

Fall 2001

## Archaeology and the Public: Exploring Popular Misconceptions

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### Recommended Citation

Rakestraw, Tamara and Reynolds, Amy (2001) "Archaeology and the Public: Exploring Popular Misconceptions," *Inquiry: The University of Arkansas Undergraduate Research Journal*: Vol. 2 , Article 8.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.uark.edu/inquiry/vol2/iss1/8>

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## ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE PUBLIC: EXPLORING POPULAR MISCONCEPTIONS

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### Abstract

*To understand how the public views archaeology and uncover the sources of their perceptions, this paper summarizes the interviews of 58 Fayetteville area high school and college students from the Fall (2000). Using standard ethnographic techniques, including prepared questionnaires and open-ended conversation, we identified several trends in the public's perceptions of archaeology and have developed some hypotheses to account for them. As the Society for American Archaeology has only recently begun to understand, to better educate the general public about archaeology it is important to identify and understand the sources of these misconceptions.*

*For more than a century, Hollywood, book publishers, advertisers and the American public have been fascinated with archaeology. More recently, archaeology has come to cable television with the introduction of the highly successful "The Discovery Channel" and "The History Channel." In this paper, we focus specifically on issues pertaining to the connection the public creates between archaeologists and dinosaurs, gender biases about archaeology, and public views on the looting of archaeological sites. This paper concludes with reasons why this sort of study is essential to the field of archaeology.*

### Introduction

The public's misconceptions about archaeology have recently gained the attention of the Society for American Archaeology (SAA). Last February they published a survey entitled "Exploring Perceptions and Attitudes about Archaeology," the first ever research focused on determining the public's general knowledge about archaeology.<sup>1</sup> Unaware of this publication, in the Fall 2000, we conducted our own survey to determine what ideas people had about archaeology. In contrast to the SAA report, our research was specifically aimed at determining what *media* have influenced public perceptions. We specifically focused on the ways popular fiction, movies, and television impacted these views. Understanding the influences

shaping the public's perception of what archaeologists do is absolutely critical to successfully correcting (or at least counteracting) these misconceptions, in order to preserve and protect cultural heritage.

### Background

The recent proliferation of television channels that focus on archaeology, such as "The Discovery Channel," "The History Channel," and "The Learning Channel," helps illustrate that archaeology is remarkably marketable and highly profitable for Hollywood. Despite commercial appeal, these television shows often blur the distinction between legitimate archaeology and pseudo-archaeology. These channels frequently show programs that deal with archaeology, mostly hyping the exotic, the unknown, or ancient treasures. For example, "The Discovery Channel" recently aired a show about "the last" Neandertals, which used archaeological information to reconstruct what Neandertal life would have been like in Western Europe (ca. 30,000 years ago). And in 1999, Fox aired the popular "Opening of the Lost Tombs: Live from Egypt" followed by a sequel the following year. PBS also produces shows dealing with archaeology: its "NOVA" series will often focus on archaeological finds. Since the days of silent films, Hollywood movies have also dealt with archaeological topics and they have typically done extremely well at the box office. Examples range from "The Mummy" (both the 1932 and the 1999 versions) to the wildly popular Indiana Jones trilogy, which was the single most well known archaeological movie mentioned by our respondents. The first Indiana Jones movie, "Raiders of the Lost Ark," was ranked 64 on the American Film Institute's list of the best movies of the century.<sup>2</sup>

Archaeology has proved to be a lucrative topic for novels as well. Numerous fictional books and entire series have employed archaeological themes. Of the best known, Agatha Christie set many of her murder mysteries in the Valley of the Kings; Michael Crichton has written numerous books dealing with archaeology ("Sphere" and "Congo" both have



after we were prodded to define looting for them, ten percent still had difficulty distinguishing between legitimate and legal excavations and clandestine looting. This confusion seems to come from not understanding what looting is, and not understanding the importance of preserving archaeological sites and artifacts *in situ*. While fifty-two percent of our informants knew that it was appropriate to turn over archaeological artifacts they may find to the proper authorities, they did not seem to know who the "proper authorities" were. Sadly, the remaining 48% either did not know what to do with artifacts they might find, or thought that they should (or could) keep or sell them at their own

