

To what extent is the International trade of battlefield/military relic material a matter of moral concern?
Gwenllian Anthony (1404702)

The trade of battlefield and military relic material raises many questions surrounding the commodification of death, the power imbalances when removing artefacts from source countries and the loss of knowledge when removing material culture from their sites. Before delving into the moral dilemmas that surround this subject, it is important to clarify what is meant by 'battlefield and military relic material' and also 'international trade'. Battlefield and military relic material is the surviving material remains on or within the region of a battlefield, which are important sources for both historians and heritage officials. These are items that have the potential to increase the credibility of written records and histories, and also may offer vital information regarding participants, weaponry and events, which cannot be found from other sources (Wyllie, R. 2014). International trade refers to the sale or exchange of material culture through private sales, museums, legal markets and online auctions. These items may have been excavated from recent archaeological digs, but are also often from colonial explorations or amateur treasure hunters. Although many artefacts are sold in legal situations, it is important to note that this does not necessarily mean it is exempt from moral questioning.

Archaeology and archaeologists have long been involved in conflict, war and tragedy, from ancient times to modern day. Archaeologists participated in the dismantling of the Ottoman Empire as well as the carving out of new states in the wake of World War I. Heritage sites and monuments are also regularly targeted during conflict due to its importance to cultural heritage and memory. The use of archaeological evidence can be used to assert dominance and to justify the displacement of people from a certain area, such as in the Silwan area of Jerusalem and it can be used as a target for cultural destruction and violence such as the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan (Pollock, S. 2016). Archaeological sites can also be a target for looters and metal detector hobbyists, who can be seeking the thrill of discovering historical material culture as well as looking to profit from the artefacts, rather than learning about the past in a scientific way (Thomas, S. Et al. 2016).

With the rise of "dark tourism", it is important to understand the motivations for looting heritage sites, its impact on the archaeological record and the ethicality surrounding the sale of material linked to trauma, suffering and death. The interest in visiting areas that are considered "dark tourist sites" has existed for millennia, from the battles of gladiatorial Rome to the Parisian morgues in the nineteenth century (Wills, M. 2020). But why do people have such a fascination with visiting macabre sites? Anthony Seaton, who coined the term 'thanatourism', suggests that the contemplation of death is seen in all cultures, but it has become more noticeable now that modern society has successfully concealed death and has made it taboo, which suggests the fascination comes from a human obsession with the forbidden and the unknown (Hartmann, R. Et al. 2018). Although there are ethical concerns with visiting many dark tourist sites, such as battlefields, there are major implications when the looting of the material takes place, as well as the sale or trade of that material. There have been major outcries from the archaeological community regarding the sale of heritage items, whose history is opaque and very probably a result of destructive looting. Although this has led to mounting pressure on high-profile sales and museum acquisitions to require documentation on historical artefacts, it has also

potentially inflated the monetary value of documented artefacts which can heighten the ethicality of the transactions (Stevenson, A. 2016). When those items are also linked to tragedy and death, it becomes a grave cause for concern as it allows individuals to profit from items that glorify and promote hatred and violence. With the ever increasing accessibility and rise in popularity of online markets, as well as the networks of international collectors, the concern around the sale of archaeological finds is understandable. The huge interest in war relics, especially World War II and Nazi memorabilia, is plainly visible in online auction markets and specialist dealer websites. Although the UK's biggest auctioneers refuse to sell Nazi memorabilia, it is not illegal, therefore there is an ability for British anti-semites, unlike those in Germany and France, to purchase "souvenirs" that glorify the Third Reich and the material manifestation of their fascism (Rees, E. 2014). These are items that are directly linked to the death of 60 million people, including the six million Jews that were exterminated at concentration camps. These artefacts are directly linked to the suffering of living people and their direct descendants. The Second World War happened within living memory and there are individuals profiting from and exploiting the relics from that incredibly traumatic event. An example of this is "collectorholic" Bill Shea's company 'The Ruptured Duck', that specialises in selling World War II material. The items on his site include German army uniforms, SS officer jackets, German holsters, I.D tags, Nazi and Hitler Youth flags, SS documents, a bronze bust of Adolf Hitler and autographed portraits of major Nazi officers. These are not insignificant, mass-produced items. They are personal and institutional objects that are closely associated with systematic genocide. They are not relics from distant conflicts, but relics that are linked to survivors of concentration camps, war veterans and direct descendants, some of which are still alive today. Although it is not illegal in the United Kingdom to sell such items, it is clear that the trade exists in a grey area where legality does not necessarily equate to moral acceptability.

