Sampling: Widening the Perspective

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In his contribution *Archaeological Collections: Invasive Sampling versus Object Integrity*, Mike Tite presents an ethic for practice which is unexceptional in the main. He quite rightly advocates close collaboration between the curator and the archaeological scientist and adopts the rubric that the science itself must be of the highest quality.

Where I might take issue with Professor Tite is not with whether invasive sampling should be permitted given the satisfaction of certain criteria, but rather with a narrowness of focus evident occasionally in what he states, and also in what he does not state. His definition of object integrity seems to be confined to the completeness of the artefact, to its physical condition. Given my particular interest in the destruction of archaeological sites by looting to supply archaeological artefacts for the antiquities market, and my awareness of the recourse made by dealers to scientists for authentication, dating and conservation/restoration, my definition of object integrity would be set in a much wider frame. It has long been a concern of mine that conservators and archaeological scientists not be complicit in hiking prices of unprovenanced archaeological objects by rendering them more saleable – more aesthetically pleasing, more stable, or by indicating that they are not fake (see for example Tubb 1995; Tubb and Sease 1996).

I would argue then that object integrity should take into consideration the security of provenance (provenance in the sense of excavation site rather than location of origin of raw material) and post-excavation history of any artefact under investigation. The scientist's and the conservator's roles converge most particularly concerning authentication since their procedures, either inadvertently or intentionally, are likely to reveal whether an object is genuine or fake. An awareness of the potential for being compromised professionally should therefore feature in any discussion concerning object integrity. After all, the International Council of Museums (ICOM) Code of Ethics for Museums, amended in 2001, Article 8.6, states:

> Members of the museum profession should not identify or otherwise authenticate objects that they believe, or suspect, have been illegally or illicitly acquired, transferred, imported or exported. They should not act in any way that could be regarded as benefiting such activity, directly or indirectly.
>
> (ICOM 2001)

Allied to, but extending beyond, my concern that ethical practice should mean more than good science, I would have liked the actual removal of samples from artefacts to be addressed more fully. It is not uncommon for this to be conducted by conser-

vators and scientists outside the institution conducting the analytical work. In my opinion the out-sourcing of sample-taking is bad practice. The choice of sample site should be a collaborative one involving at least the curator/archaeologist, the scientist and the conservator. In this way the size of the sample and its location on the object can be discussed to ensure that the sample will be appropriate to answer the research questions posed. An added benefit of such an arrangement would be to minimize the danger of previous restoration being mistaken for part of the artefact, a concern that was expressed by a scientist sampling Garstang's Neolithic statue head from Jericho recently (Anon. pers. comm.), and to ensure that modern and ancient elements of a pastiche are recognised prior to sampling. It has been reported for example, that forgers of Malian terracottas are incorporating genuine fragments in those inconspicuous areas most likely to be sampled for thermoluminescence (TL) dating in the hope that the fake may escape detection (Brent 2001).

Another aspect of Professor Tite's paper with which I wish to take issue is his statement that "it is not a conservator's role to pass judgement on either the cultural significance of an object or the extent to which it is important to maintain object integrity" (Tite, this volume: 4). This view is old-fashioned and inappropriate. It conjures up images of the conservator as a manually-skilled worker who should not be expected to be able to think academically, or who, at the very least, is disinclined to think deeply; an individual unlikely to be able to contribute usefully to policy-making; a service provider in an extremely limited sense. The comment made to me in general conversation over breakfast thirty years ago that conservation is ideally suited to those who are 'not too bright but clever with their hands' resurrects itself (see Tubb 1997 and 1998 for further elaboration on the issues raised here). The remark was indefensible then; it is surprising and disappointing to encounter a similar sentiment here, arguing for the exclusion of the conservator's judgment in decision-making concerning invasive sampling of archaeological objects, a process that benefits from a collaborative approach.

When all is said and done, the conservator spends more time scrutinising and handling objects than anyone else, including the draughtsperson. It is very often the conservator who initiates research questions. Archaeological conservators work to retrieve information to contribute to the archaeological record. The European Confederation of Conservation-Restoration Organisations (ECCO) asserts that:

> The fundamental role of the Conservator-Restorer is the preservation of cultural heritage for the benefit of present and future generations. The Conservator-Restorer contributes to the perception, appreciation and understanding of cultural heritage in respect of its environmental context and its significance and physical properties.
>
> (ECCO 2002)

To conclude, it might also be borne in mind that sampled areas on artefacts may require remedial work such as replacement of protective coatings, stabilisation treatment and gap-filling of voids – all elements that concern object integrity. Such remedial treatment will usually entail the involvement of the conservator at least in an advisory and supervisory capacity. Budgetary and scheduling factors result for the

conservator. These consequences must be factored into any decision to sample artefacts invasively. Availability and compliance should not be taken for granted.

References

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