

A Collections-Based View of the Future of Archaeology

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ABSTRACT

This theme issue has two primary goals: to illuminate the underdeveloped or faltering areas of the discipline as they relate to archaeological collections and to offer tangible paths forward to address the systemic problems identified as they impact the future of archaeology. Present-day archaeology is complicated due to its many sectors of practice: academia/faculty; cultural resource management; federal, state, and local government; tribal governments and communities; descendant communities; students; the general public; and different types of archaeological repositories. Given this complexity, it can be difficult to identify the expectations (and realities) of each sector, which, if better understood, would help illuminate the nuances of preservation, accountability, discoverability, and use of archaeological collections across the discipline. Without a solid understanding of these nuances, efforts to advance the discipline are undermined. This introduction provides an overview of the articles that address emerging and urgent issues and offer viable steps forward. These challenges include the interrelationships between ethics, collaboration, and training; the preservation and management of digital records and data; collections discovery and reuse; collections-based research; training in material culture; making collections knowable to constituencies outside archaeology; preparing for repatriation from a management perspective; and the intricacies of the archaeological digital data system.

Keywords: archaeological collections, collections management, future of archaeology, repositories, ethics, training, digital archive, repatriation

Este tema tiene dos objetivos principales: Iluminar las áreas subdesarrolladas o vacilantes de la disciplina en relación con las colecciones arqueológicas, y ofrecer caminos tangibles para abordar los problemas sistémicos identificados a medida que impactan en el futuro de la arqueología. La arqueología actual es complicada debido a sus muchos sectores de práctica: Academia/facultad; gestión de recursos culturales; gobierno federal, estatal y local; gobiernos y comunidades tribales; comunidades descendientes; estudiantes; el público en general; y diferentes tipos de repositorios arqueológicos. Dado esta complejidad, puede ser difícil identificar las expectativas (y realidades) de cada sector, lo que, si se entiende mejor, ayudaría a iluminar los matices de la preservación, la responsabilidad, el descubrimiento y el uso de las colecciones arqueológicas en toda la disciplina. Sin una comprensión sólida de estos matices, los esfuerzos por avanzar en la disciplina se ven socavados. Esta introducción ofrece una visión general de los artículos que abordan cuestiones emergentes y urgentes y ofrecen pasos viables hacia adelante. Estos desafíos incluyen las interrelaciones entre ética, colaboración y capacitación; la preservación y gestión de registros y datos digitales; el descubrimiento y reutilización de colecciones; la investigación basada en colecciones; la capacitación en cultura material; hacer que las colecciones sean conocidas por grupos ajenos a la arqueología; prepararse para la repatriación desde una perspectiva de gestión; y las complejidades del sistema de datos digitales arqueológicos.

Palabras clave: colecciones arqueológicas, gestión de colecciones, futuro de la arqueología, repositorios, ética, formación, archivo digital, repatriación

The goals of this thematic issue, “A Collections-Based View of the Future of Archaeology,” are twofold. First, we want to highlight what we consider to be underdeveloped or faltering areas of the discipline, primarily as they relate to archaeological collections in the United States and, whenever possible, globally. Second, we want to offer tangible paths forward to address the systemic problems identified. Some of the present-day challenges to collections creation, deposit in a repository, care and management, accessibility, findability, collaboration, and disposition have been explicated in recent years (Archaeological Collections Consortium 2019; Benden and Taft 2019; Childs and

Benden 2017; Childs and Warner 2019; King and Samford 2019; Neller 2019; Schiappacasse 2019; Teeter et al. 2021). However, we want to look to the future to address challenges that are emerging with more urgency and offer avenues toward viable solutions. These include the interrelationships between ethics, collaboration, and training; the long-term preservation and management of digital records and data; collections discovery and reuse; collections-based research; training in material culture; making collections knowable to constituencies outside the archaeology profession; and the intricacies of the archaeological digital data system.

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This collections work is situated within evolving, future-oriented, disciplinary dialogues that consider decolonizing archaeology so as to move toward more inclusive practices (Flewellen et al. 2021), more responsive and responsible work with regard to repatriation (Dunnivant et al. 2021), revising curricula to reflect the changing priorities of the discipline (Quave et al. 2021; Thomas 2023), and the growth and role of cultural resource management (CRM; Altschul and Klein 2022). The deeply entrenched “curation crisis” and its pervasive effect across all areas of archaeology (Marquardt et al. 1982; Price 2023) also shapes this theme issue. All these topics, and others, show us that some restructuring of our current practices is necessary to protect the core—the “heart”—of the discipline (Lyons et al. 2019) and ensure the future vitality of the profession.

