

SOME NOTES ON... Museum archaeology, archives and ethics

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The recently launched Archaeological Ethics Database currently lists over 500 sources relating to ethics, but what governs the day-to-day working life of a museum archaeologist is the Museums Association Code of Ethics.¹

Adherence to the MA Code takes many forms, but it is what it states with regard to disposal that is of particular relevance to the management of archaeological archives, especially in a museum climate where storage space is at a premium and the profession demands strategic change.² Disposal should be undertaken in accordance with the MA's Code, its *Disposal Toolkit* and supplementary guidance notes: the key considerations relative to archives are discussed in the Society for Museum Archaeology's recently published *Guidance on the Rationalisation of Museum Archaeological Collections*.³ When disposing of material as part of a rationalisation project (or for any other reason) there should be, for example, a strong presumption for keeping items within the public domain and a strong preference for free gift or transfer to other accredited museums. The disposal activity itself can be restricted by, amongst other things, specific forms of organisational governance and associated legislation. Archaeological material is also potentially more difficult to dispose of than many other types of museum object, largely because of the sheer quantities that may be involved and its relationship with specific localities. SMA's guidance states that the disposal

methods employed should not contribute to the contamination of the future archaeological record and so, whilst controlled reburial may be an option, permanent destruction (e.g. grinding to hardcore) may be the only solution. The latter is appropriate ethically so long as all other options have been exhausted, with adequate stakeholder consultation and where due diligence can be demonstrated through detailed research and documentation



processes. However, it would be inappropriate to reduce an archive to such an extent that it rendered the future re-investigation of the original research questions it addressed impossible. Delivering these types of projects will present ethical challenges for the increasing number of curators charged with managing archaeological collections but who are without archaeological training or expertise, since they cannot make informed, and therefore ethical, decisions about them.

Aside from the ethical considerations that govern the material archive, there are also those that concern the data contained within them, particularly where this involves the recording of personal details. Data protection is an ethical issue in its own right since it involves respect for individuals, their rights regarding privacy and the use of information about them. The introduction of the General Data Protection Regulation brought some elements of archaeological archiving and museum practice into sharp focus. For example, commercial organisations often supply museums with personal details of individuals as part of a notification of fieldwork process or within the deposited



Documentation Office at Bristol Museum. Just like every other type of organisation, museums have had to grapple with the implications of GDPR and in particular regarding the personal information held in collections documentation. One consequence is that all paperwork, forms, etc. that govern collections management – including that relating to deposition of archaeological archives – has had to be reviewed and revised. Credit: Bristol Culture

archives themselves. Museums need to be certain that those individuals who are identifiable are aware of how their information is going to be stored, processed and used in perpetuity. Similarly, organisations need to be able to reassure archive donors, as well as their own employees and third-party contractors, that the data they have collected and shared will not be used for unauthorised purposes. To address this, SMA has recently produced an editable template for data-sharing agreements between units and museums.⁴ By putting an agreement like this in place, organisations can ensure that the personal data they share will be protected with adequate security measures, whilst museums can articulate how they will make use of the data in the future. This is an important consideration for museum collections management since personal data attached to donations forms part of the permanent record relevant to object provenance and

transfer of title. Clearly organisations need to address the sharing of personal data at the earliest possible opportunity and reference it within privacy policies. From an ethical perspective it is vitally important that museum curators understand how they may use, or process, personal data and that it is well

documented: it affects what can or can't be done in the future, from crediting donors in museum publications/on labels or simply being able to contact donors as stakeholders in rationalisation and disposal exercises. How we deal with this ethically now governs how we can continue to act ethically in the future.



“Museums are public-facing, collections-based institutions that preserve and transmit knowledge, culture and history for past, present and future generations. This places museums in an important position of trust in relation to their audiences, local communities, donors, source communities, partner organisations, sponsors and funders. Museums must make sound ethical judgements in all areas of work in order to maintain this trust.”

Museums Association Code of Ethics (2015)

Gail Boyle

Gail has had a successful career in museums for over 30 years and was recently awarded the Fellowship of the Museums Association in recognition of her significant contribution to the museum sector. She has long-standing collaborative and teaching relationships with both universities in Bristol, is former Chair the Society for Museum Archaeology, Vice-Chair of Bristol & Gloucestershire Archaeological Society Council and Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London. Gail was appointed to the Treasure Valuation Committee in March 2018 and also sits on several national heritage and museum-related advisory boards, including the Portable Antiquities Advisory Group.



Treasure: Saxon buckle tongue (Cold Ashton). Clearly the MA Code does not specifically refer to archaeological archives but it does prohibit museum staff from providing financial valuations on items belonging to members of the public; conversely curators do often, quite ethically, have to engage in the valuation processes relevant for treasure or for loan purposes. Credit: Bristol Culture

¹ <https://www.museumsassociation.org/ethics>
² <https://www.museumsassociation.org/collections/09052018-collections-2030>
³ <http://socmusarch.org.uk/projects/guidance-on-the-rationalisation-of-museum-archaeology-collections/>
⁴ <http://socmusarch.org.uk/data-sharing-agreement-archives-template-sma/>