



***Ruling Culture: Art Police, Tomb Robbers, and the Rise of Cultural Power in Italy*, by Fiona Greenland; *Why Those Who Shovel Are Silent: A History of Local Archaeological Knowledge and Labor*, by Allison Mickel; and *The Compensations of Plunder: How China Lost Its Treasures*, by Justin M. Jacobs**

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FIONA GREENLAND

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JUSTIN M. JACOBS

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In 1869, the famed British archaeologist Austen Henry Layard (1817–1894), then fifty-two years old, married a beautiful and wealthy woman, three decades his junior. Layard had been born into a family in modest circumstances. He had no fortune or influence and little prospect of obtaining them. But in 1845, after wandering into the Middle East on a halfhearted journey to obtain a civil service post in Ceylon, Layard began to dig at the ancient site of Nimrud. He managed to convince Ottoman authorities to countenance these excavations and others at a number of ancient sites in what is now Iraq.

Layard hoped to prove the truth of the Bible by showing that the cities and cultures mentioned in the Old Testament actually existed. His excavations stocked the British Museum with much of its Ancient Near Eastern collections. And he made even more of a name for himself with his best-selling 1848 book *Nineveh and Its Remains*, which mixed discussion of his archaeological findings with swashbuckling travelogues.

Layard also turned his excavations to other, more personal uses. He parlayed his renown into a political career, winning a seat in Parliament in 1852 and serving in various public offices until 1880. And not all of his finds ended up in museums. A portrait painted shortly after his wedding shows Layard's gift to his bride: a necklace, bracelet, and earrings made of eighteen ancient

Assyrian and Babylonian carved cylinder seals placed into elaborate gold settings. Lady Layard proudly wrote in her diary that this jewelry was “much admired” when she dined with Queen Victoria.

We generally talk about the value of antiquities in terms of the roles they play in scholarship or on the market. Western archaeologists have often portrayed themselves as motivated solely by the knowledge of the past given to us by antiquities. Dealers, meanwhile, usually measure the value of antiquities in terms of the prices they bring. But Lady Layard's jewelry should remind us that antiquities can offer many other types of value beyond the intellectual or financial. For Layard, working with antiquities brought the comfort of strengthened religious faith and allowed him to garner power and sex he likely would not have otherwise experienced.

Three recent books examine different ways of valuing antiquities in Italy, China, and the Middle East. The authors use various methods, from deep dives into the diaries and letters of long-dead excavators to ethnographic interviews with local workers on contemporary archaeological excavations. But each book demonstrates that unpacking the nuances of the rewards that people seek to claim from antiquities is essential for our ongoing debates about digging, display, and repatriation. Asking people to change any behaviors, including looting antiquities, works much better if you understand their behavioral motivations.

Fiona Greenland spent ten years as a classical archaeologist before training as a sociologist. Her book, *Ruling Culture*, brings a sociological lens to bear on questions of how both individual Italian citizens and the Italian state use antiquities to understand themselves. Greenland traces changes in both the discourse and actions surrounding antiquities in Italy, from their crucial role in the state's nineteenth-century unification, to Fascist attempts to reposition Italy within the hierarchy of Western powers, to renegotiations of the authority of the state over citizens in the turbulent 1960s, to more recent events, like the 2008 return of a first-century BCE marble statue of Venus to Libya.

“My dear friend Muammar, I brought your girlfriend back,” quipped then Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi during the

ceremony (159). He had flown to Benghazi to present the Venus of Cyrene, taken in 1915 during the Italian colonization of Libya, to President Qaddafi. The return formed part of what Greenland calls “artifactual relations”: the strategic manipulation of antiquities by the Italian state (in this case) to increase its power. The ceremony also included Berlusconi and Qaddafi signing a “Friendship Treaty,” which set out economic cooperation agreements and included a promise to pay \$5 billion in reparations for Libya's colonial-era damages. By making a beautiful, seminude statue the centerpiece of the event, Italy was able to distract the world from questions about historical wrongs in favor of burnishing its image as a nation rich not only in heritage but also in the prestige and moral authority that comes from being its guardian.