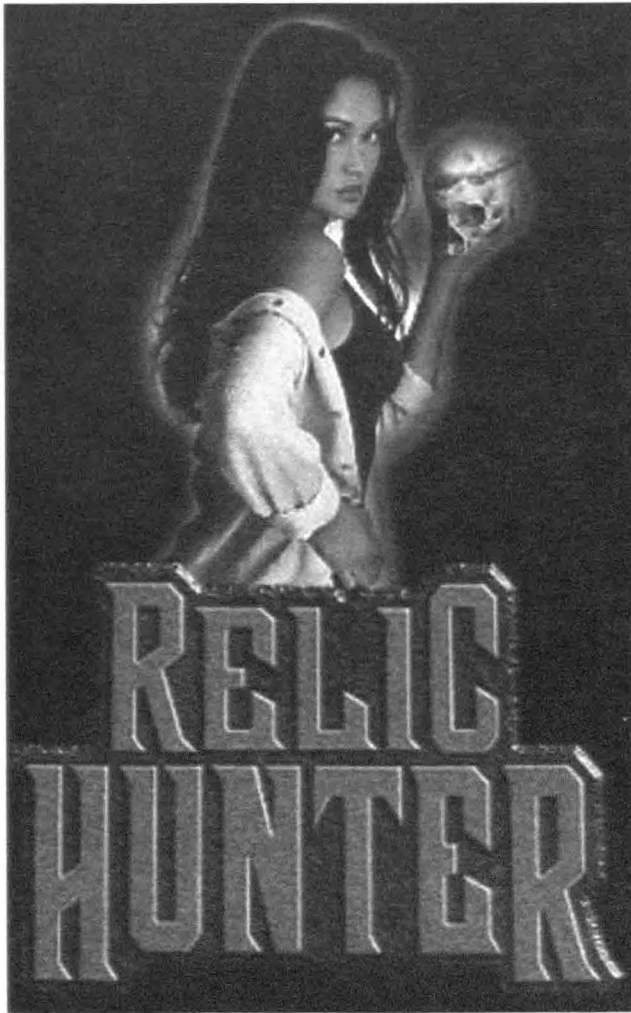


Figure 3. Sydney Fox, the woman archaeologist from "Relic Hunter".

discretion. When we pursued this question by asking if they knew of any laws pertaining to archaeological sites and what they should do if they happened upon artifacts, most said there were "some laws" but did not know any specifics (Figure 6). As well, many self-identified land owners expressed the fear that if their land is known to contain an archaeological site, it will be taken from them.

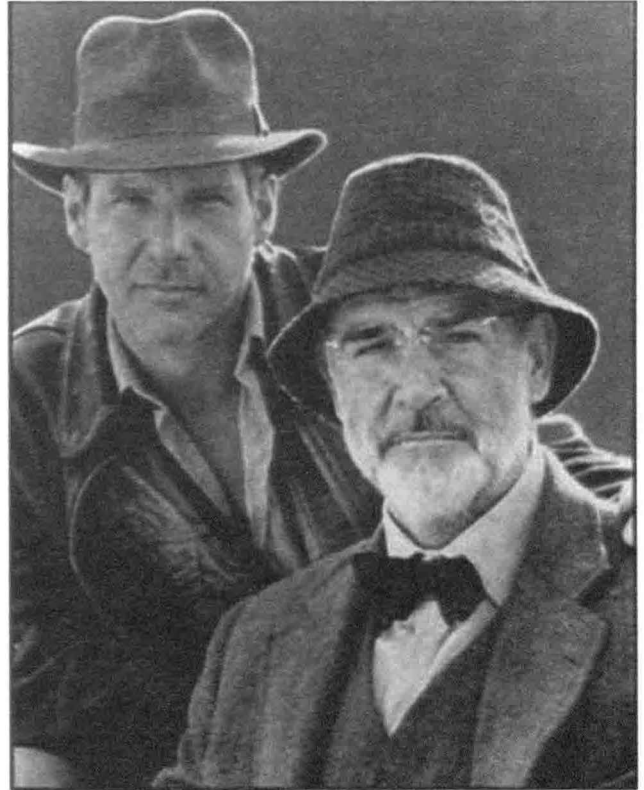


Figure 4. Indiana Jones and his father, the quintessential archaeologists--hairy chested and hairy chinned.

