

# Archaeologists and Archives

## Revisiting an Old Challenge

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Archaeologists both use and create archival records. We use archival records to prepare for new research or excavations, better understand previous work, or contextualize our data. We create archives through curation of field notes, maps, images, site reports, or other records. While the relationships between archaeology and archives are clear, archaeologists are not often formally trained to use, create, or manage archives. As a result, our efforts may be unguided or incomplete at best or unethical at worst. This special issue of *Advances in Archaeological Practice* (AAP) addresses some of the challenges and benefits archaeologists experience related to archival work.

This issue builds on a deep and solid foundation of previous work on the intersection of archaeology and archives. From the American perspective, Vogt-O'Connor (1999) edited an issue of *CRM* titled "Archives at the Millennium," which offered case studies and presented challenges and best practices. The issue urged archaeologists and others to act as stewards of their professional paper trails in the hopes that these records would not "pass into the gray oblivion of the undocumented past" (Vogt-O'Connor 1999:3). Within their volume *Curating Archaeological Collections*, Sullivan and Childs (2003) address the various ways archaeological work creates records, along with practical advice on how to curate these records with as much care and intent as the material culture of archaeology. More recently, Schlanger and others (2015:91) advocate for broad discussion among archaeologists about data collection; specifically how and why data are collected and how to manage data long-term. They argue that more thoughtful data collection and management approaches will both increase public access to archaeological knowledge and combat the ever-growing volume of archaeological records being produced.

### ABSTRACT

Archaeology as a field is experiencing a curation crisis—our professional paper trail is extensive, and we are not properly trained to adequately catalogue and curate these records. For decades, a handful of archaeologists have pushed for our discipline to confront this crisis—we need better methods for creating records and maintaining archives, as well as stronger training in how to effectively conduct archival research. This issue of *Advances in Archaeological Practice* echoes these earlier calls to action, adding new voices and perspectives. In addition to the theme of a curation crisis, our authors discuss access to archival records and the relationship between archives and power. The authors and guest editors of this issue hope the contributions presented here will inspire more sustained engagement with archival training, theory, and praxis.

El campo de la arqueología se encuentra actualmente en una crisis de conservación: nuestro rastro documental profesional es extenso y no tenemos la formación adecuada para catalogar y conservar de manera apropiada estos registros. Durante décadas, un puñado de arqueólogos ha impulsado la disciplina para enfrentar esta crisis. Necesitamos mejores métodos para crear registros y mantener archivos, así como una formación más profunda para realizar la investigación archivística de forma efectiva. Esta edición de *Advances in Archaeological Practice* repite estas anteriores llamadas de atención, incorporando nuevas voces y perspectivas. Además del tema de una crisis de curación, nuestros autores discuten el acceso a los registros de archivos y la relación entre archivos y poder. Los autores y editores invitados de esta edición esperan que las contribuciones presentadas inspiren un compromiso más sostenido con el entrenamiento, la teoría y la práctica archivística.

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The UK-based Chartered Institute for Archaeologists formed a Special Interest Group for Archaeological Archives (Archaeological Archives Forum 2012), bringing together archaeologists working with archival records to share resources and identify best practices. This group offers conferences and workshops, including an annual meeting organized around a theme, and maintains a website that serves as a resource library of sorts (Chartered Institute for Archaeologists 2016). A broader European collaboration, Archaeological Resources in Cultural Heritage: A European Standard (ARCHES), also emerged in 2012, focusing on issues and challenges in creating archaeological archives. The collaboration produced *The Standard and Guide to Best Practices for Archaeological Archiving in Europe* (Perrin et al. 2014), which is available online in a number of languages.

While not an exhaustive list, these selected previous works demonstrate the care and attention archaeologists have devoted to questions related to archival work in the past. Some of the challenges and concerns addressed in these previous works still exist, such as the need to establish best practices for creating and curating archival records. New issues and challenges arise as technology and the discipline of archaeology both change—what may have been “solved” in the past can once again become an open question. And as new archaeologists enter the profession, they face the same challenges as their predecessors, such as a lack of formal training in archival methods.

The goals of this thematic issue are to provide new perspectives on how archives can “speak” to archaeologists as well as insight on how archaeologists have approached archival research. Articles in this issue represent three broad themes: (1) curation of archaeological records, (2) access to archaeological records, and (3) archaeological records as a locus of power. A common thread throughout is a concern with ethics. Each author focuses on a particular problem related to the management, creation, and/or use of archival records. With case studies from around the globe and attention to the past, present, and future, these articles offer new approaches to using or creating archives without losing sight of the centrality of material culture in archaeological investigations.