Italy is also eager to let the world know that, even if they repatriate a few masterpieces, they have plenty more where those came from. Shortly after he handed over the Venus, Berlusconi claimed at a press conference in London that “72 percent of Europe's cultural patrimony is found in Italy, and a good 50 percent of the world's [heritage] belongs to our country” (160). The exactness of this claim might appear laughable—perhaps the Venus de Milo counts for a little less because of its missing arms—but Greenland dives below the risible surface to analyze its logic. She concludes that the modern Italian state has been eager to link its identity to high culture in order to “distance itself from the strain of Fascism and imperialism and act in the guise of moral leader” (161).

But it is not enough to have produced such heritage in the past. Greenland makes a fascinating structural argument about the importance of the continued existence of threats to Italy's ability to continually reinscribe its claims to moral authority. “Italy would not be the cultural power that it is without the antiquities market, its worthy foe” (163), because without looters and the foreign collectors who back them, Italy could not display how it protects its (claimed) lion's share of humanity's cultural heritage.

The Italian state's positioning of itself as heritage protector comes mainly through the highly publicized work of the “Art Squad”: the Comando Carabinieri Tutela Patrimonio Culturale, a special branch of

the state military police formed in 1969, before any other art-rich country considered heritage worthy of a similar policing unit. The standard explanation for the birth of the Art Squad is that global demand for Italian antiquities rose during the 1960s, leading to an intensification of tomb robbing. Greenland inverts this explanation. Pointing out that looting had been a part of the Italian experience of antiquities for centuries, Greenland argues that it was the Art Squad itself whose public-relations strategy encouraged a new public understanding of looting as a crisis.

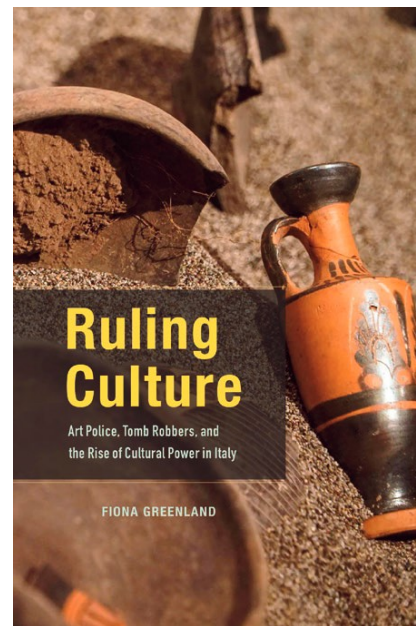
Greenland makes a case that the Art Squad's real purpose was to change public perception of the Italian state, both internally and globally. In contrast to Italian citizens' low level of trust in state authority, especially the country's police forces, the Art Squad is generally admired. They are decoratively uniformed good cops with a sympathetic mission: namely, to protect the Italian people's birthright. And their role in scrutinizing foreign markets and collections for antiquities smuggled out of Italy allows the Art Squad to play a patriotic role as "a culturally correct David in the face of [foreign] museums' culturally impure, bullying Goliath" (169).

The reality, of course, is more complicated. Greenland points out that there are far too few Art Squad agents to patrol the entirety of Italian patrimony. Instead, the Squad cultivates an aura of omniscience by conducting high-profile raids on participants in the black market for antiquities. "Highly choreographed repatriation events," museums' exhibition of returned antiquities, and other media events aid in this strategy (33). The Art Squad has even released computer games and comic books designed to spread the message to Italian children.