If the Society for American Archaeology and other professional research and educational communities are to have an effective impact on public knowledge of laws designed to protect cultural heritage, this confusion over what looting is, and redressing people's ignorance of their legal responsibilities, are of paramount importance.

## Conclusion

This report has brought to light three misconceptions about archaeology: the connection between dinosaurs and archaeology, the gender bias in thinking that the ideal archaeologist is a man, and the confusion about looting and laws that protect cultural heritage. Although surprising and disturbing, our respondents' answers only reflect ideas that are projected by film, television, and fictional media. It is necessary for the public to understand what archaeology really is because:

- the majority of archaeological funding in the United States comes from taxpayer dollars,
- the looting of sites will diminish with further education, and
- the cultural heritage of past civilizations will remain intact and respected.

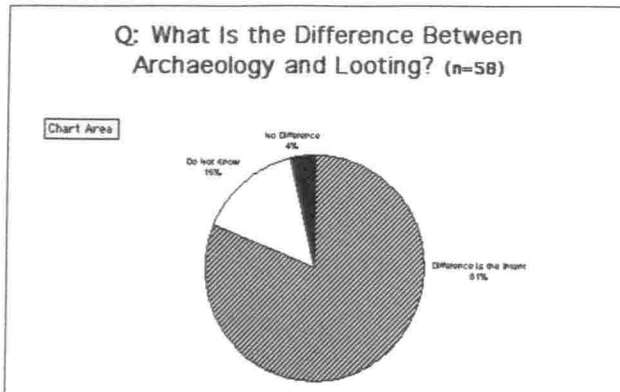


Figure 5. Question: What is the difference between archaeology and looting?

**What Should You Do if You Find an Artifact or Archaeological Site? (n=58)**

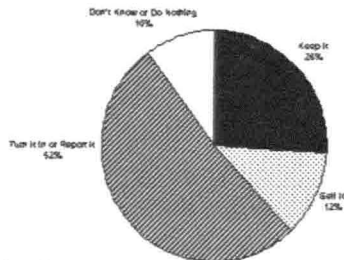


Figure 6. Question: what would you do if you found an archaeological site on your property or found artifacts lying around?

Studies such as this, which identify some of the causes for and sources of the public's misconceptions of archaeology, can provide archaeologists with the awareness necessary to correct or counteract these misconceptions through public outreach and education.

**Endnotes:**

1 The Harris Survey. "Exploring Public Perceptions and Attitudes about Archaeology." *Society for American Archaeology*: Washington, D.C. 2000.

2 "AFI's 100 Years, 100 Movies." *American Film Institute*. 27 April 2001. <<http://www.afionline.org/100movies/>>.

3 Dixon, Susan L. *Archaeologists Do What? Students' Initial Conceptions of Archaeology*. Paper presented at the annual meetings of the American Anthropological Association, San Francisco 2000.

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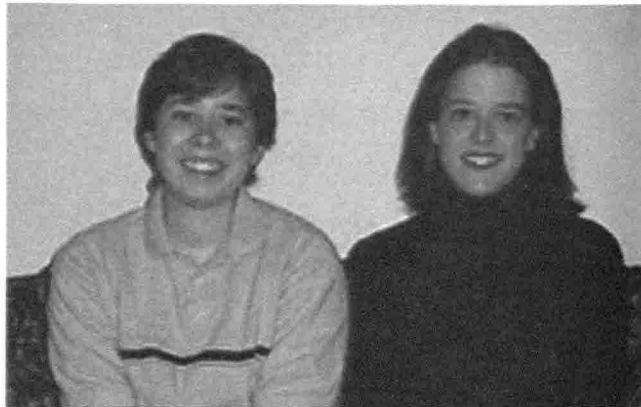
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Tamara Rakeshaw and Amy Reynolds

**Faculty comments**

Professor Dobres describes the value of her mentees' work as follows:

Tamara Rakestraw and Amy Reynolds describe here the results of a truly significant and original piece of research conducted in the fall of 2000. Their study begins to document (rather than merely assume) how and from where the general public gets its ideas about archaeology. Archaeologists and Hollywood alike have long known that the public is simply fascinated by things very old, by the exotic, the mysterious, and of course by lost treasures and gold-filled tombs. But professional archaeologists have also long lamented that the public is not only woefully ignorant about what archaeologists actually do; they have also recognized that it is these misunderstandings that lead to a cavalier disregard for the preservation of



archaeological sites and the artifacts people may "happen upon." Unfortunately, while archaeologists have long complained about public ignorance of their work, they have never determined the inspiration for these misconceptions, though this is clearly necessary if they are to successfully counteract the most problematic of these notions. Why this should be a matter of serious scholarly concern is two-fold: (1) because tax dollars go to support more than 93% of all archaeology conducted in the US. But more important, (2) where there is ignorance, sites continue to get looted, burials are treated in a shameless and disrespectful way, scientific data is compromised, and cultural heritage is lost forever. Rakestraw and Reynolds provide us an important piece of rigorous scholarship that begins to unravel this puzzle in a manner that makes it worthy of publication in a professional archaeological journal.

The seemingly light-hearted nature of this topic, archaeology and pop culture, should not lead the reader to underestimate its importance. This is an original and impressive study that combines carefully planned and executed field research (ethnographic interviews and a sociological survey) with thoughtful data collection and both statistical and qualitative data analysis. It is no overstatement to say that this work can serve as an exemplar for future studies (which professional archaeologists are only now beginning to undertake in fits and starts).

Tamara and Amy are without question two of the most remarkably self-directed, enthusiastic, engaged, mature, and bright students I've worked with while teaching at the Universities of California-Berkeley, Virginia, and South Carolina. This project began as a mere 30% requirement for a 4000-level course I recently created for the Department of Anthropology, entitled "Archaeology Goes to the Movies." But because Tamara and Amy intuitively understood that the topic was both significant and fun, they pursued it with a degree of enthusiasm, labor, and time investment that I have never seen before. The research was significant in itself, but their results were simply spectacular -- simultaneously sobering, informative, and presented in a remarkably thoughtful and organized manner. Indeed, their in-class presentation simply "wowed" the entire class--most of whom were also Honors and graduate students!

What has especially impressed me about Tamara and Amy is how well they have collaborated on this project--an important skill too few of our students are taught to appreciate. And over the past several months, it's been a joy to watch Tamara's and Amy's personal and scholarly growth. This spring, they gave an extremely professional public presentation of this research to the Anthropology faculty and to the faculty and research staff of the Arkansas Archaeological Survey. While they negotiated some really tough

questions with clarity and insight, they also provided these working archaeologists important information that will prove useful to fulfilling their professional mandate to undertake public education that helps protect and preserve the archaeological heritage of Arkansas.

Anthropology Chairperson Mary Jo Schneider seconds the comments made by Professor Dobres. She says:

What sorts of images does the word "archeology" conjure up? Romantic images of idyllic hunter-gatherers? Fierce Neanderthals who live in caves? Arrow head collectors? Dinosaurs? Although many popular Hollywood movies, television shows, and public broadcasting specials have featured archeologists, does the general public have a realistic image of what archeology is all about?

This is the question posed by undergraduate anthropology majors Tamara Rakestraw and Amy Reynolds. Rakestraw and Reynolds, working under the supervision of Dr. Marcia-Anne Dobres, Visiting Assistant Professor of Anthropology, surveyed a sample of fifty-eight students from the University of Arkansas and Fayetteville High School to learn just what archeology means to young people.

Rakestraw and Reynold's survey results indicate that archeology is not well understood. Nearly one-third of those interviewed believed that the dinosaur-filled movie, "Jurassic Park," was a film about archeology. The authors concluded that in the mind of the public, any professional who "digs" is an archeologist--no matter what is being excavated.

Archeologists are perceived as almost exclusively male, even though in reality, the field of archeology is almost evenly divided between men and women. And, perhaps most disturbing, Rakestraw and Reynold's sample failed to differentiate "looting" from "legitimate archeology."

In this paper, Rakestraw and Reynolds have made a substantial contribution by pointing out the nature of the misconceptions that the general public has about the field of archeology. This is a fine piece of scholarship with important academic and applied implications.