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Are Archaeologists Talking About Looting? Reviewing Archaeological and Anthropological Conference Proceedings from 1899–2019

Naomi Oosterman[1] and Cara Grace Tremain[2]

[1]Assistant Professor of Cultural Heritage, Department of Arts and Culture Studies, Erasmus University, Rotterdam, the Netherlands and [2]Assistant Professor, Department of Archaeology, Simon Fraser University, Canada
Corresponding author: Naomi Oosterman; Email: oosterman@eshcc.eur.nl

Abstract

The impetus for this study was a review of the Society for American Archaeology (SAA) 86th Annual Meeting program in 2021. Finding that no single poster or presentation referenced looting or antiquities trafficking despite these issues being ethical considerations that all SAA members are expected to recognize, we sought to investigate whether this was an irregularity – perhaps due to the virtual format of the meeting – or whether it was more common than not. For a broader understanding of if, how, and where these topics are discussed by archaeologists outside of the SAA, we expanded the investigation and studied the archives of 14 other archaeological and anthropological conferences. The results of the study show that despite there being an overall increase in mentioning looting and antiquities trafficking at conferences, it remains a niche and infrequently discussed topic.[1]

Keywords: Conferences; Looting; Archaeology; Anthropology; Ethics; Statistical Analysis; Trafficking

Introduction

Conferences are opportunities for learning about and sharing ideas and methods as well as social and professional networking. Many academic organizations offer such research-sharing events on a regular basis (e.g., annual or biannual), yet despite their similarities – even within the same discipline – they are sometimes referred to by different terms such as "meeting" or "congress." Here we use "conference" for consistency, acknowledging that the data we refer to later in this paper may be from events formally known by a different name. Academics are usually expected to participate regularly in conferences as a means of keeping abreast of the most recent advances in their discipline and as a means of ensuring their research is shared with their colleagues and the public.

The number of possible national and international conferences available in a given year for academics to attend is numerous but the expectation to attend conferences is,

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[1] While we were not able to include the data, for reasons explained later in our paper, we were pleased to see the specialized forum "*How American Archaeologists Can Help Combat Looting*" in the SAA's 89th Annual Meeting program in 2024.

unfortunately, not realistic for many. It has been demonstrated that one of the most important factors academics take into consideration when deciding which conference to attend is travel costs.[2] However, finances are only one of the numerous barriers that academics encounter; other barriers include language, travel visas, and work or personal commitments. Calls to move conferences online are becoming more commonplace as a means of addressing these issues. While there has been a recent flurry of debate about in-person versus digital conferences due to COVID-19,[3] calls to reduce the environmental impact caused by hundreds – if not thousands – of researchers traveling to the same conference have a much longer history.[4] Others have argued that it is time to disturb the regularity and predictability of academic conferences,[5] including replacing their traditional format with opportunities to socialize and network through games,[6] or they need to facilitate active involvement for both academic[7] and non-academic audiences.[8] Further criticisms of conferences have included their general lack of inclusive practices that severely affect many individuals, including those with disabilities or chronic pain.[9]

Despite the concerns and criticisms of academic conferences, various studies have demonstrated that they can provide professional and social benefits, although some argue that these benefits are superficial.[10] A previous study investigated the notion of return on investment (ROI) for conferences by studying attendees' qualitative feedback.[11] They concluded conferences are deemed to be worth the time and effort involved in participating in them; the ability to develop as an academic, forge new connections, and gain meaningful personal experiences were presented as examples of ROI. Similarly, other scholars measured the impact of conferences by surveying young professionals and found their qualitative and quantitative responses aligned with the benefits outlined by the researchers investigating ROI.[12] Echoing the aforementioned benefits, others revealed, through analytical coding of literature concerning academic events, that they are regarded as impactful in many other ways, including economic value and the knowledge provided to industry.[13]

Specialized archaeological and anthropological conferences

Specific to this article, anthropological and archaeological conferences are commonplace and draw thousands of attendees on a regular basis. The largest organizations are the American Anthropological Association (AAA) and the Archaeological Institute of America (AIA), the former with roughly 7,500 professional members and the latter with roughly 6,000.[14] The AAA and AIA host annual meetings in North America while other organizations such as the World Archaeological Congress (WAC) host an international congress every four

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[2] Gür, Hamurcu, and Eren 2016.
[3] See Donlon 2021; Eztion, Gehman, and Davis 2021; Raby and Madden 2021.
[4] See Høyer and Naess 2001.
[5] Benozzo et al. 2019.
[6] Castronova 2013.
[7] Verbeke 2015.
[8] Jarillo 2021.
[9] De Picker 2020.
[10] Rowe 2018.
[11] Edelheim et al. 2018.
[12] Hauss 2021.
[13] Hansen and Pedersen 2018.
[14] Estimates provided from both organizations via email in 2021.