The Art Squad claims to have recovered over a half-million artifacts since its founding. Greenland interviewed an Italian archaeologist who made the counterintuitive argument that the Art Squad's focus on repatriation actually works against preserving Italian patrimony as a whole. Repatriation siphons off resources that would otherwise go to ensuring the safety of objects and monuments—for example, by paying for site security to prevent looting instead of chasing down artifacts after the damage is done. Greenland also notes that, far from being a

true guardian against all possible sources of damage, the Italian state generally ignores urbanization as a threat to heritage. This is probably because the authorities both want to protect heritage and to encourage economic growth.

Many antiquities-rich states have followed Italy's example in aggressively protecting their heritage. Greenland argues that Italy is unusual "for the extent of its reliance on internal Others" (4). While most states pin the blame for threats to heritage on foreign collectors, Italy has long devoted special



attention to the activities of its own citizens: the *tombaroli*, or "tomb robbers."

"When I am an old man, in my bed, not able to walk, forgetting my own name," one Roman in his mid-forties told Greenland, "what I will remember is that feeling, of being in the land, with my friends, the rocks, the dirt, the little pieces of pottery making my pockets heavy" (124). Greenland interviewed a number of such men living in various communities in central Italy, with its many ancient Etruscan tombs, who regard looting as "a form of masculine bonding similar to hunting" (123). Looting provides these men with an excuse to get outdoors and display skill, knowledge, and strength to one another. The defiance of state authorities only adds to the excitement, solidifying the bonds of friendship with one's fellow *collezionisti* or *conoscitori*—"collectors" and "connoisseurs," as Greenland's informants call themselves. To

them, the term *tombarolo* only fits someone who sells looted artifacts for money. And while there are indeed professional thieves and middlemen in Italy who specialize in extracting value from looted or stolen antiquities, Greenland's informants value antiquities for very different reasons. They claim they keep their finds or give them to family and close friends "who will appreciate the objects as reminders of shared history" (2).

Greenland remains skeptical of the claim that money truly never changes hands but accepts the informants' self-conception for the purpose of her analysis. She argues that recreational excavation is a means of anchoring local identity. Her informants spoke of the importance of having a link with the sites where they dig; they take it as a point of pride that they are digging as members of the local community rather than as people who come in from elsewhere, as foreign archaeologists do.

Although sporadic, this unauthorized digging still harms the archaeological record. But such men are not likely to stop just because the state tells them such uses are illegal (especially since state authorities rarely take action in such cases). The authorities must better understand the local diggers' communal motivations to change their behavior. But of course, as Greenland insists, the state is unlikely to do so, since it depends on their ongoing looting as a foil for its self-construction.

Several of Greenland's informants recalled working on excavations led by foreign archaeologists until the 1980s, when the archaeologists began to bring their own labor in the form of undergraduates eager to obtain experience of the past. It is little wonder that these residents, familiar with the sites and excavation technique, turned to recreational digging in the absence of any licensed means of participating in the production of knowledge from local antiquities they were no longer allowed to touch. Allison Mickel, another archaeologist who has both excavated at ancient sites and drawn on multiple disciplines to think about the way these sites function in the current world, has written a book that focuses precisely on such figures: local residents who might provide the muscles necessary to uncover the past but whose brains are treated as unnecessary to illuminate it.

In *Why Those Who Shovel Are Silent*, Mickel diagnoses the “persistent cognitive dissonance” of archaeologists who rely on the archaeological skills of local residents while mocking their supposed lack of knowledge about or even interest in the past (17). Layard’s memoirs are a perfect example, salted as they are with slighting comments about the Bedouin tribespeople he encountered in what is now Iraq. Describing a local headman purportedly marveling at his ability to locate buried ruins, Layard reports that he always seized such opportunities to lecture local residents about “the wisdom and power of the Franks” (19). Yet, as Mickel points out, Layard’s multiple simultaneous excavations were far distant from one another. For years, he trusted his site workers to remove earth, recover artifacts, and make other excavation decisions in his absence. In practice, Layard recognized the local skills he denigrated in print.

