

Papers from the Institute of Archaeology

Review of *Decolonisation, heritage and the field*, London 26–27
January 2018

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How to cite: Käyhkö, I. 'Review of *Decolonisation, heritage and the field*, London 26–27 January 2018.' *Papers from the Institute of Archaeology*, 2019, 28(1): pp. 1–4.
DOI: [10.14324/111.2041-9015.003](https://doi.org/10.14324/111.2041-9015.003).

Published: 30/04/2019

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Papers from the Institute of Archaeology is a peer-reviewed open access journal.

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CONFERENCE REVIEW

Review of *Decolonisation, heritage and the field*, London, 26–27 January 2018

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‘Decolonisation’ can be understood either as the historical process during which colonies gained independence and their subsequent nation-building projects or, drawing from postcolonial theory, as the undoing of colonial power structures in society and in academic research. This definitional split marks a fundamental difference: the former sees a definitive endpoint to the decolonisation process, while the latter perceives it as a continued effort and responsibility. At the *Heritage, Decolonisation and the Field* conference, organised jointly by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) *Heritage* Priority Area (based in the UCL Institute of Archaeology) and the German Historical Institute in London on 26th and 27th January 2018, this divide could be clearly seen. While all the papers provided insight into the development of the heritage field in an international context of decolonisation, many did not explicitly engage with the latter definition – the decolonisation of heritage practice itself. This is perhaps surprising, considering the intensity of debate on the topic of postcolonial decolonisation processes both in academic communities and in public discourse in recent years.

Despite this rift between approaches, all the papers presented at the conference provided timely and critical insight to the development of heritage practices in a world that presents significant contemporary challenges – environmental, political and social – to heritage sites and governance. Overarching themes included the relationship between colony and metropole, the processes of nation-building and the creation of a global system of heritage governance. The conference was well attended and discussion sessions made it clear that many among the audience evidently held a keen interest in the more theoretical aspects of decolonisation.

The keynote address, given by Daniel J. Sherman (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill), presented a view of ‘colonising the field’ as a process linking archaeological research with the establishment of French colonial power in 20th-century Tunisia. Applying Bourdieu’s (1984) observations of the scientific field both to a physical landscape and an emerging discipline, Sherman showed colonial domination to be formed of a web of contested reasons, including interpersonal competition, scientific advancement and political goals. The paper provided a comprehensive background to many of the topics covered during the conference as the role of Western knowledge production in building colonial power was to be a recurring theme throughout.

In the opening session, *Knowledge Practices*, Marie Huber (Humboldt University of Berlin) presented a paper on UNESCO and Ethiopian heritage governance and Mark Thurner (Institute of Latin American Studies, University of London) discussed heritage networks in the Latin American context. Both papers gave interesting and broad overviews of the development of heritage governance in two different decolonising contexts.

In the following *Museums* session, all three speakers emphasised the role of museums as spaces of power, able to shape national narratives of the past – but also as institutions of alternately waxing and waning value in the eyes of the state and of wider society. Nation-building projects at two different museums were outlined: Sarah K. Griswold (New York University) focused on the role of the Louvre in defining France’s role as a cultural power after the end of its colonial project, and Tânia Madureira (University Institute of Lisbon) traced the journey of the National Museum of Ethnology in Mozambique from promoting a colonial salvage agenda to post-independence attempts to consolidate national identity. In a fascinating paper, and the first to characterise decolonisation as a contemporary agenda instead of merely a historical process, Claire Wintle (University of Brighton) addressed the complicated and often collaborative relationship between British museums and former colonies, which gave a space for the political elites of decolonising nations to put forward their views on their newly independent nations. In the next session, *Archives*, Fabienne Chamelot (University of Portsmouth) and Johanna Zetterstrom-Sharp (Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Cambridge) similarly focused on the elevation of Western and colonial expertise as ‘apolitical’ and the persistence of colonial heritage legacies in

decolonising nations. Katja Müller (Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg) highlighted the role of archives as agents in cultural production through limiting or allowing access to archival resources. Müller's compelling paper argued that the internet may be seen as an avenue for breaking existing power structures in heritage access and governance. In India, legislation requiring the digitisation of archival material has recently transformed the relationship between the public and colonial archives, while the emergence of 'guerrilla' archiving – digital community archives – has further contributed to decolonising and democratising archives.