Table 1. Organizations relevant to the study, their approximate membership size (based on website estimates and/or information provided from direct inquiries), frequency and location of their conferences (or equivalent meetings), and whether their professional policies or codes refer specifically to looting and/or antiquities trafficking. "Unknown" is the result of a lack of information from websites and a lack of response from the organization

Organization	Membership	Conference	Policies/Codes
American Anthropological Association (AAA)	~7,500	Annual; North America	Not specific to looting/ antiquities
American Association of Physical Anthropologists (AAPA)	2,200+	Annual; North America	Not specific to looting/ antiquities
American Society of Overseas Research (ASOR)	~2,150	Annual; North America	See section III.B "Stewardship" and section III.E "Programs and Publications"
Archaeological Institute of America (AIA)	~6,000	Annual; North America	See Code of Ethics
British Association for Biological Anthropology and Osteoarchaeology (BABAO)	~500	Annual; Great Britain	See section 3.2: "Act with Integrity"
European Association of Archaeologists (EAA)	~3000	Annual; Europe	See 1.6: "Archaeologists and Society"
European Association for South Asian Archaeology and Art (EASAA)	unknown	Biannual; Europe	Unknown
Plains Anthropological Society	~440	Annual; North America	See the section "Commercialization"
Society for American Archaeology (SAA)	~7,000	Annual; North America	See Principle No.3: "Commercialization"
Society for Historical Archaeology (SHA)	~1,500	Annual; Predominately North America but also International	See Principle 6
Southeastern Archaeological Conference (SEAC)	~900	Annual; North America	Limited to sexual harassment policy
Theoretical Archaeology Group Europe (TAG)	n/a*	Annual; International	n/a*
Theoretical Archaeology Group UK (TAG)	n/a*	Annual; International	n/a*
Theoretical Archaeology Group North America (TAG)	n/a*	Annual; International	n/a*
World Archaeological Congress (WAC)	unknown	Every 4 years; International	General Code of Ethics Forthcoming

TAG does not have membership requirements or dues.

years (see Table 1). As Jarillo (2021: 1) explained, "[I]nternational anthropology gatherings hardly ever take place in the Global South." This severely disadvantages anthropologists from outside North America and Europe, highlighting the reality of the aforementioned barriers to conference attendance.

Looting, antiquities trafficking, and ethics

Looting – the removal of antiquities, human remains, or minerals from (archaeological) sites – is a worldwide practice that takes place on different scales. The sale of looted antiquities may take place at a local or global level. At a local level, this could be a direct-to-consumer model where looters sell to tourists or local collectors.[15] Alternatively, a global level could involve several individuals in a more elaborate model, such as looters selling to local dealers who organize international transit to overseas dealers. These overseas dealers could then involve parties such as auction houses and collectors.[16]

Whether looted material moves through local or global markets, it is deemed to be "trafficked" when it moves through those markets illegally or illicitly. The association of looted material, otherwise referred to as unprovenienced, with financial profit often creates a rift in the discipline of archaeology, between those who support the study of such looted material and those who deplore such studies.[17]

In 1970 an international convention was created to address the market in stolen archaeological material: the UNESCO *Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export, and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property.* Prior to the establishment of this Convention, various countries had independently created national laws to protect their cultural heritage. Unfortunately, these laws were routinely overlooked by other countries[18] allowing the market for looted material to continue to grow, especially in powerful nations in Europe and the United States. The UNESCO Convention is aimed at stemming the sale of looted material with the date of 1970 becoming a standard measure for those collecting such material (e.g., museums, dealers, private collectors). As recommended by the Convention, the acquisition of materials exported illegally from their country of origin after 1970 should be avoided. While the Convention is not legally binding because it functions as an agreement between UNESCO member states (of which there are currently 144)[19] rather than a law, it marks an ethical watershed concerning the acceptance of illicitly acquired archaeological materials.[20]

Unfortunately, the looting of archaeological sites and the sale of illegally acquired materials continued – seemingly unabated – after the passing of the UNESCO Convention. Since then, other international organizations have made efforts to curtail the collection of looted materials. For example, in 2000 the International Council of Museums (ICOM) issued "Red Lists" as part of their Fighting Illicit Traffic program.[21] These lists, while not exhaustive,[22] classify the categories of objects in certain regions and countries that are vulnerable to looting and illegal exportation. They are intended to dissuade those who might otherwise collect such material (e.g., museums, dealers, and private collectors) from doing so, and help those who might encounter such material (e.g., customs officials and police enforcement) to prevent it from being illegally traded. Presently, 15 lists cover African, Asian, Caribbean, Latin American, and Middle Eastern cultural material.

In addition to the efforts of international organizations, some professional anthropological and archaeological associations have drafted or endorsed policies for their members

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[15] Kersel 2008

[16] See Brodie *et al.* 2022; Kersel 2007; Yates 2014.

[17] See Brodie 2011, 2016; Donnan 1991.

[18] See Latin America Oosterman and Yates 2020.

[19] https://www.unesco.org/en/legal-affairs/convention-means-prohibiting-and-preventing-illicit-import-export-and-transfer-ownership-cultural#item-1, accessed March 27, 2024.

[20] Gerstenblith 2013.

[21] https://icom.museum/en/resources/red-lists/, accessed August 21, 2022.

