure 7.2). This is a striking example of what one may call 'bilingualism of discourse'. The same human remains are handled within two different systems of meaning, one 'scientific' and one 'religious'. In this instance, it is worth remarking that the meanings are successive: first the excavation and analysis, then the reburial. The display of human material may prove more problematic than its excavation, because display renders the 'scientific' meaning permanent (assuming that the display is in a museum; display



Figure 7.2 Vespers of the Dead are sung by Benedictine monks as the mediaeval abbots of St Albans are reburied (courtesy The Cathedral and Abbey Church of St Alban)

is also a religious technique, as innumerable Christian saints in glass coffins testify).

When a 'sacred' artefact is placed in a museum display, it is separated from its use within a religious system. Take the example of Orthodox icons. These are artefacts which were produced to function in very precise ways within a religious system, as points of connection between this contingent world of space and time, and the eternity inhabited by God and the saints. Orthodox Christians are taught to think of icons as windows in the walls of a church, through which the believer can look into, and communicate with, the saints in eternity. In the course of Byzantine history, theologians developed an immensely sophisticated account of how icons are able to function in this way (see Evdokimov 1972 for a classic exposition).

Icons are now likely to be seen in museums or galleries, where they have been detached from their setting in churches and in the liturgies enacted in churches: they are no longer to be read religiously, but in cultural-historical terms, or in aesthetic terms of 'art' and 'beauty' that would be alien to their makers. The question is therefore, 'who shall determine the frame of reference within which icons shall be read, and by what right?' Although icons are a good example, the same issue arises in relation to any artefact that was originally made to function within a religious system. At first sight, the argument that 'we made them first' or 'this is what they were originally made for' may appear decisive—but what are the rights of the prime manufacturer?

It may be helpful to make a comparison with a well-worn question in literary theory, namely, how far does authorial intention determine the meaning of a text? Perhaps it seems obvious that a text means what its author intends it to mean, but once a text has been published, it takes on a life of its own, and may prove to sustain meanings and implications unintended by the author. Neither the intentionalist insistence that it is authorial intention alone that determines the meaning of a text, nor the insistence of the reader-response school that a text can mean anything that a reader chooses to make it mean, does justice to the complex way in which the meaning of a text is negotiated through the simultaneous operation of three forces. The author's intention (1) counts for something, and so does the way (2) in which an individual reads the text, but that individual reception will be conditioned by (3) the history of the ways in which the text has already been read. This analogy suggests that the argument which one might summarise as, 'we (religious practitioners) determine the meaning of this artefact because we made it, and we made it to function in certain ways within our religious system', is not decisive. The meaning of the artefact has to be negotiated between what it was meant to mean, what it has meant in the past, and what it might mean now; there is no *a priori* way of adjudicating between competing claims of meaning. If a religiously charged artefact is to be displayed, there will need to be this kind of negotiation, or at least the possibility of reading the same artefact simultaneously within two or more different systems of meaning—'bilingualism of discourse'.

Conclusions

'Religious meaning' is a construct, but then so are 'archaeological meaning' and 'scientific meaning'. A case has to be argued for the value of archaeological enquiry; it cannot simply be assumed. Consent has to be negotiated for the excavation of religiously charged places, persons, and objects, and archaeologists will inevitably sometimes find themselves caught up in conflicts between different systems of meaning which they are

practically unable to resolve. In a contemporary Western context where traditions are fragmented, meaning is fragmented, and there is bound to be confusion over the handling of 'sacred' material evidence. This commentary has offered elements of a typology of conflicts in the archaeology of religions, and a diagnosis—rather than a resolution—of the issues at stake. But this limitation is not surprising. The problem of the relationship between archaeological and religious discourse turns out to be part of a much larger problem, of how a single society or a single world handles plural meaning. That is a problem which religious leaders, politicians, and cultural historians all find intractable (e.g. Sacks 1990). It is not surprising that archaeologists should also be perplexed by it.

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