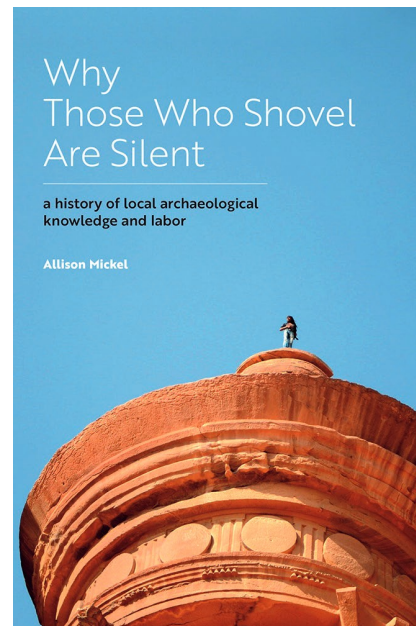
Questioning local ability to appreciate antiquities properly was, of course, a good strategy for someone who wanted to take them home. Layard is an example of the many other collectors both before and since who justified their exports by arguing that they would be better caretakers and scholars of antiquities than anyone in their country of origin. And so, just as the Italian state constructs itself in opposition to the useful enemy of tomb robbers, so, too, have many archaeologists based their self-understanding on an opposing figure: that of the ignorant modern resident of an ancient site.

Some scholars did their best to sustain this ignorance by hindering the efforts of source countries to develop programs that would train local archaeologists. Mickel discusses, for instance, how James Henry Breasted (1865–1935), founder of the University of Chicago’s Oriental Institute, secured a \$10 million grant from John D. Rockefeller in 1924 to build an archaeological research center in Cairo. Egyptians would not be admitted. In a letter to Rockefeller’s wife, Breasted referred to the donation as “the price one had to pay to save these people from themselves” (17).

Mickel’s main argument is that the exclusion of locals from the intellectual work of archaeology continues to shape the labor practices of today’s archaeological excavations. She interviewed local workers at excavations carried out by foreign teams in Petra, Jordan (site of the capital city of

the Nabataean kingdom, which arose in the fourth century BCE and was annexed by the Roman Empire in 106 CE), and Çatalhöyük, Turkey (a Neolithic and Chalcolithic settlement inhabited from around 7,400 to 5,600 BCE). Both sites have been excavated for more than fifty years. Mickel tracked down former workers and combed through the excavations’ archives to track the histories of the work there, looking at what has changed—and what has not.

It is no surprise that in the first decades of these excavations, as in most archaeologi-



cal projects until recently, workers went unnamed and unacknowledged in the excavators’ publications: “The earth seems to dig itself” (26). In the 1970s, the site workers at Petra were generally eight or nine years old—the archaeologists in charge considered them old enough to be competent with tools but young enough to control. These former child laborers told Mickel they were fired for not working quickly enough or even for leaving a trench to get a drink of water. The excavators feared unscheduled water breaks could cover the theft of artifacts. The site notebooks supported the workers’ memories. For instance, in 1978, one supervisor described a demand for better wages thus: “the kiddie brigade decided that they needed more pay and so the directors simply fired the whole lot of them” (49).

Whenever a significant artifact was discovered, the workers were hustled out of

the surrounding trenches. The archaeologists returned to dig it out under the cover of night. Yet, despite the near-paranoid levels of site security, the former workers Mickel interviewed possessed extensive knowledge of the types of artifacts that came out of the ground at Petra. They had gained this knowledge not from talking to the archaeologists or even seeing the finds but from sharing the little information they had with each other. Mickel’s interviews revealed that, contrary to the stereotypes of colonialist archaeology, the workers had a thirst for knowledge—a desire rebuffed, just as the archaeologists denied these workers water.