This theme issue also acknowledges the complexity of both practicing and teaching archaeology, given its many sectors, or communities of practice. Our discipline includes representatives from academia (faculty, researchers, and other professionals); CRM firms; federal, state, tribal, and local governments, including their legislators; tribes and descendant communities; students; and the general public. Each of these communities is dedicated to the preservation, accountability, discoverability, and use of archaeological collections, although their approaches and methods vary greatly. They are all vying for inclusion, funding, professional staff, and/or curatorial space, and each has its own viewpoint(s). Another community with notable diversity is that of archaeological repositories—from basements of university anthropology departments to multidisciplinary natural history museums to digital repositories, among others—all of which need to be recognized.

The idea for this issue originated during conversations among the Archaeological Collections Consortium (ACC), a multisector task force organized to highlight and address issues—usually through publication—concerning archaeological collections.¹ Members are from the Society for American Archaeology (SAA), Society for Historical Archaeology (SHA), American Cultural Resources Association (ACRA), US Army Corps of Engineers, and US Fish and Wildlife Service, as well as a retiree from the Department of the Interior. We wanted to examine how our work with collections and our agency in that regard could influence archaeological practice in a variety of areas. Around the same time in 2020, S. Terry Childs and Danielle Benden organized a workshop funded by the Wenner-Gren Foundation titled “Social Lives of Archaeological Repositories,” which took a sector-based approach to evaluating the state of the field as it pertained to collections and the work of repositories. We recognize that the field of archaeology is shaped by its sectors, with their different priorities and approaches.

The ACC’s discussion centered around the ideals we had when we entered the discipline, the realities we face in our day-to-day work, and the possibilities we need to propose for the future. The ideals and realities of practice are not always well communicated between individual sectors, making coordinating efforts that will affect the field holistically difficult. With all these different interests, how can archaeology viably move forward? That path must involve the practitioners of these various sectors working together to find solutions. In that, collaboration and conversation are key, and the authors contributing to this issue make a point of engaging in the former while encouraging the latter.

Finally, we agreed that there are enough contributions to the discipline that pinpoint problems without identifying solutions. None of these problems are truly unique, so all are worth our collective attention in strategizing paths forward. We agreed that each article must either be a how-to or offer how-tos or sufficient case studies and tangible steps that address the creation, preservation, accessibility, findability, and use of archaeological collections—including the objects and the associated records, both hard copy and digital.

The first article, authored by Warner and Rivers Cofield, casts a light on the ongoing problem of insufficient practitioner training concerning archaeological collections, including ethical obligations to collections after fieldwork is concluded. The authors assert that this lack of knowledge and its subsequent effects are a leading cause of the ongoing curation crisis. Lack of training in collections management reinforces the expected prioritization of fieldwork over collections research, which furthers ignorance of collections management and related costs, and the benefits of collections themselves. This can lead, in turn, to a proliferation of orphaned collections across repositories, CRM firms, and academia (Olson and Cathcart 2019). Embracing the ideal versus reality framework, the authors identify steps that can be taken to provide training for students and professional archaeologists. Most importantly, the authors assert that training is the responsibility of the entire profession, contradictory to the common trope that education and training are the sole province of academia.

Next, Domeischel and Neller revisit the ongoing challenges of compliance under the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) and how those challenges were created from within. Failure to produce catalogs and provide meaningful and respectful consultation caused museums and federal agencies difficulties when seeking to repatriate Ancestors and their belongings under NAGPRA. The authors assert that this is likely to happen a second time with a prospective African American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, or similar, if institutions do not begin preparing for such an eventuality. The authors review the history of the call for such an act, which was brought to renewed attention by Justin Dunnivant at the Society for Historical Archaeology meeting in 2016, and then they introduce a broad-use model (the START Model) for institutions to use in preparation for possible new legislation, to support ongoing NAGPRA work or any needed collections work. Fundamentally, the model is simple, pragmatic, and based in common sense. It seeks to highlight and recognize the importance of collaborative and incremental effort rather than encourage a tunnel-vision pursuit of perfection, which often stalls progress entirely.

