

"Archaeological Heritage"

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There is, it seems to me, abiding disconnects among archaeologists regarding their understanding of the expression "archaeological heritage." Some of us equate archaeological heritage with "*Indigenous* heritage," and it is our common want to refer to Precontact artifacts and features as archaeological heritage. In so doing, we (but not me, BTW) imply, albeit unintentionally, that such materials are somehow the heritage of archaeologists, whereas in fact they are the heritage of traditional Indigenous peoples to whom the Western colonialist discipline of archaeology was entirely unknown.

What is a basic, dictionary-type definition of the word "heritage"? I would suggest the following: "the material and non-material cultural legacy that descendants or successive generations acquire, via either unintended circumstances¹ or by formal bequeathment, from their predecessors."

All disciplines of long standing have a history, and as such they have a heritage. Medicine, graphic art, the military, teaching, the construction industry, Manitoba Hydro, the theatre, etc, etc, etc all have their own history and hence their own heritage ... and so does the discipline of archaeology.

Some examples of *bona fide* archaeological heritage are:

- the practice of digging square holes in the ground
- the use of the principle of seriation
- the Midwestern Taxonomic System
- the Direct Historical Approach that engendered the hypothesized Blackduck-Assiniboin connection
- the reliance on and use of the results of radiocarbon dating
- the use of Unit and Level forms
- the development and application of typological systems
- the assignment of European family and geographic place names to projectile point and pottery types.

Some aspects of archaeological heritage are for all intents and purposes no longer part of the archaeologist's "tool kit." Those that are still in use can also, and logically, be regarded as "living heritage" as well as standard archaeological heritage. We might call them "living archaeological heritage."

Most scientific disciplines, including archaeology, involve the use of field and lab instruments, early examples of which – "relics" or "disciplinary heirlooms" – may have special heritage significance because they were used by a renowned and/or now-deceased practitioner, or because they were invented by an

¹ In the present context, "unintended circumstances" comprise situations conducive to the reception of relict materials by informal means. For example, Precontact people never intended 21st Century successors to acquire their cultural residue left behind on the landscape. The fact that they (the successors) did so was simply due to Euro-Canadian archaeological activity that happened to come about due to intellectual interest in Precontact heritage and history, not by way of formal, willed endowment by the Ancients.

archaeologist some time ago and are still useful in the conduct of contemporary archaeological procedure. These items can all be referred to as “archaeological heritage objects.”

What are some examples of specific archaeological heritage objects? Here is a sample, to name a few:

- individual hard copies of Historic Resources Branch publications from the 1970s
- Dr. R.S. MacNeish’s trowel that he used in digging at Lockport in 1952
- Morgan Tamplin’s field notebook from the 1960s Glacial Lake Agassiz survey
- archived Level forms completed during the Stott site excavations in the 1980s
- Chris Vickers’ catalogue numbers that he wrote in India ink on the artifacts that he recovered in the 1940s.

Excluded are the artifacts themselves which are, and always will be, Indigenous, not archaeological, heritage objects.

In recent years, Indigenous people have expressed concern about non-Aboriginals’ appropriation of Aboriginal art motifs and clothing styles in the interest of making a profit. Professional archaeologists, by definition, make a profit (their income) in excavating Precontact sites and processing their findings. They compound this issue by categorizing their findings as archaeological heritage, which they certainly are not – what they are retrieving, and processing are exclusively *Indigenous* heritage objects and features from relict cultural deposits of entirely *Indigenous* origin.

Flowing from this discussion is the question of what is, and is not, an “archaeological site.” A place becomes an archaeological site only when it is in some way or other attended to (surface-collected, excavated) by qualified archaeologists, but not before. Even then, their cultural contents still comprise Indigenous, not archaeological, heritage after recovery from the field via archaeological techniques and their deposition in an off-site storage facility.

In this age of Indigenous-mainstream reconciliation within Canadian society, it is appropriate that we do not confuse “Indigenous heritage” with “archaeological heritage.” Categorizing Indigenous heritage as archaeological heritage is a form of cultural appropriation.

Acknowledgement:

My thanks to Dr Scott Hamilton for his critical commentary of an earlier draft of this article. For all scholarly deficits, shortfalls in common sense, and errors of omission and commission that it may contain, the responsibility is entirely mine.