[22] We appreciate one reviewer calling attention to the fact that these lists do lack detail, and material not identified in these lists has appeared for sale on the antiquities market.

that provide specific guidance for dealing with looting and/or looted material (see Table 1). It should be noted that these associations have amended their policies over the years and that the current references to looting/looted material may or may not have existed when the policies were first established. Unfortunately, some of the policies lack detail or only provide fairly vague guidance. For example, the British Association for Biological Anthropology and Osteoarchaeology (BABAO) Code of Ethics, which was first adopted in 2008, explains only that members should not "traffic, sell, or illegally appropriate any type of cultural items or biological remains," and "should refrain from working with or even consulting on cultural items or human remains acquired illegally" (BABAO Code of Ethics: 3.2. Act with Integrity). Similarly, the Society for American Archaeology (SAA) – which first adopted its Principles of Archeological Ethics in 1996 – provides the following brief statement:

> *Archaeologists should therefore carefully weigh the benefits to scholarship of a project against the costs of potentially enhancing the commercial value of archaeological objects. Whenever possible they should discourage, and should themselves avoid, activities that enhance the commercial value of archaeological objects, especially objects that are not curated in public institutions, or readily available for scientific study, public interpretation, and display.*
> SAA Principles of Archaeological Ethics, Principle No. 3: Commercialization

The Plains Anthropological Society Code of Ethics, which was adapted from other anthropological organizations, including the SAA, also makes brief reference to the commercialization of objects and discourages their members from participating in any appraisal, trade, sale, or purchase of such objects.[23] Likewise, the Society for Historical Archaeology (SHA) Ethics Principles (first adopted in 2003) reference the commercial value of artifacts but allow for their members to assign such value "for the purposes of appraisal and insurance or when valuation is used to discourage site vandalism" (SHA Ethics Principles, Principle 6).

Fortunately, the European Association of Archaeologists Principles for Archaeological Research (first approved in 1997) provides lengthier and more detailed guidelines that explain how "decontextualized" material should be treated. For example, they encourage members not to "generate data for private clients, knowing or suspecting that such data will be used to create or to enhance a financial valuation, or be used to facilitate the sale of archaeological artifacts of uncertain provenance on the art market" (Principle 2c. 17). Additionally, they advise members not to "participate in the publication of undocumented antiquities, unless the work is intended to i) highlight suspected forgeries offered for sale on the art market; ii) contribute to the investigations of relevant authorities (e.g., the police or State archaeological agency); or iii) clarify the collection history and provenance of the artefacts" (Principle 2d. 2).

In its Code of Ethics, the Archaeological Institute of America also encourages its members to refrain from publishing "undocumented antiquities" and explicitly reference the 1970 UNESCO Convention as a means of identifying such antiquities (Principle 3). The American Society of Overseas Research (ASOR) Policy on Professional Conduct, first adopted in 2015, also encourages its members to be transparent about presenting or publishing information related to artifacts that have been looted on the basis that:

> *Looting is an illegal act that breaks the association between artefact and context. A looted artefact may be considered stolen property. Therefore, archaeological heritage that is looted is*

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[23] It is unclear in what year the Society's Code of Ethics were established.

more likely to travel through illicit channels of distribution and/or exportation
ASOR Policy on Professional Conduct, Policy III.E.1

On an individual level, some archaeologists and anthropologists have become more explicitly involved with the market in looted materials by dedicating their research to this topic (e.g., the Trafficking Culture Consortium, a research group dedicated to topics concerning the looting, trafficking, and illicit trade in cultural objects).[24] Others use their expertise to work in cultural-heritage-focused positions within entities such as the Department of State (e.g., Allison Davis, who is the Executive Director of the Cultural Property Advisory Committee)[25] or have retrained as lawyers to focus on cultural heritage legislation (e.g., Tess Davis, who is the Executive Director of the Antiquities Coalition,[26] and Patty Gerstenblith, who was the founding president of the Lawyers Committee for Cultural Heritage Preservation).[27] However, if the lack of discussion about the topics of looting and antiquities trafficking at one of the most prominent archaeological conferences in North America in recent years is any indicator, the majority of those directly involved in the discipline are not giving much attention to the market in looted cultural material. We describe our process for quantifying this situation below.

Data, methods, and analyses

Data

To test the frequency with which members of anthropological and archaeological organizations have discussed the topics of looting and/or antiquities trafficking, we studied the archives of relevant conferences. Selection of these archives was based on organizations with 1) an archaeology-specific or broader anthropological focus (especially if they were associated with a fairly wide regional and methodological coverage) and 2) accessible online conference archives. In addition to organizational websites, the Digital Archaeological Record[28] and the Open Anthropology Research Repository[29] were used for data collection.

In total, we were able to include the archives from 15 separate organizations (see Table 2), which recognize that the resulting data is biased towards English-speaking conferences and those that take place in Europe and North America. (Other geographic regions were investigated but the organizations did not have available electronic archival conference information.)

Unfortunately, there is a general lack of consistency with the archives used for this study: various calendar years are missing; some calendar years are represented by brief information about conferences (such as a list of sessions limited to title-only) rather than full programs and abstracts; and some documents were available only as photocopies and thus proved more difficult to analyze since they were often stained or had shadows, making them difficult to read. These limitations were especially true of the photocopied conference documents for SAA, SEAC, and TAG UK.

