

SITE DESTRUCTION IN LATIN AMERICA:
SOME DESCRIPTIONS AND PROPOSALS

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The problems of American archaeology in terms of site destruction are not limited to North America, but rather encompass the entire Western Hemisphere. In the United States, a disinterested government, rampant urbanization (or rather, suburbanization), and a small but active group of "pothunters" have created a situation in which it is estimated there will not be a single undisturbed site left within twenty years. The case is much the same in Latin America but with some peculiar local twists tied into local politics and economics and into the fact that the Latin American civilizations were much richer in elaborate artifacts than those of North America. One of the major Latin American problems is the burgeoning market in antiquities in the United States and Europe (there is a local market too, but it is much smaller and poorer). The fashion for having ancient artifacts as status symbols has reached a new high and has trickled down to others than the very wealthy. As the demand goes up so do prices and new sources of more exotic and cheaper objects are sought. What this has meant is a wholesale invasion of South and Central America by antiquities dealers to fill the new demand.

Coupled with this invasion by foreign dealers has been the enactment by more and more Latin American governments of stringent antiquities laws which, in the abstract, are meant to protect the national patrimony against foreign collectors. However, the laws are mainly enforced against foreign archaeologists, not antiquities dealers, since the latter do not usually operate through legitimate channels. What this has meant in practical terms is that the destruction of ancient sites for salable artifacts is accelerating rapidly at a time when the amount of scientific excavation, necessarily largely done by foreigners since there is usually a lack of trained local personnel or local funding, has been slowing down or, in some countries, totally stopped.

Neither of these problems can be readily solved. Antiquities laws are needed; it is unfortunate that they are mainly enforced against the only group the local government has any control over: the foreign archaeologists. By and large, foreigners lack the knowledge of the local situation or the personal influence needed to sidestep or bend rules enough to be allowed to dig. Although some of the problems could be overcome with joint projects between a foreigner and a local archaeologist, these projects are difficult to fund, even when they could be arranged.

The antiquities market is another matter. There has been a spate of publicity in the popular press about looting and what this means in terms of destruction of knowledge. Hopefully this publicity will reach some people who will find a more

acceptable outlet for their interest in antiquities. These outlets do exist and are being further expanded: local and national archaeological societies, using non-professionals on digs, and so on. But we cannot turn a fashion overnight and the only solution on a short term basis would be to make it very hard for people to obtain antiquities to decorate their walls and coffee tables.

To control the antiquities market it is necessary to know how it works and where to apply pressure. So far most action against antiquities dealing has been on a rather otherworldly plane and has not been outstandingly successful. In the areas in which I have worked the antiquities trade is rather neatly graded and each level offers its own possibilities of the control of looting, if not its eradication. Local situations do vary in detail, but the systems of extracting and vending artifacts seem to be roughly similar over much of Latin America.

On the rock bottom level are the local people, the farmers, rural laborers, road workers, and so on. These are the people who make many of the finds. In the course of their ordinary work, antiquities are uncovered and there are probably few places in the world today where the locals are so unsophisticated that they do not know where there is cash for an attractive artifact. If a nice cache is uncovered, a cemetery or similar site, the peasant may stop his regular work to extract as much as possible. In the past probably the majority of finds

occurred in this casual manner, but as the demand (and the price) for antiquities gets higher the locals may do a little less farming and a little more treasure hunting. This has been the situation for a long time in areas where it was generally known that ancient sites contained gold and has become much more common as pots and bits of stone become more valuable than gold. In central Colombia, for example, almost every adult male does a little guaqueria on the side and a few people are almost totally professionals (Bruhns 1972). The same is true in coastal Peru where a bit of pothunting is a common source of ready cash to the campesinos.

In most areas of Latin America there are also local collectors, usually people of the middle or upper class; people who for one reason or another got interested in the prehistory of the area and started to gather artifacts. Many of these people are fairly well aware of the aims of archaeology and make a point of collecting data with their antiquities, others simply collect and ask no questions. As the monetary values of these things go up some of the local collectors become small time dealers. They hire farmers to dig up areas for them or they have arrangements with specific farmers or guaqueros to sell to them first. In their turn the collectors sell what they do not want to other collectors or to more commercial antiquities dealers. Many places also have people who are only dealers. These organize the local talent in the same way as the collectors,

although usually on a more strictly commercial basis. These small local dealers then resell either to bigger dealers in the main cities, to museums, or to foreign dealers from the United States and Europe. Antiquities dealing on this level is a very profitable business, involving little risk and a good return on an investment. A vessel from, say, the Moche culture of northern Peru that the farmer or guaquero is paid fifty cents for will be passed on from anywhere between \$5 and \$50 or more. It will end up being sold in New York or London or Geneva for several hundreds more than that. Where the gains are large enough the big city dealer may be bypassed and direct contact set up between locals and foreigners. A good example of this sort of thing is in the Maya area of Mexico and Guatemala where Americans and Europeans have set up large, well organized invasions of sites using local people as workers. They go into a site, slice up the monuments, quickly tear through the mounds and remove anything that looks worthwhile and then remove their loot directly by plane or ship to the United States. Very recently some enterprising Americans have set up much the same business in northern Colombia where the prehispanic Tairona culture produced gold and stone artifacts currently much in vogue. The entrepreneur engages workmen through local sources, sites are efficiently located and stripped and the artifacts removed by the boatload to American ports. From there they are vended to art galleries, museums, antique stores and the like.