One of the main concerns with the trade of war and battlefield relics, especially amongst scholars, is the way in which some of these artefacts have been acquired. With the rise of illicit acquisition such as looting, it is becoming increasingly difficult for archaeologists to gain contextual knowledge of certain sites, but also for archaeological artefacts. To archaeologists, the physical material can only reveal a small amount of information, with the association of these artefacts to each other and to the site, forming a huge part of the excavation process. With archaeological excavation being intrusive and destructive, even at the highest level, it is fair to assume that amateur treasure hunters and looters, who often have no care for the archaeological record, can cause more unnecessary destruction. A recent example of significant, destructive looting is the bulldozing of ancient settlements in Afghanistan by the Taliban. The University of Chicago's Centre for Cultural Heritage Preservation has identified over 29,000 archaeological sites across Afghanistan through satellite imagery and other tools. Through these images they noticed specs, which they believe to be bulldozers, that were cleaning out areas to make it easier for them to loot the site systematically. The main area they targeted, Balkh, happens to be only 60 miles away from the 'Hill of Gold', which is the site of the 'lost treasures of Afghanistan'. This gold hoard found in 1978 was made up of over 20,000 pieces, which included gold coins, gold jewellery and an intricate crown (Khamoosh, K. 2024). The close proximity to one of Afghanistan's biggest archaeological finds may be the reason that Balkh was chosen as the Taliban's target for destruction and looting. Although they deny looting these ancient sites, the bulldozing in itself causes many issues. The valuable information on any artefact is gained through its surroundings. These include the stratigraphic layers in which the material is discovered, how it is positioned in the ground, its relationship to other artefacts and the traces of material found alongside it. This

contextual information is hugely important to individual finds but also to broader issues such as ancient economy, trade and religion (Sease, C. 1997). The bulldozing of these historic sites by the Taliban has made it virtually impossible to gain context to any artefacts discovered. There is no information on stratigraphic layers, no information on the positioning of the artefacts in the ground and to other relic material. Some archaeologists estimate that artefacts that are looted lose 95% of their value with regards to telling us about the past. That suggests that looted items are practically useless when it comes to archaeological research and that they are only of scientific value when their context is known (Sease, C. 1997). An example of the importance of context to archaeological work are the stone tools found by Jacques Boucher de Perthes in 1838. He discovered a sealed geological deposit in which flint handaxes were found in association with fossilised extinct animal bones such as the mammoth. At the time, Biblical chronologies placed the origins of human a few thousand years ago, but the Palaeolithic finds confirmed his theories that humans were much older than traditionally believed (Renfrew, C. And Bahn, P. 1993). The stratigraphic position of the handaxes demonstrated that they had not been recently introduced, but were embedded in undisturbed sediment layers. If these items had been looted or taken unrecorded, then it would have been unlikely for Boucher de Perthes to come to these important conclusions about the history of humans. If the context - location, association, depth - wasn't known, then the artefacts would have been far less significant. This reinforces the importance of documentation when excavating artefacts. In this case, a flint handaxe is merely a shaped stone without its context. It cannot independently demonstrate environmental conditions or association with extinct fauna, which is the basis for evidential theories and interpretation. In the case of battlefield relics, weaponry, human remains, clothing fragments and spent cartridges can all build a picture of the battles that took place. The distribution of these items can reveal patterns of movement, fighting and moments of collapse or advance. For example, a bullet casing alongside other material can unveil firing lines and defensive strategies. Without its location, depth and relation to other materials, it is just a bullet casing, but with its context, it can form important theories on troop movement and tactics.

