Archeology and Looting Make a Volatile Mix

A UCLA professor's dealings with collectors of looted pre-Columbian art have brought a long-running debate to a boil

IN EVERY FIELD OF SCIENCE THERE ARE dilemmas involving data, but nowhere are the dilemmas more pointed than in archeology. There "data" may mean ancient artifacts worth thousands—even millions—of dollars and representing the patrimony of entire cultures. Such stakes make the data tempting targets not only for scientists but for looters, and that creates some tough choices for researchers. Among them, should archeologists make use of looted material to increase the body of knowledge, even if that means tacitly justifying looting? Or should they take the high road, shunning all looted objects perhaps at the expense of knowledge lost forever?

UCLA archeologist Christopher Donnan ran smack into that hard choice recently. Donnan is the world's foremost expert on the Moche culture—a society that dominated northern coastal Peru before the Incas, reaching its height between A.D. 100 and 800. Moche culture is famous for its ceramics and gold objects, and Donnan has made many contacts among looters and collectors who buy such booty. For his massive archive at UCLA's Cultural History Museum, Donnan photographed Moche material held by international smugglers—and, in a kind of Faustian bargain, agreed not to blow the whistle on them.

When Donnan's exploits surfaced, he was severely criticized by the media. In a May 1990 article in *Arts and Antiques*, for example, writer Carl Nagin called Donnan an "advance man" for smugglers. Worse, considering the importance of Peruvian digging permits to his work, Donnan's reputation in Peru was threatened. "There's a tendency to be a little suspicious of Chris now," said one insider in the Lima archeological community. And a little suspicion can translate into problems for archeologists dealing with governments in developing countries.

While Donnan has so far survived the negative reactions, his actions have brought a long-running debate among archeologists to a new pitch. There seem to be three basic positions in the debate. At one extreme are supporters of Donnan—few in number—who argue that scientific information must not be lost, no matter what. At the other end of the spectrum, a similarly small group states firmly that archeology and collectors of looted material don't mix. The vast majority of researchers, however, seem to fall into a third category: those who believe that any hard-and-fast rule would be a mistake. Since there is no official body to mete out discipline to archeologists, it's likely the situational approach will prevail. But that won't silence a highly emotional debate.

Donnan's difficulties originated in the village of Sipan in the dry Lambayeque Valley of northern Peru, which was once a center of Moche culture. In February 1987 Peruvian archeologist Walter Alva was alerted by Peruvian police to looting at Sipan's Huaca Rajada, a nondescript adobe mound that had never been excavated scientifically. Alva brought a crew to Sipan—and quickly realized the site must be an important Moche tomb. But the looters who had found the tomb first were intent on mining "their" booty. Gun battles erupted in which at least one looter died. And there were attempts on Alva's life.

Brian Alexander

Guarding the loot. *Peruvian police fought pitched gun battles—but were only partially successful in keeping looters away from the rich Moche tomb of the Lord of Sipan.*

When the gunsmoke cleared, the police had secured the site, and Alva's crew was well on its way to uncovering the magnificent Tomb of the Lord of Sipan. But the *huaqueros*, or grave looters, had already made off with some of the choicest bits from the tomb. Among the loot: 5-inch-long gold peanuts, gold funeral masks, gold images of the Moche decapitator god, and ceramic pots decorated with archeologically priceless iconography. Some of these materials were scattered throughout the world, but some wound up in the hands of Enrique Poli, an eccentric Peruvian hotel owner whose support of *huaqueros* helped him amass a large stash of prehistoric loot.

Chris Donnan knew Poli well. In fact, he frequently visited Poli's home museum to see and photograph what the collector had recently acquired. According to Poli, when Donnan came to Peru in early 1987, Poli showed him looted Sipan material—weeks before the police contacted Alva. Donnan denies having seen any looted Sipan objects at this time. In any event, Donnan's contacts informed him that new Moche artifacts were appearing on the international art market. Donnan wanted to see them, and his contacts put him in touch with David Swetnam, who was eventually convicted of smuggling items into California. Donnan photographed some of Swetnam's booty for his UCLA archive.

Poli claims he then sent photos of Sipan artifacts to *National Geographic*, so that they might be publicized even if the Peruvian government took his collection. "Mr. Hernandez [Robert Hernandez, foreign editions editor of *National Geographic*] was shouting on the phone with happiness," says Poli. *National Geographic* denies receiving photos direct from Poli. The magazine says it became involved only when Donnan came to Washington to ask the National Geographic Society for funds to help Alva excavate Sipan.

Whichever version is correct, *National Geographic* was interested in Poli's collection for stories on Sipan. In the October 1988 article that broke the news of the Sipan tomb, *National Geographic* used some of Donnan's photos of Poli's goods, including a spectacular shot of a necklace of

golden peanuts. A follow-up story written by Donnan for the magazine's June 1990 issue included prominent color photographs of ceramics that had made their way from the Tomb of the Lord of Sipan into Poli's collection by way of the *huaqueros*.

In a recent interview at his home in Lima, Poli flipped through a copy of *Geographic*, pointing to the objects from his collection. "You see this?" he asked, smiling broadly. "This is Poli. This is Poli.... All Poli. If someone wants to make a good book, they must use my objects. That is because I am like the Lord of Sipan. I must get all the best offerings."

