

Indiana Jones, Public Archaeology, and Honesty.

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Public Archaeology, Indiana Jones, and Honesty

O wad some Pow'r the giftie gie us  
 To see oursel's as others see us  
 It wad frae monie a blunder free us  
 An' foolish notion  
 What airs in dress an' gait wad lea'e us  
 An' ev'n Devotion

Oh, that God would give us the very smallest of gifts  
 To be able to see ourselves as others see us  
 It would save us from many mistakes  
 and foolish thoughts  
 We would change the way we look and gesture  
 and to how and what we apply our time and attention.

-Robert Burns

Whenever I talk about community archaeology in the United States someone invariably comments that the people who live in the area where they dig are not interested in archaeology, in the hope that an apparent lack of interest absolves the archaeologist from any responsibility to consult with the locals. The implication is usually that trying to get people interested would just open up a can of worms that would create problems for everybody. I think this attitude lingers among prehistorians in the United States because they are researching the ancestors of other people, not their own heritage. Historic archaeologists working on the Euro-American past never say this.

Of course if “the locals” understood the implications of the archaeology in their midst they would most certainly be interested. But where people are poor, politically oppressed, and not initiated into the deeper mysteries of a western education they are often not inclined to show interest, even though the disenfranchised are usually those who have the greatest stake in material record. Archaeological projects bring strangers into their midst along with new opportunities for wage-work, and take what they find away to some other place to keep it “safe.” And the way archaeologists construct the past of the area where they work will have the most direct impact on those whose livelihood is tied to that same landscape even if they are not the descendents of the people whose remains are being studied.

But if the public is not interested in what we are doing, then what are we doing? What exactly is the point of digging up the material remains of the past, now that we know we are not going to collect the truth that will make us free, nor will our efforts accrue much to “the good of all mankind?” In fact, surprisingly often the facts that archaeologists collect about the past have

a negative impact on living people, at least in the short term. A few archaeologists can still get away with claiming that scientific knowledge is an end in itself, but certain indigenous communities – Navajo, Maori, people who speak Maya languages – have begun to ask “Why is it always my ancestors who are needed by science?”

Perhaps the most important reason for archaeologists to engage with the public is to encourage practitioners to develop a greater reflexivity about what they are doing and why – to look more carefully at their own motives and come to terms with the triviality of much of our research and the value of honesty in dealing with the public. In short, to take an honest look at how other people see us.

Archaeologists rarely think about their work at this degree of distance; mostly they are focused on the middle ground of research and interpretation within a paradigm of knowledge: did the Maya have a consumer culture, were the ancient residents of the American Southwest cannibals, did the Easter Islanders disappear because of drought. Leaving aside the fact that these formulations are impervious to data, since none of them can actually be disproved, why do we need to collect data to show whether the Maya 1000 years ago liked to buy things, when the average person on the street would almost certainly guess that they did? You have to know a lot of theory to convince yourself that only modern people care about being fashionable. We certainly have no shortage of data on the impact of drought – what will we learn from collecting more from the remains of a culture that no one is still using? We know that under duress and in the face of starvation, pioneers and soccer teams resort to cannibalism, so why do we need more data on this?

Archaeologists frequently use George Santayana’s famous comment that “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it” as a glib justification for what we do, that sells well to the public. But I really dislike the idea that the main function archaeological research is to provide us with cautionary tales and bad examples. Raised fields, dark earth, community based initiatives, democracy – there are some aspects of the past that we would do very well to repeat, and even if we do not want to redevelop the vast irrigation systems of the Chimu or redeploy the delightful architectural conventions of Angkor Watt, we should still leave room to respect them and for descendant communities to bask in a glorious heritage. I think this approach inflates the role of the archaeologist and reduces the value of the past to a single dimension.

