

# WHO OWNS THE PAST

Wesleyan archaeologist Carla Antonaccio is involved with efforts to show that several priceless antiquities of interest to scholars and the public were stolen. Theft  
**BY: CYNTHIA ROCKWELL**

of artifacts points to a larger issue in archaeology—who owns objects unearthed from digs? Answers to this question have transformed the way archaeologists work.

Karin Halvorsen '97 has no trouble remembering an after-dinner debate she witnessed as an undergraduate on a dig in Morgantina, Sicily, co-sponsored by Wesleyan and the University of Virginia. The archaeologists around the table were arguing passionately about the so-called Elgin Marbles. Should the British return these sculptures from the Parthenon to Greece, now that the Greeks have a new museum set up for them? Or do they belong to the British, since Lord Elgin saved them from destruction when he carted them to his homeland, away from the neglectful Turks, in 1803?

The Elgin Marbles are perhaps the best-known example of an issue that has become central to archaeology: Who owns the past? This controversial topic has pitted scholars against collectors, raised vexing questions about the vast, lucrative market in stolen artifacts, and redefined notions of cultural property.

Archaeology has undergone a sea change since the days when collectors acquired objects of antiquity freely and with scholarly approval. Archaeologists once built “guilt-free collections of antiquities ‘for teaching purposes,’” writes Indiana University anthropologist Karen Vitelli in the newsletter of the Getty Conservation Institute. “Wealthy, well-educated, and passionately involved collectors often served as patrons for archaeologists, providing access to their private collections and funding for fieldwork and travel. Life was good.”

University museums were also beneficiaries, and a legacy of that era is Wesleyan's own collection of artifacts, curated by Juliana Shortell '98, who says it began as “the natural history museum that every little college had in the late 1880s.” It grew as those alumni and faculty who traveled to Europe returned with some relic—a piece of pavement from the Appian Way, a brick from The Great Wall of China, some little “trinket” of antiquity that they literally picked up on their trip, which they would donate to their college.

The comfortable collusion between collectors and

scholars ended in 1970 with the UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property. This convention redefined archaeological and other collections as “cultural heritage” whose “true value can be appreciated only in relation to the fullest information regarding its origins, history, and traditional setting.” The convention condemned dealers and collectors as responsible for creating market demand that provokes “pillage” of archaeological sites.

Since then, archaeology has become less concerned with individual objects and more focused on how people in the past organized their lives and cultures, says Professor of Classical Studies Carla Antonaccio. Yet collectors continue to pay large sums for rarities, and theft is an enormous problem. Just this summer Spanish police captured a gang of 100 robbers with 200,000 objects dating from 3,000 B.C.E. to 7th-century Spain. The value of their loot was incalculable. In September Swiss police seized \$35-million worth of artifacts smuggled from Italy to warehouses in Geneva.

One study published in the *American Journal of Archaeology* examined a number of catalogs from significant collections of classical antiquities and concluded that nearly 75 percent of the 1,300 objects in these collections lacked documented provenance. They probably had been looted—and purchased after the UNESCO convention.

Antonaccio observes that looting has increased dramatically since the 1970s and 1980s, with the popularity of the metal detector. That device has changed the scope and nature of the traditional activities of tomb robbers and illegal diggers on her own site, who have for generations worked clandestinely (hence the terms *tombaroli* or *clandestini* to describe them) on archaeological sites like hers. The Sicilian authorities asked for American collaboration in investigating the site of one ancient house that had been dug up and then reburied by *clandestini*,

and according to local sources, produced a major treasure.

The *clandestini* had done a hack job: The archaeologists found “relics” such as used batteries, bottle caps, and 20th-century coins in the fill. When the archaeologists reached the ancient floor level, they found that all the floors had been removed.

Most likely, Antonaccio says, *clandestini* used a metal detector to locate a spot where metal was detected and then bulldozed that site until they found what they were after. Indeed, locals do remember heavy equipment there, although in this small town where many are related, and after the passage of time, it has been difficult to discover the culprits, she says, with an ironic grimace.