The final session of the first day, *Decolonising Practice*, directly tackled many of the theoretical points alluded to by earlier papers, taking a more political approach to decolonisation and to contemporary debate. This session resulted in lively discussion, with many among the audience expressing interest and further insights over the theoretical approaches put forward in the papers. The papers presented made several incisive observations on the state of heritage studies as a whole, and served to illuminate problems in contemporary heritage governance. Rachel Ama Asaa Engmann (Hampshire College) presented *Autoarchaeology as a decolonising archaeological heritage practice*, outlining a community archaeology project on the coast of Ghana at Osu/Christianborg Castle. A research project focuses on descendant archaeology, which Engmann calls autoarchaeology – an archaeology of the self and one's own past. As proposed by Engmann, autoarchaeology aims to connect communities to their difficult pasts and challenges Western heritage orthodoxy, dismantling the binary between the researcher and the researched and emphasising the partial and subjective nature of knowledge itself.

Similarly, Dean Sully (UCL Institute of Archaeology) argued for a guest-host model in heritage and conservation practice, in which researchers see themselves as guests while research subjects are given the authority of hosts. Sully suggested a 'peoples-based' model for conservation which prioritises the needs of contemporary local or descendant communities. In colonial contexts, this requires active self-reflection on part of researchers. As an example of the ways in which this process can be initiated (and possibly to provide some comic relief) Sully referred to himself as 'a blockage in the pipeline', explaining that as a white man at risk of inadvertently perpetuating colonial and masculine power structures within academia, reflexivity is key to his work.

Jessica Namakkal (Duke University) presented a paper on removing and renaming monuments. Drawing from recent political campaigns focused on dismantling statues, such as #RhodesMustFall in Cape Town and Oxford and the movement seeking to bring down Confederate statues in Southern states of the United States, Namakkal questioned the purpose of heritage conservation. As Namakkal noted, statues commemorating and honouring Cecil Rhodes or Robert E. Lee create specific historical narratives: these statues are often not intended to preserve the past, but to obscure aspects of it through the promotion of specific narratives. Namakkal's paper provided a timely and passionate call for all heritage professionals to engage in these debates and to develop moral standpoints, reminding the conference that not all heritage sites must be preserved.

The final session, *Nation/State/Globe* centred the role of heritage in nation-building. Nicodemus Fru Awasom (University of Swaziland) and Emmanuel Yenkong Sobseh (University of Bamenda) both focused on the memorialisation and governance of heritage in Cameroon as attempts to unify a divided nation. Amal Sachedina (George Washington University) similarly demonstrated how heritage has been used to construct national unity in Oman. Walter Rossa and Miguel Bandeira Jerónimo (University of Coimbra) examined architectural and heritage aspects of Portuguese colonial landscapes with a novel multidisciplinary approach. The ending keynote presentation was given by Sudeshna Guha (Shiv Nadar University), drawing together several threads from the conference presentations. Focusing on the responsibilities of archaeologists, curators and archivists in heritage-making, Guha extended the reach of the decolonisation process – from decolonising heritage to decolonising the mind, raising the question of what this mental decolonising entails. The creation of an expert-centric field of heritage governance is a political agenda itself; further consideration of power, ethics and agency in heritage-making is needed.

More consideration of the ethical questions highlighted by Guha would have been welcome throughout the conference. While the presented research on developments in heritage governance is certainly crucial to better understanding the role of archaeology and heritage in decolonisation and nation-building processes, the most engaging sessions – for myself and, judging by the lively debate, for many among the attendees – stressed the importance of decolonising the theory and

practice of archaeology and heritage. It is notable that most papers were presented by Western academics working in non-Western contexts. As noted by both Sully and Engmann, this specific researcher-researched relationship must be considered when conducting research.

Decolonisation can either be understood as a historical process leading to the establishment of an independent nation; or it can be viewed, as expressed by Claire Wintle, as an ongoing process that continues to dismantle Western scientific orthodoxies. Research that challenges current methodology within heritage studies is necessary in order to relate research to precisely the contemporary debates highlighted in Namakkal's and Sully's papers. The conference demonstrated the necessity of developing an engaged, challenging and committed discourse on the meaning of decolonisation within academic archaeology and heritage studies. Without doing so, research on heritage, decolonisation and the field risks remaining peripheral to ongoing debates at best, or unquestioningly perpetuating accepted heritage orthodoxy at worst.

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