The dataset used for our research consisted of 392 documents (e.g., conference programs, session lists, lists of abstracts) from 15 different archaeological and anthropological conferences held between 1899 and 2019. This includes both annual and biannual conferences. The cut-off date of 2019 was chosen as most conferences in 2020 were canceled or moved online

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[24] https://traffickingculture.org/, accessed August 21, 2022.
[25] https://eca.state.gov/cultural-heritage-center/cultural-property/committee-members, accessed August 21, 2022.
[26] https://theantiquitiescoalition.org/team/tess-davis/, accessed August 21, 2022.
[27] https://law.depaul.edu/faculty-and-staff/faculty-a-z/Pages/patty-gerstenblith.aspx, accessed August 21, 2022.
[28] https://core.tdar.org/
[29] https://www.openanthroresearch.org/

Table 2. Overview of data used in this study

Organization	Data range	Total number of proceedings
American Anthropological Association (AAA)	1975–2019	45
American Association of Physical Anthropologists (AAPA)	2015–2019	5
American Society of Overseas Research (ASOR)	2010–2019	10
Archaeological Institute of America (AIA)	1899–2002	101
British Association for Biological Anthropology and Osteoarchaeology (BABAO)	2002–2019	18
European Association of Archaeologists (EAA)	1995–2019	22
European Association for South Asian Archaeology and Art (EASAA)	2010–2018	5
Plains Anthropological Society	1947–2019	11
Society for American Archaeology (SAA)	1948–2019	60
Society for Historical Archaeology (SHA)	1997–2019	8
Southeastern Archaeological Conference (SEAC)	1962–2019	53
Theoretical Archaeology Group Europe Turkey/Sweden (TAG)	2013–2014	2
Theoretical Archaeology Group UK (TAG)	1977–2019	44
Theoretical Archaeology Group North America (TAG)	2013–2019	5
World Archaeological Congress (WAC)	1999–2003	3
Total time span and documents	1899–2019	392

due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, many of the already accepted presentations and posters of 2020 were moved to 2021, which created duplicates in the database that were not representative of unique presentations. At the time of writing, conferences are slowly getting "back to normal" but the majority of conferences in 2020, 2021, and 2022 were either postponed, held in a hybrid format, or took place entirely online. We chose, therefore, for reasons of consistency and accuracy, to only include those conferences up until 2019 (inclusive).

After creating our population of 392 conference documents, we performed a series of optical character recognition (OCR) in R, a program for statistical computing and graphics. OCR allows the extraction of text from images. As such, PDFs and photocopies – which are effectively images – can be read as individual characters and sentences. The majority of the documentation was available in PDF from digital formats, which creates an accuracy of image-to-text transformation of around 98 to 99 percent when using Adobe.[30] For all our documents, as recommended, we used a resolution of at least 600 dpi and a brightness of 50 percent. Photocopies, however, especially those documents from earlier years, had parts that were illegible (e.g., due to bad copying leading to shadows, smudges, scribbles on pages, etc.) or were skewed (the paper documents were not put correctly on the glass plate when scanning). Photocopies that were scanned and uploaded into a computer that had these issues created "noisy data"; that is, data that cannot be understood by machines. For example, a skewed scan

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[30] We sampled five documents by manually counting the total characters of the sample abstracts, dividing those by amount of errors encountered.

or a stain on a page leads to difficulty with text recognition. To clean these documents in the best way possible, they were run through R's Tesseract OCR engine, which is a powerful OCR engine that can correct, in parts, the "noisiness" of the data to make it readable.

The accuracy of the photocopied material went down to a broad range of 70–85 percent, depending on the quality of the individual scan. The photocopies for which this was the case concerned those documents from TAG UK (years 1977–2004), SEAC (years 1962–2009), and SAA (years 1948–2003). These photocopies were additionally manually coded after running the keyword searches through R.

Keyword searches

We developed several keywords associated with our primary focus of analysis, namely looting and antiquities trafficking. We developed a list of words and variations of words (in R, this list is referred to as a "Dictionary"). The following dictionary was developed:

Although other words can be associated with looting, trafficking, and art and heritage crimes in general, early test runs of the data that included words such as "excavation(s)," "metal detecting," or "digging" did not provide additional observations. This is because, often, discussions of excavations and digging go together with words such as illicit or illegal (e.g., illicit excavations or illegal digging). The following code was developed to apply both Tesseract OCR on the photocopied material and to search for the keywords in the dictionary in all the conference proceedings mentioned in Table 3:

```
Library(rvest)
library(pdftools)
library(stringr)
library(officer)
library(tesseract)

dictionary<-c("looting," "looter,"
    "illicit," "crime," "criminal",
    "theft," "robbing," "robbed,"
    "robber," "trafficking,"
    "stole," "steal," "illegal")
dictionary<-data.frame(dictionary)
names(dictionary)<-c("words")
```

Table 3. Dictionary/keywords and variations used to search conference proceedings

Keyword	Variation
Looting	Looter(s), loot
Illicit	n/a
Crime	n/a
Criminal	n/a
Theft	n/a
Robbing	Rob; robbed; robber
Trafficking	n/a
Stolen	Steal; stole
Illegal	n/a

```
wd<-getwd()

for (year in list.files(wd)) {
  column_name <- as.character(year)
  dictionary[, column_name] <- 0
text <- tesseract::ocr(paste0(year)) #use this for photocopies
#text <- pdf_text(paste0(year,".pdf")) #use this for readable pdfs
text<-gsub("\\.","",text)
text<-gsub("\\,","",text)
text<-gsub("\r","",text)
text<-gsub("-\n","",text)
text<-gsub(" ","",text)
text<-gsub("\n"," ",text)
text<-tolower(text)

for (riga in 1:length(text)){
for (indice in 1:nrow(dictionary)){
dictionary[indice,column_name]<-dictionary[indice,column_name]+str_count(text
[riga], dictionary[indice,1])}
}
}
write.csv(dictionary,"output.csv")
```

Here, "eng" refers to "English" as the language setting as all our data is in the English language. "Dictionary" refers to our list of keywords and variations. "Text,-tesseract::ocr" refers to the image-to-text function for the photocopies (Tesseract), and "text, -pdf text" was used for the readable pdfs.