The looting outrages her on several levels. Not only is it a direct affront to her work at the site, which is dependent on a controlled archaeological procedure to establish knowledge of the culture, but it also deprives the local community (and economy) of treasures that rightly belong to them, to be displayed in their own museum.

It is this sense of justice that has set the Morgantina team on an international quest to recover and document the context of stolen objects, to establish the legal claim for the country of origin, and to work with the two governments (host and originator) in negotiating its return. Emotions are likely to run high on both sides. Large sums of money are involved in these acquisitions, and a country's pride-of-ownership (or that of a collector or museum) is at stake.



Three disputed claims, antiquities that were plundered yet sold to collectors or museums, illustrate the struggle. All three remain in the United States. The first is a larger-than-human-sized figure, which made its startling debut at the Getty Museum in Malibu and most likely came from an illegal dig in North Africa. Antiquities that large—and intact—are rare. To have a new one appear on the scene, seemingly from nowhere, raises eyebrows—and suspicions—in the art world.

“The collusion that must have occurred in order to bring that statue into this country is amazing,” says Antonaccio. “It’s a huge object to move; many people must have known about it.”

The other two were almost certainly from Morgantina. One of these objects, a set of marble sculptures, briefly appeared at the Getty Museum on consignment, then disappeared only to resurface in a private collection in New York. Local informants have reported the circumstances under which these objects were looted from a sanctuary at Morgantina, and the Sicilian authorities have been working to document the context with further excavation; the objects’ return to Sicily is actively being pursued.

They believe the other item (a 15-piece set of hammered silver and gilt silver bowls, cups, and ritual objects) was ripped from the floor of the Morgantina house. Now in the possession of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the set cost the curators \$2.7 million, which they paid to a Lebanese businessman in Switzerland, according to the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. However, the date, design, and form of many of the objects are consistent with the attribution to Morgantina.

Furthermore, the Morgantina archaeologists can offer a historical explanation of the silver's location beneath a floor: That's where people in antiquity would hide their valuables when news of marauding armies reached them. The residents would then flee, hoping to return later to their homes with their treasures safely hidden. In fact, this section of Morgantina was destroyed in 211 B.C.E. by Romans in the Second Punic War. No one retrieved this silver until the looters found it, a marvelously intact collection.

“It comes down to the fact that people know they can sell this stuff; it's the usual impulse to a clandestine operation,” Antonaccio notes. It's a choice based on simple greed over the opportunity to increase our knowledge of antiquities.

“I argue that what I do as an archaeologist does not prevent someone from enjoying an artifact as an unfettered art object—but acquiring them as stolen objects does prevent me from understanding them and the culture from which they came.”

Where items are found, their specific location, and their precise time period are crucial to her research. Antonaccio's particular area of interest is tracing the relationship between conquering people and the colonized, illuminated by the objects they left behind. Morgantina, subject to periodic migrations and invasions by nearby civilizations, is, to her, rife with objects that show the gradual give-and-take between the native culture and the conquerors, and the ultimate blending of cultures to form a new society—a process that takes hundreds of years. The art and everyday artifacts betray their changing ideals of beauty, as well as customs adopted and discarded. This will be the subject of her upcoming book.

“People see Sicilian Greek temples,” she explains, “and they might think, ‘Those Sicilians made bad Greek temples—the proportions are all wrong.’ But that's not the case: The Sicilians made great Sicilian temples; they created temples in a Greek style but according to their own standards of beauty.”

To understand a culture—that also drew Professor of Anthropology Douglas Charles to the discipline. His area of expertise is the prehistoric Native American, “ranging from 4,000 B.C.E. to roughly 1,000 A.D. It's the period of time where they're becoming really good hunters and gatherers and beginning to develop agriculture, up to becoming horticulturists, when they began to cultivate maize.” Unlike the classical archaeologists, he has no written language to offer up interpretations, literature, or myths of the culture; no metal objects to study; not even the baskets they wove survive from the tribes that lived and prospered near the floodplains of the rivers. He began in this field studying the burial customs of these ancient peoples.