In the 1990s, archaeologists began to recognize the importance of engaging local communities. Çatalhöyük is well known for its turn toward community-focused archaeology, with various innovative public-education programs designed to increase access to the project by nonspecialist audiences, including local residents. A similar community-engagement program began in Petra in 2009. But such programs only rarely, if ever, consider site workers a worthwhile target audience. And while labor practices have greatly improved at both sites, Mickel makes a convincing argument that the essentials of the labor practices have remained unchanged, since “the colonial and economic origins of Middle Eastern archaeological practice continue to inform how we excavate today” (11). Workers are still valued for their physical abilities, not for any potential intellectual contributions.

Certain excavations do pay attention to workers’ intellectual satisfaction. Çatalhöyük, for instance, rotates workers through various tasks so that they can develop new skills. However, Mickel argues that site workers remain excluded from the final step of interpretation—that is, from “ascribing meaning to the archaeological evidence collected at the site” (67). The workers Mickel interviewed at Çatalhöyük pointed out various barriers to their participation in interpretation; for example, these discussions took place in English, not Turkish, and usually happened within the site’s laboratories, behind closed doors the workers were not often invited to open.

You might argue that all the workers had to do was knock. But Mickel points out that the legacy of historic labor practices

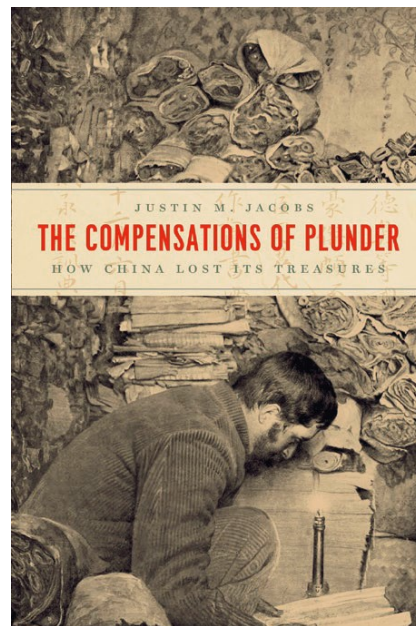
means that workers often hide their curiosity from archaeologists, understanding that revealing their curiosity might put their jobs in danger. Mickel's ethnographic interviews show that site workers have long carried out ethnographic investigations of their own to understand foreign archaeologists. For instance, the Turkish women who cook the meals for excavators at Çatalhöyük revealed that they had observed supposedly secret romances between archaeologists, discussed their strange eating habits, and watched where people sat during meal times to answer the crucially important question of who the "real bosses" of the project were. These observations, conducted without the benefit of asking questions, were crucial to protect their jobs.

At Petra, Mickel received from a local man hiring out camels for rides to tourists an even more striking demonstration of the "collective understanding that one should pretend to be less adapt, less knowledgeable than he or she really is in order to secure employment" (108). The man, seeing several groups of visitors approaching, nudged Mickel. "Watch this," he told her. Identifying the various languages the tourists were speaking to each other, he offered camel rides in perfect French, Spanish, German, and English—in British, American, and Australian accents, as appropriate. None of these tourists took him up on his offer. But when he called out in broken English with an exaggerated Arabic accent, "Camel ride! Very cheap for you!" he immediately attracted paying customers. The man knew he would be rewarded for being the type of camel herder the tourists expected to encounter, just as the site workers also know that they have a role to play—as "passive laborers" rather than "experienced excavators" (109–10).

Surveying other studies of site labor on archaeological excavations in South America, Mexico, Africa, India, and Australia, Mickel argues that what she terms the "lucrative non-knowledge" of workers hiding their intellectual existence to protect their employment is a "global phenomenon" (113). Mickel advocates, instead, for paying site workers for the explicit expression of their knowledge. Recognizing language as a barrier, she proposes giving site workers cameras so that they can help document sites and produce a record

of their impressions. Photography, she argues is a "flexible medium" that site workers, even if they lack academic training, can use to help create "a comprehensive, multidimensional vision of the research process" (153).