Descriptive statistics

After a first run of the keywords and variations in the proceedings, we observed 3,664 hits. Most of these were double (for example, due to words such as "looting" or "loot" being used multiple times in one abstract or one title). As such, the number of 3,664 is *not* the number of individual abstracts or sessions but the number of times the different words were observed. An overview of observations can be seen in Table 4.

   In the case of "looting," many abstracts discussed looting activities but looting was not the central discussion of the paper. For example, the word "looting" was observed in the text of a session titled *Archaeology at the Gault Site, Texas: Digging Deeper* during a Plains Anthropology conference in 2018. However, the central discussion of the text was not about looting but about the study of the site's use by prehistoric cultures in central Texas. As such, despite the text indicating that looting took place in this specific site, the paper was not about looting per se.[31] In other instances, words were observed multiple times in the same text. For

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[31] Full text abstract: Since 1999 the Gault School of Archaeological Research has worked on the Gault Archaeological Site in Central Texas. Ten years of excavations looked at ca. 3% of the site and recovered 2.6 million artifacts covering occupations over 16,000 years. Though past looting and collecting damaged and destroyed many areas with evidence of occupation in the last 8,000 years there is still abundant evidence to show use of the site by nearly all prehistoric central Texas cultures. Newly published research focused on excavation Area 15 has also established sound geological context and dating showing significant Clovis era occupation and earlier occupation by a previously unknown culture that adds data to the ongoing search for the first peoples in the Americas.

Table 4. Observations per keyword in all documents

Keyword/Variation	Count
Looting; Looter(s), loot	772
Illicit	289
Crime	670
Criminal	569
Theft	92
Robbing; Rob; robbed; robber	188
Trafficking	294
Stolen, steal; stole	429
Illegal	361
Total	3,664

example, the presentation titled "*The looters are coming! The looters are coming! Moral panic and the Argentine crisis,*" held at the 2008 AAA conference, hit two observations for the word "looter." This was, therefore, coded as one observation as it concerned one presentation.

Other observations were dismissed because they were observed as part of another word. For example, the word "crime" was often observed as part of the word "Crimea" and the word "steal" was often part of the words "endosteal" or "periosteal." Robbing was often used to refer to grave robbing and theft and was then counted in our analysis, but robbing and theft were also observed in relation to settings that did not involve looting or antiquities trafficking. For example, a presentation at the AAPA 2017 conference extensively discussed robbing and thievery by macaques, a genus of primates. These observations were not counted. In other instances, more than one keyword appeared in the same abstract or presentation title. For example, in the "*Trafficking culture: Research into the global traffic in cultural objects at the University of Glasgow*" panel during the EEA 2015 conference, several presentations and abstracts used combinations of words, including "illicit," "trafficking," "crime," and "looting." Whenever this occurred, we would determine on a case-by-case basis which of the keywords best befitted the abstract. It was then counted as that keyword. For example, if it was determined that the best keyword was "trafficking," the presentation would only be counted as "trafficking" and not as "illicit" if those words were pooled together. Therefore, only those abstracts featuring our keywords as central to the discussion of the paper were included in the final sample.[32] This was a manual procedure done by evaluating the individual conference proceedings *after* running the proceedings through R. In the end, this left us with a sample of 592 individual keyword observations of individual oral or poster presentations from 1899 to 2019.

Results

Frequencies per keyword

After reviewing the total amount of observations per keyword, we were able to determine that the highest occurrences were found in topics that concerned looting. To a lesser

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[32] Some proceedings only provided titles of the abstracts/presentations. As such, if any of the keywords were present in the title, this was considered as central. However, we acknowledge that we cannot determine if certain presentations did not discuss our keywords regardless. For example, our ASOR data went from "title only" to full abstracts in the 2016 editions. There are more keyword observations from 2016 onwards.