While we argue that archaeologists must develop better practices related to curation of and access to archaeological records, we recognize that archaeologists are not archivists. Archaeologists’ work related to archives generally happens in very specific contexts, resulting in unique terminology (albeit terminology that is not uniformly defined or applied). We like the definition of “archaeological archive” offered by the European group ARCHES because it recognizes the connection between objects and documentation in archaeology: “An archaeological archive comprises all records and materials recovered during an archaeological project and identified for long-term preservation, including artefacts, ecofacts and other environmental remains, waste products, scientific samples and also written and visual documentation in paper, film and digital form” (Perrin et al. 2014:20). This European perspective regarding archaeological archives is distinct from that of the United States, where “archive” in an archaeological context generally refers to documentation only, while objects are referred to as “collections.” This AAP issue focuses on the documentation produced as the result of an archaeological project without losing sight of the critical link between records and objects—it is the records that provide the

context for those objects, making attention to documentation as important as attention to material culture. In other words, what we as archaeologists are able to learn from objects is often bounded by our ability to access and understand the associated records.

## CURATION CRISIS

Any archaeologist who has faced the post-fieldwork challenge of where to store new materials knows that the discipline is experiencing what Sullivan and Childs (2003:23) identify as a curation “crisis” (see also Childs 1995; Merriman and Swain 1999). Archaeological repositories are literally overflowing with artifacts, ecofacts, and samples, along with associated records. For example, Banks and others (2016:164) reviewed records related to compliance with the National Historic Preservation Act (e.g., project reports) in North Dakota, South Dakota, and Montana: the State Historical Society of North Dakota had 15,255 records, the South Dakota State Historical Society curated 13,500 records, and the Montana Historical Society had 35,385 records. These numbers primarily represent final reports; if every data form, field notebook, or map from excavations related to the National Historic Preservation Act was included, or publications or records from other types of archaeological excavations, the number of archival records would be significantly higher. Altschul (2016) has estimated the number of archaeological projects sponsored by federal agencies, concluding that completed federal archaeology projects have, to date, resulted in a minimum of two million digital files, a number that grows with each new federally sponsored excavation.

In light of this curation crisis, archaeologists are faced with two critical questions addressed by authors in this issue: What is worth saving? What is worth saving in its original form? Our authors take up these questions through case studies or discussion of best practices. A related concern also addressed by our authors is *how* to save records, both in terms of process and form. Just as items in archival records vary, so too do the forms in which records are kept. The Society of American Archivists defines archives as “permanently valuable records” that provide “documentary evidence of past events” (Society of American Archivists 2016). Archives, therefore, include both digital and non-digital records. Non-digital records are preserved in their original form, but these require physical space and carefully maintained curation conditions. Digital records, on the other hand, may be kept with minimal space requirements, but require significant time investments. Data originally in digital form, such as digital photographs, databases, site reports, or survey data, require upkeep through server or software updates. In his article in this issue, Richards estimates that the more than two million files stored with the digital archive Archaeology Data Service necessitated 21,327 processes (e.g., upgrading files) to ensure adequate long-term preservation. Transforming original paper records into digital form is also time-consuming. In addition, some nuances within the original data may be lost. The visual appearance of color, for example, can vary depending on the digitization method or tool on which a user is viewing a digital record, among other factors.

In this issue, McManamon and others (2017) and Richards (2017) offer different international perspectives on the growing practice

of digitizing archaeological records, including the pros and cons of digital archives versus paper archives. McManamon and others advocate for incorporating data management and upkeep into the workflow of every archaeological project. They also argue for the need to develop metadata associated with digital records so these data forms can be more easily searched, accessed, and utilized. Richards reflects on 20 years of challenges, opportunities, and changes in digital data preservation in the United Kingdom and offers suggestions for best practices moving forward to ensure that ever-growing amounts of data are preserved adequately.

