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REACTION

# Always take a look back. Ethics in post-conflict archaeology

Simon Radchenko<sup>1\*</sup>  and Dmytro Kiosak<sup>2,3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Historical Studies, University of Turin, Torino, Italy, <sup>2</sup>Department of Asian and North African Studies, Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Venice, Italy and <sup>3</sup>Odesa I.I. Mechnikov National University, Odesa, Ukraine

\*Corresponding author. Email: [simon.radchenko@gmail.com](mailto:simon.radchenko@gmail.com)

## Abstract

This reaction to the Paul Newson and Ruth Young paper entitled 'Post-conflict ethics, archaeology and archaeological heritage. A call for discussion' (*Archaeological dialogues*, 2022) supports the call for a discussion regarding archaeological ethics in post-conflict zones. Following the agreement on the fuzzy border between the state of 'conflict' and 'post-conflict', it reflects on the continuity between these two. Furthermore, the reaction adds an additional issue to the discussion, which is the ethical ground of 'being above the conflict'. Applying a 'holistic ethic' approach, it reflects on the ethical assessment of archaeological practices performed by Russian archaeologists in the zones that were damaged during conflict, escalated due to the actions of the Russian government. A series of examples are shown to consider the complexity of ethical judgements in this particular case. Last but not least, the reaction claims that in some cases ethical judgements are possible and effective due to the convergence of numerous factors.

**Keywords:** Ethics; conflict; post-conflict; archaeology; archaeological heritage; holistic ethic

The discussion on archaeological ethics and archaeology after instances of conflict has been strongly encouraged in recent years because political and social tension has been rising worldwide. This call to discuss the pillars, concepts and the overall arrangement of archaeological ethics related to ongoing or recent conflicts is very welcome. But while we are encouraged by the call to discuss post-conflict ethics on a global scale, the current map of military conflicts forces us to address Europe. This is because Ukraine, a country facing conflict as we write, and Ukrainian archaeology have shown a clear trend towards integration with Europe and European archaeology, in the same way that Russian archaeology has. This integration is evident in the selection of the Ukrainian archaeologist Fedir Androshchuk for the European Association of Archaeologists (EAA) Executive board and the discussion of the complex overview of Ukrainian archaeology during the war in the *European Archaeologist* (TEA) Newsletter (Shydlovskiy, Telizhenko and Ivakin 2022).

In this reaction, we agree with Newson and Young (2022, 157) that conflict and post-conflict are dynamic concepts with no identifiable boundaries; however, we believe that post-conflict archaeology is also part of a reaction to conflict, and it should be considered within a single framework that includes conflict itself. This adds another facet to the discussion on archaeological ethics in post-conflict zones. While in their paper Newson and Young bring the concepts of sustainability, hearing and involvement of local communities to the table, our question would be how to synchronize these with the standards of academic integrity.

Archaeology is a cultural, political (Hamilakis and Duke 2007) and economic agent (as was shown in Meskell 2005 and Winter 2007). Moreover, archaeology implements itself through

specific results – scientific research, publication, discussion and knowledge. In a post-conflict environment, however, archaeology might be performed by actors who (willingly or not) legitimate the conflict itself. Applying the holistic ethic approach introduced in healthcare practices some decades ago (Keegan and Keegan 1992), one cannot ignore the unfair and unjust igniting of a military conflict by any government or terroristic entity while accepting archaeological research, which is institutionalized through governmental academic institutions of the potential culprit in the conflict. Even though, in some cases, this unavoidably leads to the complicated question of defining a culprit, there are examples where the answer is fairly straightforward. In our opinion, it is essential that such transparent issues form a precedent where archaeological ethics present a just and clear position that follows an ethical code.

Almost every conflict exposes clashing narratives, which often search for justification in the past. The Israel–Palestinian tensions are probably the most studied and emblematic (Assi 2012; Kisler 2022; Silberman 1982), and while structurally similar, but very different in essence, conflicts of narratives affect cultural heritage in contested territories in very different ways, such as in confrontations along the Turkey–Syria border (Lostal and Cunliffe 2016), Azerbaijani–Armenian war (Dragadze 1989), Iranian isolation (Dezhamkhooy et al. 2019), the conflict between Kosovo and Serbia (Defreese 2009), or the confrontation in the Transnistria region of Moldova (King 2000). The logic of ethical ambivalence leads to the equalization of scientific efforts and projects and the support of narratives of conflict. Sometimes, even rescue projects designed to protect cultural heritage can be used as a legitimization of military presence.