Table 5. Individual and grouped keyword observations[33]

Keyword	Frequency	Percentage
Looting	333	56.2%
Looter	31	5.2%
Illicit	64	10.8%
Crime	20	3.4%
Criminal	16	2.7%
Theft	13	2.2%
Robbing/robbed/robber	30	5.1%
Trafficking	25	4.2%
Stole	17	2.9%
Steal	6	1%
Illegal	37	6.3%
Total	592	100%

extent, there were topics about illicit trafficking and illicit digging ("robbing") and excavations. After observing the sample, the majority of presentations discussing "stealing" or "theft" were in fact presentations discussing looting, illicit excavations, or tomb or grave robbery. At the same time, observations about "illicit," "illegal," and "crime" were often observed together with the trafficking of antiquities, human remains, or, to a lesser extent, minerals and wildlife or the illicit/illegal trade of antiquities. One can argue there are several reasons for this. For example, the trafficking of antiquities is already an activity that is illicit or illegal and as such often concerns illegally obtained material; for example, due to looting or digging. As such, these topics are often discussed together in the same presentation. Nevertheless, an overview of individual observations can be found in Table 5 below:

All observations of keywords were then collapsed into one group. As mentioned, keywords were often observed within the same abstract or presentation as these types of criminal activities often occur simultaneously. The combination of these keywords at times made it difficult to know what the specific focus was: on the act of trafficking itself or the illicit nature thereof. This was especially difficult, if sometimes not impossible to determine for the proceedings that only provided titles of presentations or posters. As such, we grouped all the observations together under the broad umbrella of "Art and Heritage Crimes." Table 6 shows the total amount of keywords observed per conference.

As can be observed from Table 6, the clear majority of discussions on art and heritage crimes take place at the conferences of the Society for American Archaeology and the European Association of Archaeologists. Considering that our data is unequally distributed (Table 2), there are proportionately more discussions on art and heritage crimes at the conferences of the Society for Historical Archaeology (SHA) and World Archaeology Congress (WAC) than there are in the Southeastern Archaeological Conference (SEAC) and the Archaeological Institute of America (AIA).

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[33] Percentages are rounded to one decimal.

Table 6. Total observations, per conference

Organization	Grouped keywords
American Anthropological Association (AAA)	25
American Association of Physical Anthropologists (AAPA)	0
American Society of Overseas Research (ASOR)	58
Archaeological Institute of America (AIA)	18
British Association for Biological Anthropology and Osteoarchaeology (BABAO)	1
European Association of Archaeologists (EAA)	110
European Association for South Asian Archaeology and Art (EASAA)	2
Plains Anthropological Society	9
Society for American Archaeology (SAA)	273
Society for Historical Archaeology (SHA)	23
Southeastern Archaeological Conference (SEAC)	26
Theoretical Archaeology Group Europe Turkey/Sweden (TAG)	0
Theoretical Archaeology Group UK (TAG)	31
Theoretical Archaeology Group North America (TAG)	3
World Archaeological Congress (WAC)	13
Total	**592**

Observations over time

Since our data is irregularly spaced – because our population included annual and biannual conferences as well as conferences occurring only once every four years or conference data was missing (not available to the authors) – we decided to pool our data at the cross-sectional level, meaning we combined all the data to create a visualization of our observations from 1899 to 2019.

Figure 1 shows an increase in the discussion of our keywords from the mid-1980s, but starts to gain more momentum and consistency beginning from 1999 (approx.), taking off in 2003. There were no observations between 1899 and 1934 in our data. The first mention in our data was observed in 1935 at the AIA. Observations remained sporadic until 1985. Since 2003, there have been at least ten presentations dedicated to art and heritage crimes with the largest volume of presentations in one conference taking place in 2015 at the EEA.[34] It needs to be taken into consideration once again that our data is unequally spaced and we did not possess conference proceedings for all years (see Table 2).

Regions under consideration

Furthermore, we were interested in the geographical distribution of our observed keyword. When there were presentations or posters on art and heritage crimes, what was the geographical region or location that it focused on? This was more difficult to determine. First, not all conference proceedings provided full abstracts, which often made it impossible

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[34] This can be explained by the occurrence of the EAA that year in Glasgow, Scotland, UK, where members of the research group "Trafficking Culture" are based.
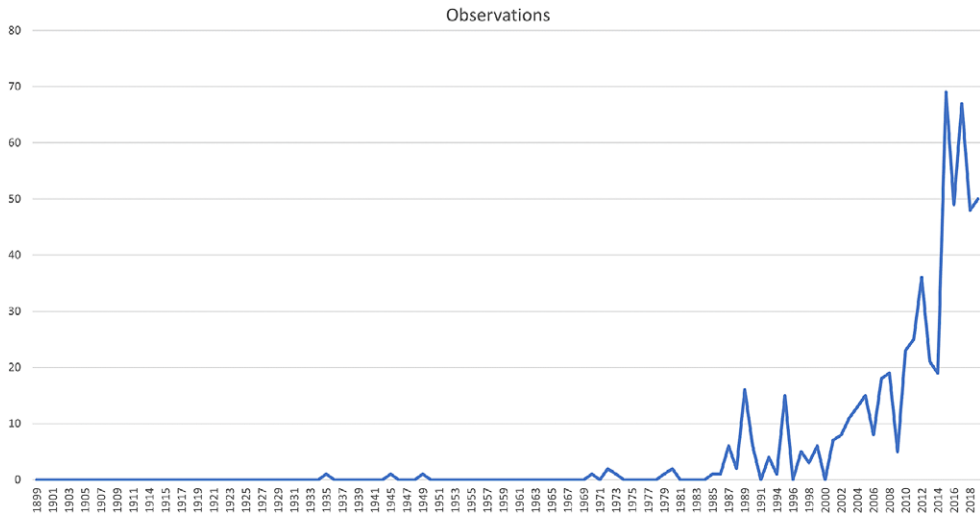
Figure 1. Total observation of keywords in all conferences, from 1899–2019.