The only fly in the ointment for Poli was that somehow *National Geographic* failed to credit him for the published photographs, an oversight corrected in the November issue of the magazine by a letter to the editor from Donnan. "*National Geographic* must cover my back," cooed Poli during the *Science* interview.

But if the consequences of publicity have been good for Enrique Poli, they haven't been good for Donnan. In addition to the vitriolic *Arts and Antiques* article, an episode of the PBS series *Frontline* devoted to him was critical. And some of his colleagues have made strong statements denouncing any archeologist who deals with looters or collectors of looted material.

Fernando Cabiezas, former director of Peru's National Museum, says those who utilize looted material are "against my country and the laws and archeological ethics." Cabiezas is supported by Jeremy Sabloff, anthropologist at the University of Pittsburgh and president of the Society for American Anthropology. Sabloff says he would never record looted artifacts because doing so would legitimize looting. "I take a fairly hard line," says Sabloff. "If knowledge is lost, that's too bad."

Donnan and *National Geographic* stoutly defend their actions from such criticisms. "Professionally," Donnan said, "I feel obliged to do everything I can to reconstruct ancient civilizations. I still feel it is perfectly legitimate [to make use of looted material]. It concerns me that other people might not record because they are afraid of what happened to Donnan. That would be tragic."

> "Professionally, I feel obliged to do everything I can to reconstruct ancient civilizations"
> —Chris Donnan

Donnan does not defend looting, which he describes as "horrible." But he argues that not recording looted artifacts will have no effect on the problem. "Not recording what we can is not going to help... Ninety-nine out of 100 people from *huaqueros* to collectors wouldn't even know if an archeologist stopped publishing."

> "I take a fairly hard line. If knowledge is lost, that's too bad."
> —Jeremy Sabloff

National Geographic is also critical of the *huaqueros*, having run several stories decrying looting and collecting. Yet George Stuart, the magazine's archeology editor and himself a prominent archeologist, concedes that *Geographic* publishes photographs of gold objects—including some looted ones—because "people wouldn't read the article otherwise." Stuart also contends that publishing pictures of Poli's artifacts does not increase their resale value, a statement other archeologists and art historians interviewed by *Science* found laughable.

Some members of the archeological community have rallied to Donnan's side. Among them is Walter Alva, the Peruvian archeologist who led the Sipan excavations. Alva has been a crusader against looting, and, as a result, several attempts on his life have been made by the *huaqueros*. But Alva told *Science* that Donnan was "doing a great job," not only for science, but also for Peru. "When he makes an exhibition of the material, all the country will know the magnitude of what has been lost [due to looting]."

Elizabeth Boone, director of pre-Columbian studies at Harvard's Dumbarton Oaks research center in Washington, D.C., sees Donnan as the victim of shifting standards. "We are caught up in changing ethics," she says. "Chris was caught up in something that would have been perfectly acceptable in the past. And the question is, will it be acceptable in the future?"

Many archeologists contend that the situation defies unequivocal conclusions. "To codify this underestimates the complexities of the problem," says Julie Jones, curator of pre-Columbian art for the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Jones' judgment hinges on differences between New York and Lima. "A lot of this has nothing to do with the niceties of North American ethics," she adds. "In Peru, everyone who has a shovel and is poor digs. To sit up here in our comfortable air-conditioned places and say those people shouldn't loot... is a nicety that we can afford and they cannot."

"[Looters] tend to be people who live on the land," says Dan Sandweiss, an American archeologist who works on a Chimu site dating from about A.D. 100 at Tucume, Peru. "They are the descendants of the people who produced the artifacts and feel they have a claim to them." Indeed, Sandweiss adds, the looters "feel the archeologists are looting themselves."

Furthermore, looting is given some approval even at high levels of Peruvian society. It is not uncommon for Peruvian government officials to collect looted materials. Mujica Gallo, former Peruvian ambassador to Austria, has turned his huge collection of artifacts into a Lima tourist attraction. And *National Geographic* is not the only U.S. institution that has relations with collectors of looted material. The cultural affairs officer of the U.S. Embassy in Lima has frequent contacts with Poli. And Poli was delighted to show a recent visitor to his home his visitors' book bearing the signature of U.N. Secretary General Javier Perez de Cuellar, himself a Peruvian, among other signers.

In spite of the complexity of the situation, there have been attempts to set rules. Pittsburgh's Sabloff cites Article II of the bylaws of the Society for American Archeology, which condemns activities that cause losses of scientific knowledge or access to sites or "conduct that results in such losses." Such a stipulation might be interpreted as condemning looting, but the wording is vague and there is no explicit mention of what a researcher should do if confronted by looted material. Sabloff said a bylaw specifically forbidding contact with looters or collectors would "be subject to rigorous discussion" among the society's members. But he guesses that such a bylaw "would pass."

In the absence of a consensus, researchers faced with unique but illegally obtained materials will have to make up their own minds—as Chris Donnan did. Meanwhile, Donnan will have to live with his choice. He says at least two books are being written about the Sipan case—and a movie deal is in the works. That publicity could shine more unwanted light on his activities, perhaps jeopardizing his precious digging permits. "I wish I could just go back and do my work quietly," Donnan sighed.

■ BRIAN ALEXANDER

Brian Alexander is a free-lance writer based in San Diego.