

Is archaeology a political practice?

Archaeology is undoubtedly a political practice. When working with areas of social and historical significance and the remains of humans and their cultures, there are many political aspects that must be taken into account. Whether that be working with the local authorities and people when excavating so as to not disturb the physical and social landscape of the area; or working with the people of the same or similar culture when working with human remains in order to respect the dead as they would have wished to be respected. The treatment of the remains of the dead is a highly political decision, it involves overcoming subconscious prejudices and respecting those that have come before. The continued treatment of these bodies is also highly important when looking at whether archaeology can be considered a political practice, the retention of these bodies by powers other than those to whom they belong is, more commonly, being seen as politically taboo with many of the remains being repatriated to their countries and peoples of origin. Not only are the bodies of the dead significantly important when looking at the respectful treatment when excavating and the repatriation of their remains, but when looking at their reburial as well.

The bodies of the dead have historically been mistreated, often being removed from their resting places and put on display in places such as the British Museum and other such museums. The bodies were put on display without the consent of the deceased, often taken from their own countries and moved halfway across the world. Often they were stripped of their personal belongings that they were buried with and removed of any semblance of identity that they were found with. These people were forced to be entertainment for people they had never met and had no connection with. If the desecration of human identity for entertainment purposes does not allow for archaeology to be considered a political practice, then nothing in life can be considered political. Archaeology and the treatment of human life, dead or alive, is the pinnacle of politics and therefore dictates that archaeology is certainly a political practice. If they were not removed from their graves to be put on display, then there was also the possibility of them going missing entirely as is what happened to the babies found in Kahun, Egypt, by W. M. F. Petrie in April 1889¹. It is still unknown what happened to the babies that were found at Kahun, but there is the potential that one of their heads was in the Manchester Museum but was destroyed in the 60s.² Even if the knowledge of their whereabouts were known, the blatant disrespect that they received

¹ Debbie Challis, *Inequality And Race In The Histories Of Archaeology*, (2021) p. 5.
<<https://archaeologybulletin.org/articles/660/files/submission/proof/660-1-3583-1-10-20210519.pdf>>
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² Debbie Challis, *Inequality And Race In The Histories Of Archaeology*, (2021) p. 5.
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from Petrie in his writings makes it clear that they were not considered to be anything of importance to him. He writes that:

“Many boxes were found in which babies had been buried. The boxes were evidently intended for domestic uses, to hold clothes, tools & c., but babies were put in them, sometimes two or three together, and buried in the rooms.”³

Not only does he appear to dismiss the babies and the cultural practices of the region of Kahun as being lesser in his writings by focussing on the boxes that the babies were found in rather than the infants themselves and their significant importance to whoever lived in the area, but he also consistently dismisses them entirely, barely mentioning such an important find, with small comments such as “pottery with cylinders found in boxes buried with babies”⁴. Petrie’s dismissive nature towards the children of Kahun could possibly be linked to his views on race and his vast association with the study of eugenics, and those involved in the study of eugenics such as Sir Francis Galton who coined the term ‘eugenics’.⁵ The National Human Genome Research Institute (NIH) defines eugenics as “an inaccurate theory linked to historical and present-day forms of discrimination, racism, ableism and colonialism”⁶ Clearly, if Petrie subscribed to these ideas, then his dismissal of the babies in Kahun was possibly due to his more western-centric views and discrimination against those outside of his social and ethnic sphere.

This then poses the question as to whether other excavations of the deceased may have been rooted in prejudices, whether they be subconscious or not. This is clearly a political issue that is reflected in the archaeological practices of the past and present. How many burials have been dismissed or wrongfully analysed because the excavator held prejudices that affected the outcome of the excavation? Petrie dismissed the babies of Kahun, his prejudices and eugenic views warping his analyses to portray the people of Kahun as lesser for burying their infants in boxes that otherwise would have been used for domestic purposes, when we cannot judge another culture for their practices just as they can not judge us for our own practices.

While internal prejudices might have an impact on the outcome of an excavation, the future of the remains collected is also a valuable point to consider when looking at whether archaeology can be considered a political practice. Due to countries such as Britain’s colonial past, many human remains were and are on display in museums in countries

³ William M. Flinders Petrie, *Kahun, Gurob, and Hawara*, 1890, p. 24.

⁴ William M. Flinders Petrie, *Kahun, Gurob, and Hawara*, 1890, p. 45.

⁵ Joe Cain, *Flinders Petrie And History Of Eugenics At UCL*, (2021) <<https://profjoecain.net/flinders-petrie-eugenics-ucl-ianus-modern-life/>> [accessed 17 November 2024].

⁶ National Human Genome Research Institute, *Eugenics And Scientific Racism*, (2022) <<https://www.genome.gov/about-genomics/fact-sheets/Eugenics-and-Scientific-Racism>> [accessed 17 November 2024].

across the world. These remains have been stripped away from their rightful owners, the countries and people to which the remains belonged. Having the remains returned to their homes is an issue of political and social significance, it signifies the cultural importance of the bodies and an admittance of past wrong-doings on the part of the returners.

