

CULTURE CHANGES IN CALIFORNIA ARCHAEOLOGY CONCERNING GRAVE MATTERS

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Tony Platt's recent book, Grave Matters: Excavating California's Buried Past, emphasizes many significant ethical and moral issues regarding the excavation of Native American burials in the history of California archaeology that have not been highly emphasized in much of its education and literature. This paper discusses some reactions regarding those issues that were under way within California archaeology a half century ago. This is not at all a critical rejection of Platt's analysis, but instead is an expansion of its complexity based on the author's own experiences in college and professional life. Opposition to the excavation of Native American burials was already emerging then, though it was not yet a prevailing ethic. It is hoped that exploration of the ethical and moral issues involved in burial excavation can become more widespread and diverse in the literature and can become more significant components in the education of future generations of researchers.

Tony Platt, a Professor Emeritus of History, recently published a significant book called *Grave Matters: Excavating California's Buried Past* (Platt 2011). The book focuses on issues of ethical significance in the history of California archaeology in which professional attitudes toward Native Californians, and toward Native Californian concerns about the protection of religiously important remains, such as the graves of ancestors, reflect strong levels of racial prejudice and discrimination. Platt's book discusses issues concerning the ethics of the practice of Anthropology and Archaeology. These issues have not at all been ignored by researchers and instructors in recent decades, but they deserve more examination and reflective consideration than has been given to them so far, and they should be even more central than at present in the preparation of scholars and researchers for future generations.

EMERGENCE OF THE ISSUE

Platt's geographic focus is on the Pacific Coast of Humboldt County in northern California, particularly part of the traditional territories of the Yurok and Wiyot nations. He has brought to light a number of cases in which archaeologists have excavated burial remains from prehistoric and protohistoric village sites and cemeteries, against the disapprovals of the local Native American communities. In many cases these projects and conflicts have resulted in the prevention of indigenous people from having access to the remains and properties of their ancestors. Platt has been able to document the orientations of several key figures in the historic development of anthropology and archaeology in California, such as Alfred Kroeber (see especially Platt 2011:37-53) and Robert Heizer (see especially Platt 2011:108-121), who put aside concerns about the effects of their research on the indigenous peoples and cultures they were studying in order to pursue their investigations without restrictions.

In the last half century or so, the attitudes and actions of California archaeologists have evolved, both in response to increasingly vigorous oppositions from Native American communities and to changes in laws and regulations established by the Federal government that affected research done on public lands or with public funding. Platt's discussion reports on changes that have taken place in archaeological practices, especially in the last 10-15 years, so as to reduce the actions that proved so offensive to Native American communities (Platt 2011:122-178). Most archaeologists today reflect quite different positions of values regarding the status of such Native American remains. At the same time, many representatives of Native American communities have become increasingly involved in the conducting of archaeological research of old sites and remains whose integrity is endangered by construction projects and other causes.

Thus the dilemmas that were taking place a century or so ago are, in general, much less severe today and are on paths to increasing resolution.

Nevertheless, there is an element of this issue that Platt has not drawn very much attention to, but which has a good deal of significance for the operation and development of the field and practice of archaeology as time goes on. This element concerns the place of the formal discussion of the ethical principles under which archaeology should operate, and which should be part of the formal educations of future generations of archaeologists. Joseph Des Jardins' discussion of the philosophical basis of ethics in regard to the environment is quite applicable to these much more specific circumstances (Des Jardins 2013).

SOME VARIATIONS IN ETHICAL ATTITUDES AND PRACTICES

Platt's book understandably does not try to provide a comprehensive examination of ethical practice across California archaeology, since he is focusing on some particular examples which reflect internal consistency in anthropological attitudes. He has some very strong evidence about the practices and associated values reflected in the burial excavations he describes, and they are hardly unique. However, I think it is useful to note that attitudes among archaeologists about the ethics of burial excavation were more varied than is reflected in Platt's discussion, and also that there have been significant changes in such values and attitudes over time as well. Just as one example, I would like to refer to the experiences I encountered as an undergraduate student at UCLA in the early 1960s. Prof. Clement Meighan was my primary mentor in my undergraduate years. Prof. Meighan was a student of Alfred Kroeber at U.C. Berkeley, from undergraduate days through his Ph.D., and was a colleague of Robert Heizer, so it would be understandable to expect that the values exhibited by Clem would reflect those which Platt has described for the Berkeley environment at that time. Kroeber and Heizer are perhaps the two most significant characters in Platt's discussions of burial excavations in Humboldt County, but their impacts and influences on California archaeology were far wider than the Humboldt region.