to determine the geographical focus. Second, many presentations and posters discussed, for example, the "international illicit trade in antiquities." There is a chance that the presentation itself focused on specific regions but this was not reflected in the proceedings. Lastly, at times it was difficult to determine the geographical focus despite these being mentioned or hints being given. An example is a presentation at SAA 2012 that mentions the text "*filling Yale with Machu Picchu.*" One could, perhaps, argue that this could be both the United States and Peru, but from the abstract it is not clear if the focus is particularly on collecting or looting, or both. When looking at the regions under consideration of all our topics combined in Figure 2, it is clear that North America (including the United States and Canada), the MENA region (Middle East and North Africa), and Latin America (including all states in South and Central America and Mexico) are the most studied regions. Observations that specifically mention the geographical location are often case studies. Oftentimes specific countries are mentioned. The most common discussions concerned Latin America; for example, Peru and Mexico. Other times, continents or regions are mentioned (e.g., "Scandinavia" or "Latin America"). At other times, we observed multiple regions in the same abstract; for example, comparative studies between two countries or regions. These were then counted
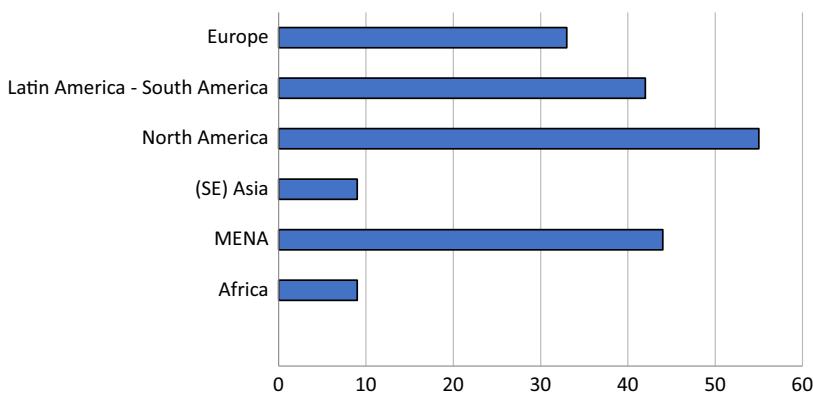

Figure 2. Distribution of topics per region.

as two regions unless the comparison was in the same region as determined in Figure 2 when it was counted as one observation. We need to stress here that for many of the proceedings we analyzed, the specific place of inquiry was oftentimes omitted. As such, the amount of observations is smaller here than our observation of keywords in the overall data (Tables 5 and 6).

It will come as no surprise that the majority of our observations focus on the North American, European, and MENA regions. The majority of the observations focusing on the United States were observed at the SAA, the biggest archaeological association in North America. At the same time, the majority of European-focused observations were at EEA, whereas the majority of presentations on MENA were observed at ASOR.

Discussion

During the 1997 meeting of the Archaeological Institute of America (AIA), renowned archaeologist Clemency Chase Coggins received the 33rd annual Award for Distinguished Archaeological Achievement. The awarding committee lauded Coggins for her seminal article *"Illicit traffic of pre-Columbian antiquities,"* describing it as *"a courageous statement, coming at a time when most archaeologists turned a blind eye to illicit traffic, having never given thought to how it might affect their own work."*[35] Indeed, our results demonstrate that discussions on issues concerning looting, trafficking, and heritage crimes are the topics that emerged more prominently in the last three decades. In 1969, at the time of Coggins' article, there was hardly any discussion centralized on looting in archaeological conferences. The results demonstrate, however, that the most prevalent keyword observed is, in fact, looting/looter (more than 50 percent of the sample) followed by discussions of illicit markets, trade, and trafficking of a variety of objects associated with art and heritage crimes. However, these discussions did not become prevalent until the mid-1980s, nearly twenty years after Coggins' article.[36]

These results are likely a reflection of the physical interaction that many archaeologists have with looted sites and materials: they are unlikely to "see" or interact with trafficking networks in the same way that they do looting, and therefore contribute less (but not nothing) to such discussions. The results are also likely a reflection of the fact that the aforementioned anthropological policies concerning ethical behaviors and practices predominately give attention to practices surrounding looting and trade in cultural material rather than criminal trafficking networks.

The results also demonstrate that the regularity of conference presentations concerning art and heritage crime-related topics was sporadic until the mid-1980s. A measurable increase in such presentations was in 2003, the year of the looting of the Iraq National Museum in Baghdad. This incident attracted worldwide attention from the media and academics[37] and likely explains a sudden growth of archaeological interest in presenting topics related to looting that same year.

High-profile incidents related to topics of looted cultural heritage might also explain noticeable increases in conference presentations in prior years. The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) – intended to protect and repatriate Native American ancestors and cultural materials – became public law in the United States in 1990.[38] Through the establishment of this law, it is likely that an increasing number of

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[35] 99th Annual meeting of the AIA conference proceeding, p. 356.
[36] Coggins 1969.
[37] Bailey 2003, Fisk 2003, Pollock 2003.
[38] Trope and Echo-Hawk 2000.

archaeologists became aware of the looting and theft of Native American remains, which can perhaps explain the number of conference presentations concerning these topics in 1990. It is well-documented that the passing of the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) Act the year prior was a strong catalyst for the passing of NAGPRA.[39] The NMAI Act,[40] which noted the concern that Native American communities had about the thousands of ancestral remains in the collections of the Smithsonian, many of which were from unethical and, likely, illegal excavations, outlined instructions for the return of such remains, which can, perhaps, explain why in 1989 there is a spike in conference presentations that singularly outnumbers the number of presentations over the previous 54 years, starting from the first observation in 1935.

