# Object Integrity; or Why Do We Excavate?

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**Introduction**
When asked to contribute to the debate surrounding the ethics of sampling and the integrity of archaeological objects, I initially hesitated to enter this badly mapped, and potentially dangerous, area. But then, I thought, one has to enter an unknown region in order to find out what is lurking there, so I agreed. What follows are a few initial thoughts, necessarily personal, to set the scene, and then a number of arguments, not necessarily premeditated or politically correct, but very much in favour of responsible sampling and analysis of suitable materials.

**The Wider Context**
The desire to learn about ancient societies is at the heart of archaeology as a profession, and there are undoubtedly many ways to contribute to this. A rather fundamental and widely accepted way of doing so is to excavate. Under current understandings, this is done in order to generate knowledge rather than to retrieve objects, as was often the case in the past. This is manifest in dramatic changes in recording practice over the last few decades, and in the realisation that artefacts, once deprived of their origin, as in undocumented collections or from the 'arts market', are almost worthless for academic enquiry.

However, in the process of excavation, basically all the physical evidence and integrity initially present are destroyed in exchange for (necessarily limited) documentation, and some (even more limited) sampling and storage of 'finds'. Here, one could elaborate on the massive archival problems arising from modern-day recording practices, and the flood of 'development-driven' excavations with their almost complete lack of post-excavation processing, but this is not the purpose of this discussion.

Geophysical prospection, the modern 'non-destructive' technique in archaeology, is playing an increasing role in the broader goals of archaeology, but still more in guiding subsequent excavation than in replacing it. For the foreseeable future, this is unlikely to change, although geophysical prospection is visibly maturing to an archaeological approach in its own right for the large-scale mapping of archaeological sites.

Thus, the large-scale destruction of physical archaeological evidence (aka 'excavation') is apparently considered to be totally acceptable. At best, it is lamented upon as unavoidable, but rarely questioned as the main method of enquiry, while archaeological material encountered during excavation is often seen more as a storage problem than as an asset.

**Why Sample Archaeological Materials?**

In light of the above, some archaeological material seems to undergo a magical transformation once it passes through the excavation stage and is selected for storage. From that moment, it is often perceived as an untouchable entity rather than a resource for further study.

To my understanding, archaeological materials are excavated during a process aimed at generating, or rather unlocking, information about the past (see above). The archaeological context, considered the crucial part of the excavation, has been transformed by this process into an excavation archive, and sometimes into a publication. Any materials present have been 'orphaned' during the exercise, and some transferred into storage. What is the justification for them to be held in an archive or exhibition of some kind? Why were they selected initially, while others were relegated to the spoil heap?

In my opinion, the reason why they are there cannot be anything other than to contribute their share in the knowledge-generation exercise called archaeology. Keeping finds for their own sake is certainly outdated antiquarianism, in the tradition of the *curio* collections of the nobility and rising upper classes of the past (*Nota bene* my belief that existing antiquarian societies are well beyond that stage, and can play an active role in modern-day archaeology!). For artefacts to reveal their intrinsic information, we have to analyse them: visually as in a museum showcase, non-destructively as in a scholarly artefact study, by sampling for scientific investigation, or even by complete destruction, as in the case of the radiocarbon analysis of a single barley grain. The key issue here is that of appropriateness: are the loss of archaeological material, the effort of analysis, and the gain of information in a beneficial (or at least acceptable) relationship to each other?

**Appropriateness**

What is appropriate? This question is not definitively answerable. It is a complex social issue, including economic factors (the current state of Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) and Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) funding for science-based archaeology is certainly in favour of preserving much material for posterity), culturally determined assessments of the 'value' of things and information (see the debate surrounding human remains from First Nation contexts, or the success of the television programme *Time Team*), and technical issues as mentioned in some detail by Professor Tite. Not least, it is a highly personal, curiosity-driven issue. Were it not for me, many a crucible fragment or slag piece would still rest happily, untouched, either on the spoil heap of some exotic country, or in the darkness of an excavation archive.

Clearly, there is a difference between a piece of slag and, say, the Portland Vase. Both are beautiful in their own ways and worth a place in a museum exhibition. Yet, one would more easily agree with the sampling of the piece of slag, removing a fragment for full chemical analysis and structural investigation, than one would do with the Portland Vase (which [un]fortunately lent itself to sampling some time ago, so that now we do know much more about its age, history and manufacture). Thus, when compromises have to be made, checks and balances need to be in place. Some

of this can be achieved by red tape, and much by the self-regulatory powers of dialogue within the scientific community.

Any decision taken about sampling and analysis will clearly be rooted in their cultural context and may be judged differently under different circumstances. In my subjective experience, however, the ratio of damage done and information gained is often much in favour of the study of archaeological material through invasive, and sometimes partly destructive, sampling, when compared with the same ratio applied to the initial excavation. I dare say that without the full, competent and responsible scientific study of the material remains rescued, no excavation, past or present, could any longer be justified. Clearly, this is even more true for past excavations where the recording is less satisfactory than with current excavations. Here in particular we have an obligation to maximise the amount of information recovered by adequately studying what little has survived, often in the absence of field notes, documentation and publications by the late archaeologists originally in charge. It is up to the curator to decide whether the destruction of an archaeological site is finally sealed by effectively removing the sparse remains from full academic access, or whether what little information can be rescued posthumously is indeed rescued.

I am glad (and proud) to work in an institute which is home to several of the finest collections of archaeological materials, brought to this country as a tool for research and education, and not merely for being gazed at. This is an asset which, through conscious and responsible use, can have a much more significant impact on the discipline than many overly guarded collections, access to which is often left to the mercy of (unreliable) public funding, and where scientific research is treated as a dispensable luxury rather than the fundamental responsibility that it is.

**Conclusion**

Archaeological collections constitute one of the Earth's many non-renewable resources currently at humankind's mercy. In themselves, they are already only a faint shadow of excavated sites, which in turn were never formed with a view to an eternal existence (except of course for most burial and religious sites, which ironically attract particular attention by excavating archaeologists). Both the desire to collect and preserve, and the desire to analyse and study, are manifestations of rather recent European culture. As such, neither of them can claim prevalence over the other, nor over entirely different approaches (such as to stay away and leave things to rest in peace). On the contrary, rather than having any absolute value in themselves, these two desires have to be seen in relation to each other, and to the wider cultural or social agendas of their time. In my opinion, material that has already been excavated can be more acceptably used for study than material from as yet untouched archaeological sites; object integrity should be seen on the site scale. Once damage to a site has been done, it is only a matter of courtesy to the site, and responsibility to the past, to maximise the knowledge gained in compensation.

Integrity and protection, in my view, should be the highest priority for as yet untouched sites; material from sites already excavated ought to be studied, including appropriate sampling. The question here is to strive to maximise the benefit while minimising the cost, including any damage done to the material. Object integrity as

a key issue in deciding about sampling, then, should be restricted to objects which are still (reasonably) complete and/or unique. In such cases, the concept of appropriateness can act as the decisive tool to prevent real damage to our cultural heritage.