My first experiences with archaeology fieldwork at UCLA took place in the spring of 1962, when Prof. Meighan sponsored a fieldwork training program, as part of the class of ANP-195, on Saturdays at a prehistoric coastal village site (at Paradise Cove) west of Malibu (Nicholson 1962). The site was scheduled to have housing construction take place there, and Prof. Meighan wanted to use the opportunity to recover and preserve knowledge about what could be learned concerning the village site that had existed there before it was lost from planned subdivision development. No burials were known to have been there, though it was felt at the time that the presence of burials at such a coastal village would not be unreasonable. We students were taken there by one of Prof. Meighan's graduate students to teach us the methods of fieldwork while using our work to recover the endangered data. Over the semester, as test excavations were made across the terrace, some burial remains were found. Prof. Meighan then closed down the project. The next spring, when he held another field training program, he shifted the fieldwork to the grounds of a historic mansion on the outskirts of Malibu, where there were no known remains of any Native American settlements. The disturbance of Native American burials would not therefore be an issue.

Prof. Meighan, in his teachings, was not at all completely opposed to the study of human burial remains, but he did know and understand Native American feelings about the disturbance of the remains of their sacred ancestors. He made these perspectives known to his students in his classes. Many of his students, such as myself, took on the perspective of avoiding disturbance of burial remains as fully as could be possible. Our fieldwork practices reflect these values. This position shows that, although it was not a profession-wide position, nor was it then made a formal part of professional training, the issues of ethics such as the disturbance of burials were becoming part of the archaeological environment a number of decades ago. It did not turn into a changed world view across the profession, but it did show that

variation existed. It also shows that, even with Kroeber and Heizer as major influences, everyone was not drawn into the Kroeberian system of values.

DISCUSSION OF ETHICS

More, however, needs to be done in this arena. The subject of ethics is certainly discussed in many archaeology courses, but as a formal part of literature and curriculum it seems to be not very widely represented. Just as one example, I reviewed an edition of *Archaeology: Theories, Methods and Practice* by Colin Renfrew and Paul Bahn. This highly regarded teaching book, over 600 pages long, does not include the term “ethics” in its index or glossary (Renfrew and Bahn 2000). This edition is not brand-new, but it does reflect commonly held values and concepts in the current generation. On the other hand, Martha Joukowsky’s *A Complete Manual of Field Archaeology* (1980:10-12) even though it was published a generation earlier than Renfrew and Bahn, does have two pages devoted to ethics, although issues related to the violation of graves and ancestral remains are not mentioned. I also looked at a field methods textbook coauthored by Heizer (Hester et al. 1975). Since this book was written while Heizer was still professionally active, it was seen as a reasonable reflection of his own values and attitudes. The book makes no reference to ethics in the practice of archaeology. It has an entire chapter devoted to the excavation of human burial remains, but focuses on the protection of burial remains as sources of data, rather than discussing any questions about the propriety of burial excavation.

As another example, I examined the first 20 volumes of the *Society for California Archaeology Proceedings*, which consist of papers presented at the Society’s annual conferences that were subsequently submitted for publication. In these volumes, dating from 1988 to 2007, 524 papers were included. In 16 of the 20 volumes, I found no papers having any overt focus on matters of ethics. In Vol. 6, however, a paper by Dorothea Theodoratus, who collaborated with me in the controversial GO Road Project, includes a link to a matter of ethics (Theodoratus 1992). Vol. 13 had two papers which discussed matters of collaboration between archaeologists and Native Americans (Johnson 2000; Raab 2000), but not specifically about ethical dimensions of archaeological practice. In Vol. 14, a paper I wrote refers to student training, but not to ethics as a part of it (Chartkoff 2000). Vol. 16 includes six papers about student training, but none that have specific inclusions of ethics. A paper by Michael Glassow in Vol. 16, however, does discuss student training in ethics (Glassow 2003).

SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This is hardly a comprehensive piece of research, but it does give a fairly substantial overview of the place of ethics teaching and discussions in the California archaeological community. I think it would be very beneficial if the Society for California Archaeology, and the California archaeological community more generally, would undertake a substantial expansion of the examination and application of ethics in the practice of archaeology, both in terms of exploring the ethical dimensions of archaeological practice, and in the curriculum content of our undergraduate and graduate university education programs. For example, we have considered for many decades the ethical rationales for the preservation of archaeological sites from destruction by construction projects without recovering and preserving any information or artifacts from the sites. These analyses have led to the passing of many laws at Federal and state levels for both the preservation of sites against unnecessary destruction and the required support of studies of the sites should damage or destruction be unavoidable. Given those positions, it would be stimulating to consider the arguments for the preservation and protection of irreplaceable burial remains, held as sacred by their descendants, to compare and contrast those analyses with those for the preservation and protection of archaeological sites and remains more generally. Such comparisons would be very stimulating both in the dialogues among practicing archaeologists and in the educations of future archaeologists. Having many, if not all, of our curriculum catalogues include courses on ethical issues and practices in archaeology would be a marked positive response. Not only could it substantially enrich the

practice of archaeology in California, but it could become another area in which California becomes a national leader in the profession.

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