

Is Subsistence Looting Morally Justifiable?

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Looting is defined as the illegal excavation of artifacts that “directly impacts upon the archaeological record” (Hollowell 2006: 70). Of the people who participate in this activity, there are two large modern groups: well organized and well financed large-scale operations (“mafias”), and small-scale locals who tend to be disorganized and independent (Matsuda 1998: 93). Of these small-scale looters, there are many motivations, including political resistance (Kersel 2007: 91), a sense of tradition or connection to their ancestors, and, most importantly, economic incentives (Matsuda 1998: 89, Kersel 2012: 258). This last motivation is defined as subsistence looting, or when impoverished locals engage in illicit excavations to supplement their income. This kind of looting can cause damage to the archaeological record, which can render the archaeological context useless. Without this context the cultural heritage of the area is permanently harmed. However, in areas where survival is dependent on unreliable harvests, looting might be the only way to make ends meet (Matsuda 1998: 90). The question remains: does that make the illegal digging and the associated destruction morally justifiable?

This complex issue impacts how archaeologists interact with locals, whether treating them simply as diggers or as nuisances that interfere with the advancement of knowledge due to what archaeologists perceive as greed (Matsuda 1998: 89). Archaeologists might consider the advancement of knowledge to be more important than a modern community’s short-term needs. It can be important for archaeologists to understand the connection between a modern community and its cultural heritage to fully understand the context of that community. If archaeologists see members of a modern community just as workmen or people simply residing in the same area as an ancient site, they might miss that connection.

I argue that in certain circumstances, impoverished people cannot be held to the same academic and institutional rigor we hold archaeologists, museums, and art dealers to. While there are many ways that the destruction of cultural heritage harms a community, they ultimately hold little weight if it means starvation for the looters involved. I will examine two case studies of subsistence digging communities, one in Belize conducted by David Matsuda (1998), and one in the Bering Strait conducted by Julia Hollowell (2006). I aim to compare their findings and analysis of the moral arguments for looting as well as looting trends in high-risk countries reported by Staffan Lunden (2012) and Moreg Kersel (2007, 2012). While major, organized looting operations appear the least morally justifiable and most harmful, in reality the average looter is an impoverished farmer doing what is necessary to survive.

Hollowell makes the point that in the modern globalized economy, cash flow is essential even to people who participate in a subsistence lifestyle, and that survival is difficult without some sellable good. In locales where subsistence digging occurs, artifacts serve this purpose (Hollowell 2006: 72). Matsuda claims that the average traditional farmer in Belize keeps just \$75 of the \$500 they earn annually, and that necessities like medicine cost far more than they could possibly afford without a supplemental source of income (Matsuda 1998: 88). In the modern world, access to proper healthcare and an education are often considered essential human rights, but people can't synthesize these things by themselves – they must interface with the wider world, which often requires money. Artifacts offer a resource to communities that have no access to other natural resources. Groups like the Bedouin, traditionally pastoral nomads, have little access to employment opportunities. However, their lifestyle makes their access to previously undisturbed artifacts easy, making looting an enticing opportunity for some extra income. Looting as a supplemental income is so ingrained in their history that it has become a

part of their cultural tradition (Kersel 2007: 90). Kersel asserts that as the practice of looting spans over several generations, the older tribal members teach digging and artifact identification techniques to the younger members in an apprentice-style relationship.

There is a strong correlation between poverty and areas with high incidents of local looting. Lunden points out that not only do impoverished countries have little resources for protecting sites and education, but that the lack of opportunity in those areas drive people to looting. Examples include the widespread looting that occurred in rural Iraq between the Gulf Wars as economic hardship befell the populace, partially due to Saddam's policies and partially due to the sanctions imposed by the West (Lunden 2012: 120); the collapse of the cane sugar market in the 1980s and 1990s that resulted in many impoverished farmers seeking alternate income by looting Moche sites in Northern Peru; and the traditional farmers and politically disenfranchised indigenous peoples in Central America who loot in "seasons" that match up with the agricultural off-seasons (Matsuda 2012: 90-91). At one site the looting was stopped and the site was turned into an archaeological park, fulfilling the need for alternative income as a reliable tourism market now existed through which locals could find jobs as guides or selling souvenirs, though objects from other sites still pop up on the antiquities market (Lunden 2012: 121).