Although the general consensus on looting is that its damaging, unhelpful and sometimes dangerous, there is a point to be made on the context in which battlefield material is looted. It is easy to forget the sociopolitical context in which looting occurs, which is often around areas of war and conflict, when focused on the relic material itself. Especially as western people, who have often provoked or involved ourselves in these wars, it is important to understand that looting might be a feasible way for some people to eke out a living in adverse situations (Gonzalez-Ruibal, A. 2018). Referring back to the Taliban's destruction of Afghan heritage sites, it is unknown if the Taliban are directly involved in the looting of artefacts but local artefact smugglers are known to pay Taliban commanders a "commission" for archaeological material in the areas they control (Kumar, R. 2023). These artefact smugglers are local people who have been surrounded by war up until the withdrawing of NATO troops in 2021, with severe instability and armed conflict still ongoing. Is it fair to judge the actions of people who may be desperate for money and for some kind of stability? With regards to collectors and sellers such as Bill Shea, who claim to sell items that have been brought back from Europe by Veterans, it could be argued that auction houses and specialist retailers are "helping Veterans, Veterans families and estates" as stated on 'The Ruptured Duck' website (Shea, B. No date). For much of history, soldiers have been under and unfairly paid, and looting can be a feasible way of making money quickly. American soldiers were known to be voracious trophy hunters by allies and enemy alike, which they justified by claiming wartime necessity, opportunities for profit, keepsakes and also revenge for Nazi atrocities (Givens, S. 2014). If soldiers are looting from a war they themselves were involved in, does it allow this type of looting to

be exempt from some moral questioning? After all, they are turning personal tragedy and trauma into something positive. No amount of money will revive the fallen soldiers or the millions of innocent people that were persecuted, but it could mean that the soldier will be able to feed his family, to keep a roof over their heads and to plan for the future. Especially with the huge military draft in the United States during World War II, it is important to remember that many didn't choose to be at war, or to leave their families, or to risk their lives. Therefore taking an item from the battlefield home for a keepsake or for profit, could be seen finding a silver lining within all the trauma.

There is a general consensus that material culture is important for the claimed continuities of people and identities (Macdonald, S. 2009), but when looking at material culture as a whole, it could be argued that it is intrinsically insignificant and they are items that are valued as a result of socio-cultural processes (Beckstead, Z. Et al. 2011). Our western outlook on the importance of material heritage is not necessarily how other cultures view history and heritage. When Laurajane Smith undertook research work in Northern Queensland, she encountered the Waanyi Women's History Project which is aimed to voice the concerns and ideas around the heritage of the Waanyi community to local land management agendas. It became clear that oral history and storytelling is as important as material heritage and cultural sites. It is important for the Waanyi women to recite and record their histories in their cultural territory, and the passing of oral histories to future generations is a form of heritage management and preservation (Smith, L. 2006). As Western people, we automatically consider heritage and our 'identity' to be manifested in physical and material ways, but that is not necessarily the case with all cultures. Many cultures share and celebrate histories by song, dance, shamanistic practices and festivals, such as the Yakut people of Russia, the Palestinian Hikaye and many more across the world (UNESCO, 2003). It could be argued that the West have a narrow-minded way of looking at heritage and that physical material should not be our dominant source of culture and 'identity'. The importance of commemoration, storytelling and reflection is already incredibly important in the West when remembrance days arrive every year, so it is not inconceivable to imagine a more self-reflective perspective on recent traumatic events. If the domination of material culture was minimised, and intangible cultural heritage were to become a main source of history, it could possibly depreciate the value of heritage items such as those that are looted from battlefield sites. It could allow a detachment from insignificant items, it could make looting sites unappealing to those looking to profiteer and could allow archaeologists to continue their work without the worry of greedy looters.

