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The Impact of Archaeology and Empire in the Postcolonial Era

“The more you know about the past, the better prepared you are for the future.” - Theodore Roosevelt

In this digital world that we live in, information is at our fingertips, and new technologies are developed to help us understand and zero in on what happened in the past that directly or indirectly affects us now. Thus, the study of Archaeology opens the door for historians to unearth the stories about where we come from and how we got here; basically, defining our identity. Archaeology paired with understanding the creation of empires has piqued the interest of post colonists for years. The world today as we know it has been impacted in many ways by Archaeology and empires and this essay will focus on a few of these impacts.

Empires are the largest political systems of the early modern world, which forcefully and greatly transformed the lives of people within their colonies in ways that were quite different from other societies. The word ‘empire’ means, a major political unit having a territory of great extent or several territories or peoples under a single sovereign authority (The Meriam-webster dictionary). I like how Dictionary.com explains it, that is, a group of nations or peoples ruled over by an emperor, empress, or other powerful sovereign or government: usually a territory of greater extent than a kingdom, as the former British Empire, French Empire, Russian Empire, Byzantine Empire, or Roman Empire. Moreover, the two main empires that heavily influenced the world today were the Roman Empire that conquered most of Germany and most of Europe including, Britain, France and Spain, and the Arab Empire that ruled North Africa, the eastern half of the Roman Empire, the Middle East, and central Asia. These empires have a real and important impact on post colonialism.

India, for instance, under the British empire has benefited greatly. When the British came to India, they brought new ideas such as liberty, equality, freedom and human rights from

the Renaissance, the Reformation Movement and the various revolutions that took place in Europe, and the people are enjoying these luxuries. Women started getting better education opportunities and took up professions and public employment outside their homes. The British also built railways to improve the poor transportation system which plays an important role in the national awakening of the country. The extensive transport network and education brought people and ideas together. The architectures that were built by the Arab Empire influenced the way the natives of those nations built their mosques and castles, with the inclusion of domes and arches; for example, in Spain and Africa (Kishlansky 1999). Due to the great impact that the Roman and Arab Empire have on those societies the people of today are benefitting immensely whether in the form of Spain mosques or Roman roads in Britain and France, and more. thanks to Archaeology.

Archaeology, according to Cambridge dictionary, is the study of ancient cultures through examination of their buildings, tools, artifacts, biofacts (bones, charcoal, plants, and pollen), sites, and cultural landscapes. Simply put, archaeology is the study of the human past using remains. These remains can be any objects that people created, modified, or used. Therefore, it helps to explain which indigenous people occupied a particular country/territory and what their culture was like in that era. As a field discipline, Archaeology provided colonialism with the practical knowledge of conquered land, as well as land that was conquerable which were indefinitely acknowledged by colonial powers. Notably, in the nineteenth-century, archaeology in other words related to treasure hunting. It was a time when adventure was at its' peak, and consequently, a great deal of looting inevitably led to the damage of artifacts of the past – royal tombs torn apart, temples ravaged, and entire city mounds reduced to dust (Fagan and Durrani 2016). This practice of one country taking full or partial political control of another country and occupying it with settlers for purposes of profiting from its resources and economy was known as colonialism.

Subsequently, postcolonialism led to the building of architecture and historical sites that brought and continues to bring attention to the countries that were colonized. Museums for example, were built to store various artifacts which attract tourists from all over the world. Both island and continental countries that were under colonialism gained economic benefits because of this. Also, through colonialism, empires were able to build Catholic, Anglican, and Methodist churches within their colonies. These ancient buildings hold archaeological significance in their architecture; the way in which they were made.

Look at the Napoleonic campaign in Egypt. His military expedition was a failure because despite their capture of Egypt, the British forces were too strong, so they could not hold on to it. On the contrary, they created a phenomenon known as Egyptomania. Egyptomania is a fascination with ancient Egypt that existed for over three thousand (3,000) years (Fritze 2016). Napoleon's invasion ignited fascination for ancient Egypt. The Rosetta stone was among a few antiquities that was taken to the British museum in 1802, under the terms of the French surrender in North Africa in 1801. The fact that its destination was in Britain, the Rosetta stone is an example of how archaeological discoveries can be displayed in Museums on account of military conquest. To this day, the deciphering of hieroglyphs is made possible because of the findings of the Rosetta Stone and Jean-Francois Champollion (1790-1832), who was a decipherer of hieroglyphs and the founder of modern Egyptology. The stone continues to be an icon in the study of Archaeology and in Egyptomania (Fritze 2016). As a result of archaeology and empire, the people of today get to know and see all that transpired in the past.

Lydon and Rizvi (2010) stated that: Archaeology was also relevant for denying indigenous peoples their roots and their historical rights to the land as well as their artifacts. For example, the Rosetta Stone. In 1799, the Rosetta Stone, which was a stone with inscriptions of the Egyptian and Greek languages, was discovered by the French in Egypt. It was then passed

on to the British after they conquered the French in 1802. The discovery of the Rosetta Stone led to understanding Egyptian hieroglyphic texts and Ancient Egypt. At the present time, the Rosetta Stone continues to be one of the most popular exhibits in the British museum (Fritze 2016), substantially benefiting the British. Hence the reason it is said that colonialism was a form of conquest to benefit Europe on a whole economically and strategically. Should not the British return the Rosetta Stone which possibly reads more than one hundred (100) years of Egyptian history back to Egypt? Egypt is socially deprived of their monument that holds significant historical importance of ancient Egyptian languages, leadership, and traditions, while the British continues to gain economically from it.

Dr Nick Shepherd, an Associate Professor of Archaeology and Heritage Studies, in the book *Archaeology and Capitalism: From Ethnics to Politics*, asked the question,

“I want to begin with a question that takes us to the heart of a tangled issue: What does it mean ‘to give the past back to the people’? In the first place it raises an issue of ownership: To give the past back, it must first be yours to give...” (Shepherd 2007).

Shepherd continues,

“In the second place, it implies a conception of ‘the people’, who stand in a separate relationship to both the givers of the past and to ‘the past’ itself. In the third place, it raises the question of the format in which the past is to be returned. The ‘pastness’ of the past means that that which is to be returned is not the thing-in-itself but something standing in for the past... a set of texts, a pile of bones, a patch of ground, a body of memories, certain rituals of enactment (Shepherd 2007).”

Some post-colonialists may argue that those artifacts are better off in the British museum due to how they are being conserved. While others may argue that these artifacts have nothing to do with British history, therefore they should be sent back to their home country.

Most countries gained independence from colonial empires by the 1970's. We can say that we live in a postcolonial world today, but is this a world stripped of empires with their own strategies of knowledge and power? Archaeology is a crucial part of understanding the history of empires and how they impact us now. These impacts are woven one into each other and are predominantly social, economic, and political. Historians are challenged with the task of re-examining Archaeology and empires to further understand these impacts and ultimately our identity.

“We are not makers of history; we are made by history.” - Martin Luther King Jr.

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