Archaeological records, in all forms, have increased for a variety of reasons. Schlanger and others (2015:84) quantify the growth in archaeology due to the National Historic Preservation Act and point out that, between the 1960s and 2010s, the number of National Register listing determinations made each year has nearly doubled, to over 100,000 annually. In addition, 36 CFR 79, Curation of Federally-Owned and Administered Archaeological Collections, was passed in 1990, which established regulations for curating records associated with federal archaeological projects. While providing valuable guidance on record-keeping, 36 CFR 79 also prompted federal agencies to examine their associated records, often turning up long-forgotten records (see Banks and Boen 2016 for further discussion). Other federal laws result in increased numbers of records or reluctance to downsize records, such as the Archaeological Resources Protection Act, which emphasizes the responsibility of the federal government for archaeological collections and associated records recovered from federal land, or the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), which outlines processes for repatriating human remains or objects. Institutions involved in repatriation under NAGPRA, for example, may be reluctant to destroy or even digitize original records because these records are necessary to establish cultural connections for repatriation, even as they struggle to find space for new records from consultations or other repatriation activities. Even efforts designed to downsize collections, such as deaccessioning, generate a paper trail, as institutions or repositories record what was deaccessioned and when and why. On top of this, the increasing professionalization of archaeology, museology, and archival science has resulted in significant growth in archival holdings, a trend that is unlikely to change (Silverman and Parezo 1995). Simply put, we are doing more professional archaeology, and we generate more collections and associated records in the process.

Perhaps the most pressing challenge in the curation crisis relates to resources: it takes time and money to curate, digitize, or even downsize archaeological archival records. Ongoing curation costs are seldom properly budgeted and often overshadowed by the more immediate one-time costs of field and lab work (Childs 2004, 2006). In addition, archival records may be less visible (as opposed to public exhibits, for example) and therefore less of a priority for institutional resources. A 2010 thematic issue of *Heritage Management* focused on costs associated with managing archaeological collections; within that issue, Childs and others (2010) addressed repository costs for curating archaeological records, and Kintigh and Altschul (2010) examined the financial side of efforts to digitize archaeological records, both demonstrating how financial needs can constrain efforts to create or maintain archaeological archives.

Despite the cost, archaeologists have an ethical obligation to address the curation crisis, as illustrated in three of the Society for American Archaeology's (SAA) nine Principles of Archaeological Ethics: Principle 1, Principle 6, and Principle 7 (see also Childs 2004 and Clarke 2015). Principle 1 addresses stewardship, explaining that

The archaeological record, that is, in situ archaeological material and sites, archaeological collections, records and reports, is irreplaceable. It is the responsibility of all archaeologists to work for the long-term conservation and protection of the archaeological record by practicing and promoting stewardship of the archaeological record [Society for American Archaeology 1996].

Principle 6 on Public Reporting and Preservation is clear that "documents and materials on which publication and other forms of public reporting are based should be deposited in a suitable place for permanent safekeeping" (Society for American Archaeology 1996). And, finally, Principle 7 concerns Records and Preservation and encourages archaeologists to "work actively for the preservation of, and long-term access to, archaeological collections, records, and reports" (Society for American Archaeology 1996).

Archivists have been dealing with similar crises. In their highly influential piece, Greene and Meissner (2005:208–209) make clear that archival "processing is not keeping up with acquisitions and has not been for decades, resulting in massive backlogs of inaccessible collections at repositories across the country (and across all types of archival institutions)." As we see it, both disciplines are experiencing difficulties applying their own values and principles. Even if we manage to get a handle on our curation crisis in archaeology, there is still a problem with how useful our archival records are, given the varied ways in which archaeologists collect and record data. Without standardized recording language and practices, cross-cultural comparisons using archival records are not possible. Beebe takes up this problem in her article (2017), advocating for both more standardized data collection and preservation within archaeology. Through her case study, Beebe demonstrates why and how archaeologists should consider variables, such as software availability or levels of staff training, when creating digital records of archaeological data that can be broadly used.

## ACCESS

While proper curation is a concern, an archive's accessibility must also be a prime focus. Given the differing realities in terms of missions, staff, budgets, and space that exist within the myriad institutional types with archival holdings of archaeological interest (e.g., libraries, universities, museums, cultural resource management firms, historical societies), access to these archives and the usefulness of the holdings become all the more complex. Swain (2006:215) is clear that curation of records alone is not adequate, if they are not used. While some archives have become inaccessible or highly restricted, others are quickly being digitized and accessible to anyone from anywhere. Podany (2006) sees archaeological archives as a "heritage asset," which increases in value

with increased accessibility. However, increased access does open up new concerns, as many archives contain important yet sensitive information, such as cultural practices or site locations, which we discuss further in the section on “Power.”