Frankly, the thing that disturbs me the most about public archaeology, including the cautionary tale approach is its tendency to promote dishonesty. The hype about “discoveries” sells National Geographic, but the recently documented murals at San Bartolo, Guatemala are not going to change the course of science – they are not even going to add much to what we know about the ancient people of Mesoamerica. Although my colleagues will probably lynch me for saying this, as far as I can tell, we have learned very little about the ancient Maya as a result of “cracking the Maya code.” We now have some records of what elites claimed about their heritage (it was legitimate), some confirmation of what we already knew about long distance trade relationships, some personal names, the names of some cities, some questionable historical details, some extremely speculative ideas about Maya cosmologies, and some absolute dates. The vast majority of stories about archaeology that get into the press are mostly hype, trumped up to sell papers, but also to make archaeologists into celebrities.

So public archaeology and also the local version – community archaeology – takes place in the context of this sort of hype, and archaeologists tend to try to use this angle to engage people in their work. Of course most archaeologists do not find beautiful 2nd century murals

like the ones at San Bartolo so it becomes necessary to inflate the significance of more ordinary data to meet Indiana Jones' standards. I think this is where archaeologists have been seduced into oversimplifications that have negative and even disastrous implications for living people – we are convinced that we need the hype to keep our discipline alive. But if this is really true, perhaps it is time to reconsider the cost of this life support. Returning to my original question, if lying is what is keeping archaeology afloat, what **are** we doing?

This issue has come forward very blatantly with the advent of the latest Indiana Jones movie, which many archaeologists think is just good fun and a great boon to the discipline. In an interview in New Scientist Cornelius Holtorf is quoted as saying “Ultimately, archaeology has far more to gain from being associated with characters like Indiana Jones than it has to fear. Public enthusiasm for the films attracts many bright young students to the field, as well as creating goodwill and occasionally providing fund-raising opportunities” (Welcome Back, Indy, NewScientist | 17 May 2008.) David Hurst Thomas, author of Skull Wars: Kennewick Man, Archaeology and the Battle for Native American Identity, is quoted in USA Today as saying “There's a wimpy faction that likes to take umbrage at the looting and swashbuckling, as if that somehow demeans the serious and white-lab-coat part of the profession. Give me a break. My only concern is that if the movie sucks, that might not be good for archaeology!” (Indiana Jones: He's Everyman, with wit and a whip, USA Today, May 2008, by Maria Puente)

I find this rather startling, since archaeologists who have bewailed the hegemony of colonial science are endorsing a movie about a white Euro-American stomping into places that are economically dependent on the US and Europe, where he kicks, shoots and punches the anonymous locals, before making off with a priceless treasure, which he plans to “protect” in a museum (although in previous movies I think he was planning to sell his “discoveries.”) I understand that in the Chrystal Skull movie, Indy is helping the natives – who appear as generic savages sporting the personal adornment of people from New Guinea, Australia, and certain parts of Africa - get their skull back, but I am not mollified. I am not even going to comment on the role of women in these movies. I understand that the Archaeological Institute of America has put Harrison Ford on their advisory board.

My problem with this sort of entertainment is that it naturalizes a sort of exoticism that is inherently elitist. My colleagues are saying that archaeologists who don't like Indiana Jones are just wimps and that real archaeologists really do have adventures. But these “adventures” take place where ordinary people live their daily lives, amid the snakes, the bandits, the monkeys, and the corrupt officials. No one thinks of a Maya campesino – a corn farmer – as living an adventurous life. But by Indiana Jones standards, there ought to be a corn farmer on the cover of National Geographic regularly, especially since if he lives in Guatemala or Belize, he has probably discovered some ancient object that could easily be hyped as the find of a lifetime. But nobody mistakes a corn farmer for Indiana Jones.

In order to appreciate the swashbuckling in Indiana Jones movies, the viewer has to identify with a pampered lifestyle in which encounters with spiders, snakes, violence, resource shortages and people who see the world differently are exotic. But most of the world does not live like Indiana Jones. I have encountered all these challenges in my fieldwork, right alongside the people who live with them every day. I would be ashamed to claim the experience as some sort of heroism.