However, questions of ownership also arose in his work, and his field changed radically with the 1990 passage of the Native American Grave Protection and Repatriation Act. This act, NAGPRA, “made what I was trained to do as a graduate student illegal, basically,” he says. Here, it seems, the archaeologist was viewed as the looter, at least by some Native Americans.

“There are real differences between antiquities-looting in cases like the Elgin Marbles and the (potentially exploitative) archaeology of indigenous peoples' heritage in places like North America and Australia,” he says. “Native American sites are also looted by collectors, but this is not what NAGPRA was designed to correct. The act was aimed at the appropriation of the Native American past by archaeologists in the name of ‘research.’ The issue is about who has the right to ‘own’ the past for both the Elgin Marbles and sacred Native American objects and skeletons, but the contenders are very different in each case.”

To give insight on this perspective, he cites the beginning of a Tony Hillerman mystery: A Smithsonian curator receives a package from a Native American activist. Inside are skeletons—her grandparents', the note announces—raising the question: How would it feel to have one's ancestors' remains on exhibit?

**Carla Antonaccio and Douglas Charles help their students understand how artifacts, properly handled, illuminate ancient cultures.**

Charles recalls another monument to cultural insensitivity: When the Dickson brothers found a Native American burial mound on their Illinois property in 1927, they built a museum over it and charged people to come and see it. It was adopted as a state park, and spotlights were installed to further illuminate specific customs.

Picture a similar show on the Foss Hill cemetery. “That’s the point,” he says. “You can’t do that to European graves, can you? You can begin to see why some Native Americans see archaeology as institutionalized, government-sanctioned racism. Until NAGPRA, the United States had some of the worst antiquities laws in the world—because it wasn’t our history we were digging up. While the Elgin conflict—and Carla’s work on returning Morgantina’s artifacts—is between two sovereign nations, NAGPRA is about racism.”

He acknowledges that he initially found the legal restrictions frustrating in limiting his explorations of burial customs. Now, a decade later, Charles appreciates

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the wider scope his research has taken since then.

“Initially I was interested in the biology—the skeletons in the cemetery—but the more I got into it, the more I became interested in the burial practices, because they reflect cultural beliefs and social organizations, which are hard to get at archaeologically in pre-historic settings.”

Barred from those sites, he turned to ceremonial sites—large, multicomunity gathering sites (“a sort of country fair,” he explains), and the actual living sites, which were little hamlets of about 20 people.

“I’d done a lot of burial sites early in my career, so my research has made a logical progression through the three major types of sites. From these, we look at what underlies the social organization, like economic relationships, division of labor—and that actually takes you back to what they ate, what kinds of tools they used, trying to reconstruct things like gender relationships, marriage patterns.”

In addition to preventing the desecration of burial grounds, the law required all institutions that receive

federal funds to inventory and report “all burial material, all skeletal material, all grave goods, and any other ceremonial kinds of items” to the National Parks Service and to any potentially related tribes. The tribes themselves were to decide the disposition of the items: repatriation to the tribe or retention by the institution holding them.

The law, however, presents archaeologists with two questions, says Charles. “The first: What do you do with stuff that you bring out of the ground now?”


All states have strict protocols for human remains: “If we come upon any—it could be a single bone—we immediately stop and report it to the state historic preservation officer and to the county coroner.” If those agencies decide that the bone is Native American, the local tribes dictate their preference. If there is no local tribe, archaeologists consult with tribes that lived in the region in the past, with a nearby tribe, with descendants of a nearby tribe, and on down the line.

This brings up the second difficulty. “As you go back in time, rights of ownership get fuzzier, so very little of that older material has been repatriated. Nobody knows quite what to do with that,” says Charles.

The “Kennewick Man” epitomizes that dilemma. Dubbed for the nearby town in Washington where the 8,000-year-old human remains were found, the skeleton has been at the center of a continuing court battle over ownership and a challenge to the current laws.