In Latin America itself most larger cities have dealers in antiquities who are purely commercial and who act as full time middlemen. They have regular (and casual) contacts throughout their area and country and in turn sell to urban collectors, museums, tourists and foreign dealers.

Aside from the big dealers, in whose hands the international trade and the whole business of getting the things out of their country of origin largely rests, there are two other sources for antiquities on the world market: the diplomatic corps and the Peace Corps. Both American and local diplomats are involved in smuggling out antiquities. Sometimes these are for their own collections but a fair number of these people are well known to dealers, especially as sources of valuable and portable items like ancient jewelry and textiles. Since diplomats are not subject to customs regulation they form an excellent channel for objects which might be difficult to get through governmental barriers.

The Peace Corps is another matter entirely. Probably a large number of Volunteers do a little pot hunting as recreation. After all, in many of the areas in which they are stationed everyone they meet does some and most of these young people see nothing wrong with their activities. In most cases they do little damage and simply come home with a few souvenirs which they might sell if they needed the money. Unfortunately a few Peace Corpsmen seem to have gotten into the trade in a big way.

One of the largest collections of pottery and gold from the northern Andes to appear on the market in the past few years was being vended by a Peace Corps Volunteer with an eye to making money out of his tour of duty.

The Peace Corps could probably be controlled even if the diplomatic corps cannot (smuggling by diplomats seems to be one of the bigger headaches of the various law enforcing bodies in all countries). Very likely some serious talk about why they should not tear up sites and an occasional disciplinary action would work wonders. Most of these people simply do not realize they are being destructive (even in a minor way) and those who go into antiquities gathering on a large scale could be stepped on.

The possibility of control exists with some of the other groups, although not on the very bottom level. By and large, the actual work is done by poor people who need money. There is also the whole hidden treasure complex in much of Latin America and in a system of limited good there probably always will be. No amount of legislation is going to stop a poor man from looking for his chance out. Also, these people do find things by accident. They are involved with working the soil. In earlier days the things they found were simply recycled: pots were reused, cut stone was used in erecting new buildings, etc. If they could not sell things any longer they would probably go back to using them. A cutback in their immediate

market would, however, have the effect of stopping planned looting of sites in areas where there is no gold.

The local collectors could, perhaps be regulated. Most countries do have laws about the registration of collections. These laws do not work because they are not enforced or because it is too much trouble or it is too expensive to register a collection (one country demands several photographs of each piece in a collection upon registration; the cost of photography alone makes it impossible for many people with large collections to register them). Also, a registered collection is not one that cannot be liquidated for quick cash and it is a collection that could be taxed. Considering the disadvantages to a collector it is no wonder that no one obeys the law unless he is forced to or is more public spirited than most.

The only hope of control of the wholesale looting that is now going on seems to lie in cutting out the huge profits made by the middlemen. There will always be local collectors and the great majority of these are not too destructive. It is the high commercial value of artifacts that lies directly behind the devastation of archaeological sites in Latin America. Control could be effected by enforcing the laws which most countries already have about getting permits to export antiquities, jail sentences for smuggling, etc. Unfortunately, this would probably only further blacken the black market. The only people who regularly apply for permits to export are

legimate archaeologists; nobody else bothers. Even when these people get caught they usually have enough influence to escape any sanctions; dealers very seldom end up in jail.

Since the really immense profits start coming in on the international scale it might be possible to regulate the trade on this level, where local influence would have less effect. At this point the only feasible route is by a combination of taxation within the country of sale and treaties with the country of origin. A really heavy personal property tax on antiquities would cut out a lot of would be collectors. A punitive sales tax, for which precedents exist (tobacco and alcohol) would have much the same effect.

In terms of treaties, the United States did recently sign one with Mexico and it has already been invoked. What would make it more effective would be some teeth: jail sentences and heavy fines for both the vendors and buyers. The only problem is that treaties would have to be enacted among all the countries which participate in the antiquities trade. Even now much of the trade in American antiquities is switching to Europe, just as our government is beginning to act. If, say, England and Germany are the scenes of most of the buying and selling, then no number of treaties on our part will stop the traffic. There is, of course, the United Nations, but in twenty odd years they do not seem to have gotten past the Elgin marbles.

As the present situation stands there is no hope for archaeology. Too many factors enter this situation: local values structures, local poverty, national and international politics, the desire for quick profits on all sides, and current fashion which decrees that it is chic to have an artifact or two or two hundred standing around. Archaeology has neither the political power nor the internal cohesiveness to push for any changes in the international scene. All we can do is to continue to make as much noise as possible and in the meantime settle down to salvage as much as we can.

Reference cited:

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