



Debate Article

Engaging with demand and destruction

Morag M. Kersel*

* Department of Anthropology, DePaul University, USA (✉ mkersel@depaul.edu)

In their provocative piece, Thomas and Pitblado (2020) suggest that responsible and responsive stewards of artefacts exist, and that archaeologists perpetrate grave injustices by refusing to collaborate with these caretakers. The stewards of Thomas and Pitblado, while not professionally trained archaeologists, are people who follow laws and who care for their collections (Pitblado *et al.* 2018). The stewards do no harm and are pure of heart, with a desire to engage with the past and to make tangible connections to the land. They are interested in both their own well-being—with their love of outdoor adventure satiated, for example, by metal detecting—and the well-being of a common heritage. To that end, these stewards are eager to share their insights and information with professional archaeologists. They care about culture so much that they want to find it and rescue it from developers, looters (those who dig illegally and/or for profit) and other types of impending peril. As such, Thomas and Pitblado advocate for greater cooperation between archaeologists and responsible and responsive stewards, an action that benefits “archaeologists, collectors and heritage resources” (Thomas & Pitblado 2020: 1060), although there is no mention of how this cooperation benefits local populations.

Much of my academic inquiry focuses on the Eastern Mediterranean, and more specifically, on the legal and illegal movement of archaeological artefacts from the ground to the consumer. Most of the data I collect derive from ethnographic interviews (approved by the appropriate review boards) with individuals associated with this trade: archaeologists, dealers, government employees, locals, looters, museum professionals and collectors (see Kersel 2019). I will talk with almost anyone willing to speak with me, and I rely heavily on the kindness of strangers. All three nations (Israel, Jordan and Palestine) in my regional area of interest have national ownership laws, meaning that all undiscovered artefacts are the property of the state. Excavations take place with permissions obtained from the relevant authorities, and permits are typically issued to trained archaeologists, both local and foreign. Under these laws, there are no responsible and responsive stewards, defined by Thomas and Pitblado (2020: 1060) as “those who collect artefacts lawfully”. To be clear, the people I encounter digging or using metal detectors without relevant governmental permission are *looters* engaging in illegal activities. What is not clear vis-à-vis the Thomas and Pitblado (2020) piece is the definition of collector, a term that they use interchangeably with ‘steward’.

The collectors whom I routinely interview include pilgrims to the Holy Land (a deliberate choice of term for the region due to the demand for artefacts related to the people and places of the Bible) who want an oil lamp, and institutions (museums and educational) interested in buying high-end items such as Dead Sea scrolls or cuneiform tablets. While all are interested in owning a piece of the past, none are interested in digging something up themselves. These collectors share some of the same characteristics as Thomas and Pitblado’s (2020) stewards;

they care about culture, often wanting to ‘save’ the past, or needing a tangible connection to the land. Most, if not all, want to act responsibly by purchasing their artefacts in licensed shops in Israel. There, they can receive a certificate of authenticity and an export licence, legally entitling them to take home their fragment of the Holy Land (see Kersel 2019). For the most part, they do not want to break laws and, like stewards, they love to speak with archaeologists about the artefacts in their possession.

As Thomas and Pitblado note, there are many benefits of engaging with the stewards of their study; the same is true for engaging with collectors. My interviews with collectors of Holy Land artefacts has resulted in a greater understanding of why they want, for example, a Roman oil lamp, and why a replica will not fulfil that need. Certain sites are the targets of looting in order to meet consumer demand, and analyses of interview data related to those sites may assist in policy formation, site-management plans, and protection strategies (see Kersel & Hill 2020).

There is no denying the complex nature of human interaction with ancient sites and objects, but while Thomas and Pitblado (2020) present what they consider to be a more nuanced stance advocating for engagement, we should also ask whether the responsible and responsive acquisition of artefacts—by stewards or collectors—causes harm. Tentatively identified as Biblical Sodom (van Hattem 1981), the Early Bronze Age (3600–2000 BC) site of Bab adh-Dhra’ on the Dead Sea Plain in Jordan is pitted with thousands of holes—the result of illegal digging for artefacts since the 1960s. When interviewed about the connection between their demand for an object and the looting of an archaeological site, collectors see no direct association. A collector in the Old City of Jerusalem who wants a pot from “the city of sin” (to quote one interviewee), however, will be provided with a pot recently looted from one of the Dead Sea Plain sites in Jordan (see Kersel 2019). A recent headline from *The Guardian*, “Illegal metal-detecting at English Heritage sites doubles in two years” (Brown 2020), suggests that, perhaps, the UK public is unacquainted with the distinction between night hawking and legal metal detecting. I am aware of no longitudinal studies on whether rewarding metal detectorists in the sense of receiving the imprimatur through the UK Portable Antiquities Scheme results in greater interactions (either negative or positive) with the landscape. In the Holy Land and in the UK, ongoing demand for both legal and illegal objects can and does result in the ruin of archaeological landscapes. While Thomas and Pitblado are correct to advocate for greater collaboration with responsible and responsive stewards and collectors, this engagement must be one that highlights the clear connection between demand for artefacts and the destruction of archaeological sites and objects.

References

- BROWN, M. 2020. Illegal metal-detecting at English Heritage sites doubles in two years. *The Guardian*, 28 February 2020. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2020/feb/28/illegal-metal-detecting-at-english-heritage-sites-doubles-in-two-years> (accessed 24 March 2020).
- VAN HATTEM, W.C. 1981. Once again: Sodom and Gomorrah. *Biblical Archaeologist* 44(2): 87–92. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3209864>
- KERSEL, M.M. 2019. Itinerant objects: the legal lives of Levantine artifacts, in A. Yasur-Landau, E.H. Cline & Y.M. Rowan (ed.) *The social archaeology of the Levant*: 594–612. Cambridge:

Cambridge University Press.

<https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316661468.034>

KERSEL, M.M. & A.C. HILL. 2020. Databases, drones, diggers, and diplomacy: the Jordanian request for a US cultural property bilateral agreement. *Journal of Field Archaeology* 45: S101–10.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/00934690.2020.1713282>

PITBLADO, B.L. *et al.* 2018. Process and outcomes of the SAA 'Professional Archaeologists, Avocational

Archaeologists, and Responsible Artifact Collectors Relationships Task Force'

(2015–2018). *The SAA Archaeological Record* 18(5): 14–17.

THOMAS, S. & B.L. PITBLADO. 2020. The dangers of conflating responsible and responsive artefact stewardship with illicit and illegal collecting. *Antiquity* 94: 1060–1067.

<https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2019.201>