One example of the impact access has on archaeological knowledge comes from cultural resource management (CRM). CRM, like all forms of archaeology, can and does benefit from archival research, yet constraints limiting archival work may be more acute, as CRM is often conducted under tight deadlines and with limited budgets that don’t often include resources for archival work. In addition, many resources that would be useful in CRM contexts, such as census data, historical maps, or site reports from previous excavations, may not be widely available, putting further constraints on access. Furthermore, even if these sorts of resources are held in a central repository, such as a state Historical Commission, the resource catalogue may not be searchable, or researchers may need to access these materials in person, putting this information out of reach to those not in close proximity to the repository.

CRM work also, of course, generates a significant volume of new archaeological records, including gray literature. Maps, site reports, and other records often focus on spaces that no longer exist, making them the only source of information on certain sites or historic places. Yet these data may not be accessible to other archaeologists, or to non-archaeologists, for that matter. Here again, pressing deadlines, lack of personnel or training, and inadequate financial resources relegate large amounts of CRM records to filing cabinets or hard drives, unused and unseen. In spite of efforts to collect and catalogue gray literature, access is not fully open, nor should it be at times. State Historical Commissions, for example, may curate gray literature of all sorts, including dissertations and site reports, yet these materials may be provided only to professional archaeologists out of legitimate concerns for looting or destruction of sites.

Digital repositories, such as those discussed by McManamon and others (2017) and Richards (2017), do offer wider and easier access to a variety of archaeological records. State Historic Preservation Offices and State Archaeologists function as information-keepers and gatekeepers by curating archaeological records and facilitating access to those who have a legitimate need for such access, ideally promoting the circulation of archaeological knowledge while protecting sensitive information such as site location. Another valuable resource to promote both curation of and access to records is the Council for the Preservation of Anthropological Records (CoPAR). While focused more broadly on anthropological records, CoPAR nonetheless offers an online guide to anthropological archival repositories and some discussion of record preservation and use that is helpful to archaeologists (see [www.copar.org](http://www.copar.org)). Also focused on sharing anthropological records, the American Anthropological Association maintains a web page titled “Find and Share Gray Literature” to promote distribution and use of materials not published through peer-reviewed sources (American Anthropological Association 2016).

We also believe that all archaeologists, regardless of the sector within which one works, would benefit from guidance provided by the Society of American Archivists. In particular, Society of American Archivists’ (2011) Core Values of Archivists could help change archaeologists’ long-standing passive approach to

protecting archival *materials* to one in which they work to more intentionally conduct (or help facilitate) archival *research*. In short, these core values promote preservation of information in a manner that best facilitates broad access to and use of these records of the past while offering a framework for archivists to ensure their work meets these goals. Archaeologists should understand these core values because archaeologists are frequently on the “front lines,” coming face-to-face with archives of archaeological interest at institutions where there is no archivist on staff. In addition, attention to reviewing core values might also help archaeologists assess appropriate storage and curation conditions and enable long-term conservation and access to archival collections. While we are often not trained in archival science, we should be prepared to make decisions about the materials of archival significance in our possession or our institution’s possession and know when to reach out to qualified archivists or librarians for assistance.

While our authors do not discuss the core values of archivists specifically, several articles in this issue provide both big-picture and case-specific discussions of access. As McManamon and others (2017) point out, archaeological discovery need not be limited to new excavations, provided existing data are stored in a manner that is easily searchable. Richards (2017) cautions against data silos, which prevent valuable cross-comparison between repositories around the world. Richardson and others (2017) offer a valuable case study on how one museum worked collaboratively to establish best practices for making its collection records more accessible to a variety of researchers or other stakeholders while protecting sensitive information. Wiltshire (2017) focuses on the value of creating detailed and searchable finding aids to promote more efficient use of a unique moving image archive.

## POWER

A final theme within this issue is that of the relationship between archives and power. Inherent within archival collections are multiple loci of power (Jimerson 2009). This includes what scholars have described as the four expressions of power—power over, power with, power to, and power within (Rowlands 1997; VeneKlasen and Miller 2002). We see that access to archival collections can give certain stakeholder groups power over others but also how it can multiply a group’s power *with* strategic partnerships and collective action, allow the power to enact change in the present through the past, and help empower stakeholders and stakeholder groups from *within*.