The remains of human bodies have, more recently, been returned to their countries and peoples of origin. For example, in 1998, Maori remains were returned to New Zealand by the University of Edinburgh⁷, these included the heads of Maori people that had Mokomokai (tattoos that are culturally significant to the Maori people). These remains were transported to a Waahi Tapu which is a "land of special spiritual, cultural and historical significance to the tangata whenua (indigenous people) of Aotearoa"⁸ Clearly, the Maori remains were of significant cultural importance to the people of New Zealand and therefore their repatriation is also significant. It shows the importance of respect for the dead and an attempt to undo the wrongs of the colonial past by the University of Edinburgh. Archaeology is clearly a political practice when it comes to the repatriation of human remains, the process of retrieving the remains and the provenance of the remains that has led to them being the possession of other people shows just how political archaeology is. It is clear that without the social and political aspects of archaeology, that many human remains would be treated with disrespect, intentional or not, and that because of the known social and political implications surrounding human remains, many bodies can be treated with the respect that they deserve. The bodies can be buried in a way that reflects the people and culture that they are from and be returned to their people in order for this process to be best actualised.

The remains of the dead should always be honoured. How they are honoured are up to interpretation and, recently, the pagan community has been particularly vocal when it comes to archaeological excavations and the bodily remains that were found there. The organisation "Honouring The Ancient Dead" is an example of a pagan community that feels a connection with the bodies that archaeologists discover and wish to treat them with the respect that they believe, the bodies would have wished for, they say that their "priority is ancestors from ancient and historical pagan culture within the British Isles."⁹ Modern pagans are often "inspired by the religions of Europe, North Africa and West Asia that were rendered extinct by the spread of Christianity and the other Abrahamic traditions."¹⁰ It is logical that as they believe in the religions and faith that are no longer prolific in the world,

⁷ Returning Heritage, *Natural History Museum Returns Human Remains To Torres Strait Islands*, (2019) <<https://www.returningheritage.com/natural-history-museum-returns-human-remains-to-torres-strait-islands>> [accessed 17 November 2024].

⁸ Aotea Harbour, *Waahi Tapu*, (no date) <<https://aotea.maori.nz/waahi-tapu#:~:text=Waahi%20tapu%20refers%20to%20land,the%20tangata%20whenua%20of%20Aotea.>> [accessed 17 November 2024].

⁹ Honouring The Ancient Dead, *Statement of Intent*, (2017) <<https://www.honour.org.uk/statement-of-intent/>> [accessed 17 November 2024].

¹⁰ Britannica, *Paganism*, (2024) <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/paganism>> [accessed 17 November 2024].

then they would also feel a kinship with those whose peoples are also not in the world and who, potentially, had a similar belief system. Other pagans have also made it clear that they value the remains of those from the past and wish for them to be buried in a traditional way that aligns with what the dead may have believed in. These include people like Chris Warwick who considers himself as a druid and feels “it isn't just modern graveyards that should be considered as sacred sites, but anywhere that a body has been buried with ceremonial intent”¹¹ Throughout nearly all pagan campaigns against archaeological excavations is the undertone that the disruption of the site and the removal of bodily remains is a desecration of the land and bodies. These pagan people believe it is their priority to make sure that the remains are given a fair and honest burial and therefore often involve themselves in archaeological digs and sites of archaeological importance. They hope to achieve the traditional and respectful reburials of the dead. This shows that archaeology is clearly a political practice as people hold exceptionally strong opinions on the way in which sites are excavated and what happens to the excavations afterwards, it shows the conflicts between archaeologists and the local people, whether they be from the locality or who consider themselves to be akin to the people buried there. Politics runs deep through the conflicts between archaeologists and pagans, with many discussions having to be had between the two groups about the best way to respect the dead and their cultures. It has also led to many legal proceedings which are undoubtedly political in and of itself. An example of this would be the Avebury Consultation between 2006 and 2009 where the National Trust asked for the public's opinions on the reburial of ancient remains in Avebury. This was after a faction of The Council of British Druid Orders submitted a request for the reburial of the remains.¹² At the very least, to pagans, archaeology is considered a political practice that infringes on the rights of the dead who can not consent to being on display or having their final place of rest disturbed and desecrated thousands of years after their death by archaeologists who want to study their remains.

In conclusion, archaeology is a political practice. This is particularly clear when it comes to handling the remains of the dead, whether it be the internal prejudices that we may or may not be aware of, the rights of the bodies home countries to bury the remains as they see fit, or the representation of the body in a people that feel they represent it best. Politics is ever present in archaeology and is an inescapable aspect of life that interweaves itself into every facet of archaeology and history. It is therefore evident that archaeology must be considered a political practice in order to authentically understand what archaeology is as a study.

¹¹ BBC, *Druid Campaign For Sacred Sites*, (2006)
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/wales/south_west/5372598.stm> [accessed 17 November 2024].

¹² Honouring The Ancient Dead, *Avebury Consultation*, (no date)
<<https://www.honour.org.uk/avebury-consultation-english-heritage-and-national-trust/>> [accessed 17 November 2024].

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