Hollowell posits that the major driving forces behind subsistence digging are impoverished areas stricken by "drought, political instability, and major changes in political instability" (Hollowell 2006: 75). She brings up the example of Blanding, Utah where after a shutdown of a uranium mine that comprised most of the local community's employment opportunities, the desperate locals turned to the practice of searching for and selling Native American ceramics, dubbed "pothunting." According to her, sometimes a major find can represent a family's entire annual income, taking the place of income earned in the legal market

(Hollowell 2006: 75).

Though subsistence looting shows a strong correlation with poverty, does that make it morally justifiable? Is it worth the permanent destruction of knowledge just to alleviate a bad harvest? Hollowell notes the difficulty in finding the line between essential and supplementary looting, especially as there are many non-economic related reasons local residents might participate in looting (Hollowell 2006: 77, Kersel 2012: 258). But archaeology is not necessarily always in the moral “right” either. Some dealers of antiquities argue that local looters discover things that “far exceed what archaeology has had to offer” (Hollowell 2006: 79). Many archaeological projects only offer temporary employment for the locals at the sites they inhabit, and after completion, very few archaeologists give any discovered information back to the community (Hollowell 2006: 79). People see archaeologists come in and take artifacts away without ever seeing any of the value return to them, while those objects that are being taken could be sold to buy food, clothing, and medicine. Archaeology only recently developed its more ethical practices, and it is unfair to impose those on communities whose priorities are most focused on short-term survival (Matsuda 1998: 93). Matsuda looks back at early American museum acquisition of pre-Columbian artifacts and notes that subsistence looters were an integral part of the supply chain, as they were the primary producers of artifacts (Matsuda 1998: 90). He claims that even today archaeologists and art dealers earn material gain for their work, and who is to say they have domain over the artifacts instead of the impoverished indigenous locals whose people produced those artifacts originally (Matsuda 1998: 94)? It is important to consider whom the cultural material actually belongs to. If it is the locals, we must ask: can archaeologists necessarily decide how it should benefit them?

Large-scale organized looting does occur, and often exploits small-scale, impoverished

diggers as the primary producers (Kersel 2007: 78). However, this type of looting does not necessarily represent the majority of looting. It makes sense that large-scale, targeted looting would be the most harmful to the archaeological record; however, according to Matsuda, in Central America, the looting “mafias” only represent about 2-3% of all looters (Matsuda 1998: 86). Kersel found that in Jordan, Israel, and Palestine the primary producers of looted goods were almost always impoverished Bedouin and Palestinians, and that only a portion of these looters answered to overseers involved in large-scale looting operations (Kersel 2007: 87).

One argument against subsistence looting is that it is inherently unstable – that artifacts are being looted wildly and once they become sparse, harder times will come to those impoverished communities that have come to rely on them (Hollowell 2006: 83). This is not always the case. Studies show that when archaeologists work to educate locals about the importance of cultural heritage and conservation, a noticeable drop in digging occurs (Hollowell 2006: 82). The case study performed on St. Lawrence Island discovered that people started digging back in the early 1900s after the collapse of the whaling market. Since then, St. Lawrence Island’s inhabitants have created a tradition of looting old ivory artifacts to supplement their income whenever employment is scarce (Hollowell 2006: 84). However, when work comes into the towns the digging diminishes, much to the chagrin of the art dealers (Hollowell 2006: 78). This is a prime example of the idea that subsistence looting is borne out of necessity rather than greed, and can often be influenced by outside sources.

Subsistence looting is an unfortunate consequence of poverty. Knowledge and cultural heritage are forever lost; however, most evidence frames the typical subsistence looter as an impoverished, disenfranchised local desperately trying to make ends meet, rather than a greedy, uneducated criminal. In an increasingly interconnected world, it is becoming more difficult to

hold everyone to the same universal standard. Subsistence farmers can no longer purely rely on farming. Money is essential to the modern economy, and some places simply lack the opportunity and resources for generating income aside from looting ancestral tombs. Not everyone is part of a looting mafia, and some communities like the Bedouin have a history of looting that stretches back enough generations that looting techniques become traditions passed down from the old to the young. Efforts to reduce looting should focus higher up the food chain, with end sellers and buyers. Economic development is another possible strategy – if more sources of income become available to poor communities, looting may no longer be necessary to make ends meet. Archaeology has not always been held to such a high standard, and while it is important to do so now and to work towards a future where subsistence looting is no longer required, we should also recognize that our moral standards regarding cultural heritage don't necessarily translate to other cultures. It is important to have understanding for those in situations where they are forced to do the "wrong" thing.

Works Cited

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