“Archaeologists want to study the remains and they maintain that NAGPRA doesn’t apply because the remains are so old,” explains Charles. “Native Americans say the act does apply—although no resident tribe can trace their history back far enough to establish ancestral claim.” A recent court ruling allowed scientists to study the skeleton.

Charles also notes that the increased involvement of Native American populations has given the archaeologist further insight into their cultural heritage. For example, Wesleyan’s relationship with Connecticut’s two recognized tribes, the Pequots and the Mohegans, is quite cordial, and Charles speaks highly of the Pequot Museum.

For curator Juliana Shortell, the question of ownership of Wesleyan’s collection of Native American artifacts comes down to usefulness to students. “Whether some of these artifacts should be used in teaching is still up in the air,” she says. “At this point, we merely report things, but if there’s a reason any of the items in our collection couldn’t be used for teaching, then we’d want to give them to a tribe. As an educational institution, we tend to look at things differently. We’re not concerned if a collection is perfect for display. For us, it’s an educational tool, not a monetary holding.” 

## GETTING A GRIP ON ANCIENT HISTORY

Each faculty member of Wesleyan’s archaeology program has a research site—unusual for a relatively small university focused on undergraduate education, says Carla Antonaccio. A steady stream of students travel to these sites in summer for intensive work.

Antonaccio and Associate Professor of Classical Studies Chris Parslow have classical sites: hers in Morgantina, Sicily; and his in Pompeii, Italy. Professor of Art History Clark Maines works a medieval site at Soissons, France; Phil Wagoner, professor of art history and faculty member of the archaeology program, works in India. Doug Charles’ site in Kampsville, Ill., offers students the opportunity to excavate at a pre-historic Native American dig.

Though their sites are very different, all of the faculty members share a similar scholarly perspective—more so, says Charles, than one might expect to find in a program that encompasses classical, medieval, and prehistoric archaeology. Classical archaeologists, he explains, most often focus on art history, while the prehistorians are the ones who tend toward an anthropological approach, asking sociological questions about the ancient culture. At Wesleyan, however, they all meet somewhere in the middle.

The program attracts both majors and non-majors.

For the majors, the department offers unique training that graduate students would be doing at larger universities. At Morgantina, for instance, Antonaccio teaches her students how to dig, how to catalog, how to reconstruct a piece of pottery like a three-dimensional jigsaw puzzle. “I was working hands-on with the pottery, taking measurements and cataloguing,” recalls Karin Halvorsen ’97, now a graduate student in archaeology at the University of Michigan.

For the nonmajors, Charles says, “you want them to come away with an understanding of what archaeologists do. You want them to have an understanding of why it’s really not okay to walk around and collect arrowheads on their own; what the implications are of destroying archaeological sites; and the issues of patrimony, of who owns the past. You want them to develop an appreciation of the past, to want to go visit Sturbridge Village, the Pequot Museum, or other historic sites.”

Nik Apostolides ’95, now a budget analyst for the Department of Justice in Washington, D.C., reflected on his experience with archaeology. Two years after he graduated, Antonaccio asked him to be the registrar at Morgantina for a summer. He recalls with awe holding a large Greek krater in order to have it photographed. “The feel of that exquisite black gloss slip... there’s nothing like that. Modern science still hasn’t been able to duplicate that glaze,” he says. “And there I was, holding this amazing work of art that is 2,500 years old.”

He also recalls some unglamorous parts—looking through a mass of pottery shards with other archaeologists for certain pieces “about the size of our thumbs,” hoping they would appear and prove someone’s theory about a part of an object discovered. “We didn’t actually find the pieces we were looking for,” he says, “but this is how an archaeologist works: You look and look, in order to test out a hypothesis. It’s not glamorous.” This scientific method that he practiced on site, he feels, is what he brings to his current career. “Archaeology is a search for truth about people who lived then, in a particular snapshot of time. Testing out a belief by finding supporting evidence is important in whatever field we pursue.”