For example, the legitimization of conflict can be illustrated by the recent heritage projects in Syria, where Russia is taking the lead (al-Azm 2017; Al Hassan 2017; Plets 2017). The results of these projects legitimize the Russian presence in the region among scholars and the non-scientific public, even though it is clear that such a presence is due to the very nature of the conflicts in the region. Therefore, the acceptance of presence of Russian scholars there leads to the approval not just of their scientific work but also of Russia's political practices. This is even more outrageous since Russian scholars in Syria have conducted a series of projects on cultural heritage preservation and reconstruction (Belal and Shcherbina 2019).

Thus, the concept of post-conflict curation of archaeological heritage cannot depend on the assumption of 'equal guilt of the participants in the conflict'. In a situation of direct aggression, this assumption is far from ethical and aligns more with the aggressor's narrative. Archaeology is not above the fight; it is directly involved in legitimizing competitive national, imperial and religious projects (Kohl 1998). The claims made by aggressors are often supported by references to symbols derived from the archaeological heritage of the disputed territory (Trigger 1984). A conflict poses an ethical choice and not taking a side is a choice in itself (Steinberger 1990).

The recent Convention on Offences relating to Cultural Property (Council of Europe Treaty Series (CETS) No. 221; also known as Nicosia Convention; Bieczyński 2017; Oriolo 2022) clearly speaks out against the legitimization and use of cultural heritage artefacts in a way that is offensive, unjust and/or illicit. One of main goals of this statement is to prevent the financial support of worldwide terrorism through the monetization of cultural heritage and related practices. Since Russia has been declared a state sponsor of terrorism (Almqvist 2022), its participation in archaeological practices and governmental support of archaeological research also contributes to the latter. The acceptance of such participation – in the form of research projects, publications, etc. – on an international level is, thus, nothing more than the legitimization of the whole set of practices performed by the Russian government.

Another case involving the relation of archaeological practices to the legitimization of conflict is the creation of Russian narratives concerning Ukraine and archaeological practices on Ukrainian territories. Even before the actual start of the Russian–Ukrainian war in 2014, archaeologists from Russia would often describe Ukrainian territory as a 'south-western area of CIS [Commonwealth of Independent States] territory' or 'the territory of USSR' (Chernykh 1992; Ryndina 2009, 10). There have also been references to the demise of Ukrainian archaeology since

1991 (Tunkina 2011). Even after 2014, Russian scholars have continued conducting research in Crimea (Bocharov 2016; 2017) and have published their results in journals worldwide, including those affiliated with Scopus or other scientometric databases (Bocharov et al. 2019; Kazaryan 2017; Kirilko 2019; Saprykina et al. 2022; Volkov 2015). The acceptance of this research by the international community threatens peace all around the world and is simply indecent. In our opinion, the absence of clear ethical judgments concerning this research has fed into the perception that these lands belong to Russia, and it sanctions imperial narratives shared by Russian governmental museums and institutions (Kishkovsky 2022).

The experience of post-Second World War archaeological heritage provides additional examples in support of this position. After the Second World War, the fieldwork undertaken during the German occupation of Ukraine was published without mentioning their authors or reflecting on their particular contexts (cf. Kotova and Tuboltsev 2013; Pasternak 1948; Sveshnikov 1954). It was only much later that ethical judgments on illegitimate research were argued as necessary (Yanenko 2016), and their earlier absence has hampered the multi-faceted and multivocal understanding of the archaeological record.

Archaeology is a continuous practice that lasts through pre-conflict, conflict and post-conflict periods and affects the international relationships of independent states, regardless of the outcomes of these conflicts. It is also evident that the absence of ethical reaction to the unjust and illegal actions of any entities (terroristic groups or countries) encourages these entities to proceed with their policy. Given that archaeology and history are essential components of an ideological and political narrative that set a structure of potential conflict and its perception through time (Newson and Young 2022), ethical reaction is necessary whenever possible to develop ethical solutions to the issues we face. These solutions should be flexible, dynamic and multivocal, including those affected by the conflict in the first place.

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