The moral dilemmas that surround the trade of battlefield relics are incredibly complicated and ever-present. It is merely impossible for archaeologists to gain information on artefacts when the context is not known. This could be due to lack of material found in the vicinity of an item, or when researching a specific artefact that lacks documentation. Contextual knowledge is incredibly important and the artefact itself can only reveal a small amount of information, unless location, stratigraphic and its relationship to other artefacts is known. Therefore, when looting is prevalent due to metal detector hobbyists or profiteers, it becomes increasingly difficult for archaeologists to carry out their work. Information on troop movement, tactics, the attack or collapse of an army can be discovered through discovering patterns of bullet casings, personal items and weaponry. Therefore, when this information isn't available due to undocumented excavations and looting, it causes issues in the field of archaeology. Unfortunately, the raging call by archaeologists to pressure museums and private sellers to require documentation has only increased the value of documented artefacts and encourages looters to continue

stealing from heritage sites. It becomes a vicious cycle that is difficult to escape from. Saying that, if intangible heritage such as storytelling, song and dance were given as much importance as material culture, it could alleviate some of the issues that surround looting and trade of all cultural material. There are cultures around the world that focus on intangible heritage, which can free them from issues surrounding the trade of historical items, such as the Waanyi people. For material culture to become less sought out and less valuable to looters, it would require a complete overhaul of the western view on heritage and history, which seems unlikely in an increasingly capitalistic society, but maybe necessary.

References

- Beckstead, Z., Twose, G., Levesque-Gottlieb, E. And Rizzo, J. (2011) *Collective remembering through the materiality and organisation of war memorials*.
- Givens, S. (2014) *Liberating the Germans: The US Army and Looting in Germany during the Second World War*.
- Gonzalez-Ruibal, A. (2018) *Ethics of Archaeology*.
- Hartmann, R. Et al. (2018), *The History of dark tourism*.
- Khamoosh, K. (2024) *Afghanistan: Archaeological sites 'bulldozed for looting'*. Available here: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-68311913>
- Kumar, R. (2023) *Looters continue to pillage Afghanistan's rich archaeological heritage*. Available here: <https://www.science.org/content/article/looters-continue-pillage-afghanistan-s-rich-archaeological-heritage>
- Macdonald, S. (2009), *Difficult heritage: Negotiating the Nazi past in Nuremberg and beyond*.
- Pollock, S. (2016) *Archaeology and Contemporary Warfare*.
- Rees, E. (2014) *Should the sale of Nazi memorabilia be banned?* Available at: <https://theconversation.com/should-the-sale-of-nazi-memorabilia-be-banned-31499>
- Renfrew, C. And Bahn, P. (1993) *Archaeology: Theories, methods and practice*.
- Shea, B. (No date) *The Ruptured Duck*. Available at: <https://www.therupturedduck.com/pages/complimentary-appraisals>
- Silliman, S.W. (2008) *The "Old West" in the Middle East: US Military metaphors in real and imagined Indian Country*.
- Sease, C. (1997) *Conservation and the antiquities trade*.
- Smith, L. (2006) *Uses of Heritage*.
- Stevenson, A. (2016) *Conflict antiquities and conflicted antiquities: addressing commercial sales of legally excavated artefacts*.

Thomas, S., Seitsonen, O., Herva, V.P. (2016) Nazi memorabilia, dark heritage and treasure hunting as “alternative” tourism: Understanding the fascination with the material remains of World War II in Northern Finland.

UNESCO, (2003) *Intangible Cultural Heritage Domains*. Available at: <https://ich.unesco.org/doc/src/01857-EN.pdf>

Wills, M. (2020), *Does Dark Tourism Exploit Tragedy for Profit?* Available at: <https://daily.jstor.org/does-dark-tourism-exploit-tragedy-for-profit/>

Wyllie, R. (2014) ‘*Entrenching Nostalgia*’: *The historical significance of battlefields for South African tourism*.