Mickel argues for recognizing the agency of site workers in the future. Justin M. Jacobs, in his book *The Compensations of Plunder*, attempts to recognize it in the past. He aims to recover what it is possible to know about the Uighur peasants who provided labor for turn-of-the-century French, German, American, and British expeditions



into the Xinjiang region, "where the arid climate of the Taklamakan Desert had managed to preserve the ruins of ancient migrants from India, Iran, and Central Asia" (13). The somewhat tongue-in-cheek title of the book summarizes Jacob's main research question: What benefits did Chinese nationals receive from the artifacts whose removal by foreign archaeologists they aided?

Most famously, the Taklamakan Desert held what are now known as the Dunhuang manuscripts, a cache of tens of thousands of manuscripts and paintings from the late fourth to early eleventh centuries CE. They had been walled up in a hidden room of what had once been an extensive Buddhist monastery complex on a Silk Road oasis. Once news crept out that a Daoist monk had discovered this room and begun selling its contents, the long, difficult trek to reach Dunhuang became irresistible to many newly

fledged sinologists, including those who, like Marc Aurel Stein (1862–1943), were hoping to discover traces of Alexander the Great's journey into China.

Born in Hungary and educated in Germany and Britain, Stein served the Raj in various administrative and teaching posts in India. He also periodically convinced the authorities of British India to fund his expeditions in search of Central Asian antiquities, carrying out surveys as he went and thus producing potentially militarily useful information. Stein would purchase around 13,000 Dunhuang manuscripts and fragments, most of which ended up in London, in the British Museum and British Library, as well as many other antiquities during the four expeditions he made to China between 1900 and 1930.

Stein's career began in the model of Layard. As a representative of a colonial power, he initially was given more or less free rein by local authorities to carry off whatever he could. But he left China with empty hands in 1930. The modern nation of post-Revolution China, finding antiquities important to its self-formation, had decided to restrict their export sharply. Contemporary descriptions of Stein tend either to vilify him as a sneaky, thieving bully who took advantage of his colonial backing to force the Chinese to surrender antiquities, or praise him as a scholarly saint who braved deadly conditions to rescue manuscripts that would have crumbled without his persistence. Jacobs aims to give readers a more nuanced understanding with his detailed history of Stein's expeditions, drawn from research in both Western and Chinese archives. Jacob's sources, many previously unpublished or untranslated, include Stein's expedition diaries, letters to his funders, correspondence with the Chinese officials with whom he formed long-lasting and mutually admiring relationships, and reports on his activities by the new generation of Chinese scholars who sought to enforce stricter antiquities laws.

Jacobs focuses on the interests of the Uighurs, the highly educated elites sent to govern Xinjiang by the central government, and the Beijing-based Nationalist Chinese scholars and politicians who began to wrest control of decisions about antiquities from these local officials. (Jacobs' first book was on the complex and sometimes tenuous

relationships between Xinjiang, in China's far west, and the central government, based in the east, and he deftly sets out the necessary but convoluted background.¹) Jacobs argues that these three groups regarded antiquities in Xinjiang as, respectively, profitable, precious, and priceless.

To the Uighurs, antiquities were a resource to be exploited. They had long dug in abandoned ancient cities in search of gold, and sometimes reused materials from these sites to build houses or even fertilize fields. The arrival of archaeologists meant more regular profits in the form of wages to dig or work on the caravans that carried the artifacts away. Jacobs analyzes the economics of the wages and working conditions offered by Stein and other expedition leaders and concludes the Uighurs were treated fairly; of course, as Mickel's research should remind us, having access to only one side of the story can leave much hidden.

Meanwhile, the local elite, like the foreign archaeologists, recognized the historical and aesthetic value of the antiquities. But these elites also appreciated the opportunity for networking offered by archaeological expeditions. Jacobs paints vivid pictures of the boredom of these cultivated men, isolated in far-flung rural outposts. They greeted the arrival of Stein so eagerly in the beginning, putting on extensive banquets in his honor (about which the dyspeptic Stein complains in his diaries at length) and taking every chance for conversation they could get.