As Ketelaar (2002:230) summarizes, “records act as instruments of power.” Many archives are of course colonial legacies—they include items that reflect past (or present) imbalances and preserve evidence of past atrocities, including events in which archaeologists participated. In addition, archives, like the archaeological record, provide only a sample of past activities. What is preserved and what is lost reflect power dynamics dictating what is valuable and what is not, what Cooper (2007:257) refers to as the “Eurocentrism of the written record.” Stoler (2002:92) expands on this to argue for the need to consider both the content and the organization of an archive to fully comprehend how archives reflect power dynamics: “What constitutes the archive, what form it takes, and what systems of classification signal at specific times are the very substance of colonial politics.”

Furthermore, indigenous communities and others may simultaneously see how their own history is absent from or negated by the archival record, while their cultural and intellectual property is archived in a way that prohibits or limits access. Anderson (2013:237) describes archives as “colonial projects” that recorded “Indigenous people’s lives, languages, cultures, and histories.” They served (and may continue to serve) as a way of preserving objects, images, and ideas at risk of being “lost.” Through this practice, archaeologists and others not only objectified exotic “Others,” they also curated these objects and records in a manner that positioned the researcher as the author, rather than those who produced the object or knowledge (Anderson 2013). These practices establish institutions as gatekeepers, with indigenous peoples and other marginalized groups subject to rules and regulations regarding how, or even if, they could access their own cultural materials. Through NAGPRA in the United States and other legal systems around the globe, indigenous people are asserting their rights to ownership or control of these archival holdings. Improved and increased record digitization may aid these efforts, as the ability to maintain a digital record may make it easier for institutions to repatriate the original object.

However, these repatriation efforts require resources not all tribes or indigenous groups have, such as time and financial resources to conduct archival research. And here again the need to preserve and curate records thoughtfully becomes apparent. Simply digitizing all records and making them available online does not translate to greater access if records are not organized and indexed effectively with appropriate finding aids. Furthermore, archival records contain sensitive cultural information or images that some may not be comfortable viewing. Excavation images showing skeletal remains, for example, could be disturbing; the power held by institutions determines whether and how individuals accessing that institution’s records receive any warning regarding what they are about to view or the option to not view certain types of images.

Several authors in this issue carefully consider the dynamic roles and limits of archaeological ethical standards related to power. Working in different cultural contexts, Richardson and others (2017) and Wiltshire (2017) demonstrate how to establish best practices for curating and accessing culturally sensitive archival collections. Significantly, these best practices consider the need for groups, not just archaeologists and academics, to access and utilize archival collections. Whittington (2017) challenges archaeologists to consider the ethical ramifications of colonial removal of archival holdings from their original homes. He discusses decolonizing strategies for archaeologists concerned with the colonial legacies of the archival records they curate or use.

## LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Archaeology is an ever-changing discipline, as are the practices of archaeologists. As such, our efforts related to archives will continue to change. The authors of this special issue seek to shed new light on archaeological archives, as a growing and rich body of data. As a final resource within this issue, Kirakosian and Bauer-Clapp (2017) offer a How-To article to assist archaeologists in drawing on their archaeological training when con-

ducting archival research, a twenty-first-century reimagining of Vogt-O’Connor’s (1999) tips for archaeologists working in archives. With a nod to this issue’s themes of Curation, Access, and Power, Kirakosian and Bauer-Clapp also present two new digital databases to help researchers identify the location of archival collections or records related to archaeology—as user-generated, open-access resources, these databases represent a collaborative effort to promote more widespread and efficient use of existing archival collections and records.

With this issue, we hope to add to ongoing efforts to develop stronger archival practices among archaeologists. Taking up a call sounded previously by Vogt-O’Connor (1999), Childs (2004), and others, the authors in this issue offer best practices, questions, and solutions for archaeologists contemplating use, creation, or curation of archival records. In addition, we hope to promote more formal training in archival methods for archaeologists. Organized sessions at recent SAA Annual Meetings provided a forum for archaeologists to discuss issues and share resources; this issue is the result of one such session in 2016. Continuing and even expanding these sessions makes archival work more visible to archaeologists and establishes it as a topic worth examining in depth. Additional training platforms could include a workshop in SAA’s Online Seminar Series, which offers the dual benefit of initial training and an archived presentation to serve as an ongoing resource. Furthermore, our professional societies could help standardize record-keeping practices by offering templates and instructions for creating common archival tools such as finding aids. Interest in archives among archaeologists ebbs and flows over time. We hope this issue promotes sustained engagement with this important topic.

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## Data Availability Statement

Original data were not used in the preparation of this article.

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