The third article by Rivers-Cofield, Childs, and Majewski takes a core ethical practice of archaeology—documentation—and explores how archaeological repositories are handling the ongoing digital transition. They present the results of surveying 88 archaeological repositories in the United States and abroad about their capabilities to collect, preserve, and make the digital data and records under their control findable, accessible, interoperable, and reusable (FAIR). Not only do the survey questions probe into details about repository practices, but they ask about the challenges repositories face and any strategies repositories are using to overcome them. The results are sobering and do not largely differ from some of the basic findings of a repository survey conducted in 2010 (Watts 2011). The authors use their more

detailed results to point out the big-picture culture changes that are needed, which include knowing how to recognize a digital repository, hiring professional digital curators, and understanding the costs of digital curation. They also identify a few “band-aid” strategies to incrementally improve current practice for repositories that curate both physical and digital materials. The authors close by reiterating that archaeological repositories of physical collections are carrying a huge burden when trying to curate digital records and data, and they provide repositories, along with archaeologists, with several ways to ensure that the discipline of archaeology is meeting its professional and ethical responsibilities to the documentation it creates.

Next, Neller, Heckman, Bollwerk, Noack Myers, and Wells explore the conundrum of how we continue to accrue new data when we do not actually know what existing collections contain. The authors suggest that our inability to find and access archaeological collections easily is a serious barrier to the goal of understanding the past for research, heritage management, and the cultural heritage of descendant communities. The lack of standardized ontologies (vocabularies with formal definitions of relationships between definitions of concepts and information) that inform about both sites *and* collections is critical to correct in the future. They advocate and propose a standardized metadata format and ontology for archaeological collections for use on regional and, eventually, national levels so that repositories can gain intellectual control of the collections they manage and make those collections findable and accessible for use by archaeologists, descendant communities, policy makers, and other interested parties. Other nations have successfully used this strategy, and even within the United States, the practice of regionalizing collections and data is not unheard of. Neller and colleagues suggest that the results of such ontologies and their integration into regional databases, as a start, will help repositories—as well as all sectors of archaeology—achieve a comprehensive understanding of collections and promote more mindful efforts during work in both the field and the lab.

In the fifth article, Eichner, Campbell, and Warner discuss the issue of sharing collections with audiences beyond professional archaeologists. The authors argue that archaeology has an ethical obligation to share our findings after field work, and that failure to do so ultimately harms the discipline through a perception of hiding collections—and consequently, hiding the past. To address the distrust, the authors present several examples of innovative ways that archaeologists have used collections to engage the nonarchaeological public, as well as creating opportunities to make collections more broadly available to scholars and the public alike. These examples provide models that can be used to mitigate this problem in the future.

Finally, a digital review by Bollwerk, Gupta, and Smith provides an integral capstone to our theme issue through an evaluation of the US archaeological digital data system. Using a systems thinking approach (Meadows 2008), the authors lay out the parts and connections of the system, which broadly align with the sectors of archaeology, such as academia, CRM, descendant communities, and government. They conclude that the system is stuck in a “reinforcing loop,” which encourages individuals and organizations to keep generating and accumulating new data through fieldwork at the expense of making existing data findable and accessible through curation. The authors provide several

approaches to bringing balance to the system and advocate for prioritizing training and instilling the behaviors that foster use of digital curation best practices, such as the use of paradata, metadata, and the FAIR and CARE (Collective benefit, Authority to control, Responsibility, and Ethics) principles.

As we conclude this introduction, we want to reassert that the articles in this theme issue are intended to push the discipline into the future. The authors challenge, inspire, and guide readers to implement new strategies for better management of archaeological collections in all realms of practice. Some of these conversations have been a focus for decades; others are new; and still others struggle to achieve traction, despite their merit and despite their audience(s). We hope that the articles in this issue will shed light on some of the less explored issues affecting collections, and that they will help readers see how some seemingly large or intractable problems can be broken into pragmatic steps. These steps allow us to approach subjects, such as decolonizing and improving the accessibility of our work, modifying teaching practices inside and outside the classroom, and cultivating better attitudes toward collections within CRM, academia, and the field as a whole, as we move ahead.

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Competing Interests

S. Terry Childs is on the editorial board of *Advances in Archaeological Practice*.

NOTE

1. The current membership of the ACC consists of Elizabeth Bollwerk, Danielle Cathcart, S. Terry Childs, Jenna Domeischel, Kerry Gonzalez, Jasmine Heckman, Teresita Majewski, Angela Neller, Sara Rivers Cofield, and Mark Warner. Heather Olson and Sonny Trimble were members during the development of this theme issue.

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