These conversations could also be strategic. Foreign travelers were a rare direct link to the central government, and these local officials sometimes successfully persuaded them to support promotions or transfers. It is therefore no surprise, Jacobs argues, that these officials actively assisted the archaeologists. The antiquities they removed were precious, but so were the compensations they offered.

The generation of scholars who rose after the 1911 fall of the Qing Dynasty, by contrast, regarded antiquities not as precious but as priceless: that is, not to be sold or removed from China. Laws to this effect were quickly passed but not immediately enforced, allowing Stein to leave China in 1915 with crates filled with 16,000 pounds of antiquities. But the new Nationalist Party wanted to forge "a new ideology based on a

shared patrimony" to unite China (2). Both laws and enforcement became harsher. Until 2010, antiquities looting could be punished by the death penalty.

Jacobs concludes that China, along with many other source countries for antiquities in the Middle East and Latin America, "slammed the door on unrestricted Western archaeological enterprise" as soon as their rulers decided it was no longer politically beneficial to court support from Western countries by letting their archaeologists do whatever they pleased (272). Instead, source countries established what is known as the partage system, allowing foreign archaeologists to take home only a share of their finds. Over the course of the twentieth century, these rules tightened; most source countries now allow antiquities to leave only for temporary loans.

But these laws are often broken. The clear line Jacobs draws between uncontrolled and controlled foreign excavation disregards the reality of ongoing looting of archaeological sites in these countries—looting that feeds foreign collectors' demand for their antiquities. China could bar Stein, but it could not so easily control the desire unleashed by his finds.

Jacobs tackles another line, even more difficult to draw, between persuasion and force. He admits that the "gross disparity between the western imperial powers and the rest of the world" (278) formed a significant context for interactions between foreign archaeologists and Chinese nationals. However, he insists that Chinese nationals' knowledge of the powers standing behind Western scholars "merely provided the *incentive*" to give the scholars what they wanted, but "did not impose an obligation" (278). But what about those who remembered the British looting and burning of Beijing's Summer Palace in 1860? And only three years before Stein first arrived in China, British forces marched into the Kingdom of Benin, in what is now Nigeria, killing countless civilians, deposing the ruler, reducing his kingdom to a protectorate, and looting centuries worth of palace decorations that they brought back to European museums. The Benin Punitive Expedition of 1897 was one of many reminders during Stein's long career that British art lovers and British soldiers could operate in tandem.

Jacobs argues that current condemnations of early foreign expeditions are clouded by "the fog of nationalist disinformation" (276). He holds that it is anachronistic to regard their taking of antiquities as criminal, since most Chinese nationals who interacted with these archaeologists did not believe their acts to be problematic. He asks us to turn to documented history rather than passively accepting "whichever version of Western archaeological expeditions proves most useful for current political agendas" (276).

Jacobs does not specify how he thinks this history should help settle current debates about repatriation, including debates about whether the Dunhuang manuscripts should return to China. Indeed, it is far from obvious how any of the new history and analysis offered by these three books should change our minds. Here, however, it should be noted that identifying a normative belief, like the belief that antiquities should be owned by their modern country of origin, as anachronistic or politically expedient or utopian does not strip it of all validity.

Despite the lack of clear answers, paying attention to how antiquities are used, instead of just theorizing about how they should be used, is very much worth doing. The accomplishment of these three authors is in bringing attention to the thoughts of groups of people whose opinion about antiquities is generally of no interest to scholars. The local diggers (whether authorized or not) and mid-level bureaucrats studied in these books have a greater role in the everyday transactions that shape the fate of antiquities than the world's archaeologists. If we want to preserve cultural heritage, we need to understand why it is important to all of its users—no matter the uses to which they put it.

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NOTE

1. Justin Jacobs, *Xinjiang and the Modern Chinese State* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017).