The final insight provided by the results is the relationship between geographic study regions and discussions of art and heritage crimes. The popularity of North America, Latin America, and the MENA region can likely be explained by the geographic location of the conferences in our sample. Fourteen of the 15 conferences took place in either North America or Europe, adjacent to Latin America and the MENA region, while only one took place outside these regions. The lack of conferences represented in our sample outside of North America and Europe presents a shortfall in our understanding of whether or not art and heritage crimes are being discussed with any more frequency at anthropological conferences elsewhere in the world, and whether or not there are other geographic regions attracting more attention from archaeologists studying looting and related topics.

Overall, what the results demonstrate is that discussions on looting and antiquities trafficking have remained a fairly niche discussion for over half a century in traditional anthropological and archaeological conferences in North America and Europe. Previously surveyed presentations from SAA conferences in 1983, 1991, and 1992 also demonstrated that looting and trafficking were not popular topics of discussion.[41] That same study revealed an increased representation of women in American Archaeology (from 25 percent in 1983 to 32 percent in 1992); however, this study only took three reference dates that are within ten years of each other. As such, the longitudinal statistical significance of female participation cannot be confirmed. Although we considered different keywords, variations, and variables, and used a broader scope of conference proceedings, we did not include representation of women due to the inability to confirm gender.

However, we can confirm that discussions about looting and art and heritage crimes in general became more prevalent after 1999. Yet, as of 2019, art and heritage crimes remain niche presentation topics at the SAAs. This is despite dedicated sessions such as the 2008 session, "All the King's Horses: Looted or Unprovenienced Artifacts and the Valid Construction of the Past," and the 2017 session "The Precolumbian Antiquities Market: Reflections, Critiques, and Effecting Change." Both sessions resulted in edited volumes[42] and included contributions from session participants as well as other scholars not originally involved in the conference session (which, in and of itself, demonstrates that some academics studying these topics are not presenting their work at conferences).

Conclusion

What is the reason for the lack of attention to looting, antiquities trafficking, and other art and heritage crimes at conferences? Given that several anthropological and archaeological organizations make specific mention of these issues in their policies, and given that there

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[39] Trope and Echo-Hawk 2000: 138.
[40] https://americanindian.si.edu/sites/1/files/pdf/about/NMAIAct.pdf, accessed August 28, 2022.
[41] Feinman, Nichols, and Middleton 1992.
[42] Lazrus and Barker 2012; Tremain and Yates 2019

have been several high-profile incidents, as previously mentioned, that should have made academics keenly aware of these issues, this lack of attention remains surprising. Could it be that archaeologists and anthropologists are presenting these issues outside of their discipline? Perhaps that is so, but the number of applicable conferences for such topics is few and far between. It is also possible that numerous academics involved in the study of looting and trafficking are failing to attend conferences but, based on the benefits and expectations of attending conferences, making the choice not to talk directly to colleagues at large prominent conferences about one's research seems unlikely. It seems, perhaps, likely that the majority of archaeologists and anthropologists are not publicly engaging with these topics at conferences.

Considering that almost two decades have passed since the publication of Brodie and Renfrew's (2005) critique against archaeologists not doing enough to combat looting, it is clear that the discipline is still not doing enough – at least at conferences – to seriously effect change.[43] Albeit more and more presentations argue that sites have indeed been looted or have been subjected to vandalism and destruction, there are a limited number of conference presentations that put looting and trafficking at the center of academic inquiry. The small number of researchers who have been openly discussing such topics at conferences include individuals who are actively moving beyond the realm of anthropology and archaeology. Their work provides examples of research-pushing boundaries to work within an interdisciplinary framework that combines anthropological, archaeological, and criminological perspectives and methodologies.[44]

However, the fact remains that there are a very limited number of academics within archaeology and anthropology who specialize in looting and trafficking. Without a growing cohort of colleagues within the discipline, it is possible that the small number of researchers focusing on these topics will feel out of place and marginalized. This will hamper the growth of this field of study, which is detrimental both to the discipline and the possibility of reducing the amount of looting and trafficking taking place worldwide. While this paper cannot definitively answer why a lack of attention to these topics exists – specifically in the form of conference presentations – we hope that by emphasizing the problem, more archaeologists and anthropologists will want to be part of the conversation in the future.

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[43] We are aware that our data exclusively focuses on conference presentations. We did not consider published outputs or any other interactions that archaeologists and anthropologists might have in relation to looting and trafficking activities. This is to say that we do not in any way want to argue that archaeologists and anthropologists "do no care" about these activities, or do not engage and/or think critically about these topics at or in other places.

[44] See for example Brodie et al. 2022; Huffer and Chappell 2014; Mackenzie et al. 2020; Oosterman et al. 2022; Yates 2014

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