

Revisiting Archaeology and Colonialism

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Introduction: Revisiting archaeology and colonialism

In recent decades, there has been increasing interest in the long-lasting effects of colonialism within academia and the broader public sphere, most recently around debates on decolonisation (Gani and Marshall 2022; Maringe 2023). The impacts of colonialism are wide and far-reaching, affecting every field of research (Adas 2008; Smith 2012). The relationship between archaeology and colonialism is in itself complicated as the origins of archaeology are founded in colonial ideology (Moro-Abadía 2006). While there has been research within archaeology around colonialism (for example Cipolla and Hayes 2015; Given 2004; González-Ruibal 2013; Gosden 2004; Lemos 2023; Lyons and Papadopoulos 2002; Silliman 2005; Trigger 1984; van Dommelen 2006), little has been addressed or enacted in practice regarding the actual benefits of decolonisation for the field of archaeology as a whole (Bradshaw 2018). The main problem is that the archaeology of colonialism, despite rightly becoming a major sub-field, has not made much progress. After the long overdue realisations brought about by postcolonial theory (Lydon and Rizvi 2010), of, for example, the need for alternative archaeological narratives that do not rely on colonial concepts such as acculturation, but rather on two-way processes of cultural change and entanglements (Bhabha 1994; Dietler 2010; Stockhammer 2012), not much has been achieved in terms of understanding the nature of social relations among colonial societies. It has, therefore, to be wondered what is the way forward for the archaeology of colonialism; what is new and how can we ‘reclaim archaeology’ (González-Ruibal 2013).

Whilst the colonial past of archaeology needs to be acknowledged, distance must be created in order to dismantle the inherent association between archaeology, Indigenous communities and coloniality (González-Ruibal 2013; González-Ruibal et al. 2018). Reclaiming archaeology, however, should also include de-

colonisation and reparation, which archaeology itself, as a weaponised subject, owes to the postcolonial world (Tuck and Yang 2012). It is important to note that decolonisation can assume different meanings (Falola 2022; Mignolo and Walsh 2018) and that there are several ways of achieving this, the key is to ‘build bridges’ (Lemos in this volume). Unpacking this complex relationship is essential to the role of the archaeologist due to the field’s controversial past (Carruthers 2022; Hingley 1996; Moro-Abadía 2006) as well as its broader implications for the present and the future. The intention of this volume is to highlight the intersection of colonialism and archaeology from a broad, wide-ranging perspective; we think there are ways forward for the archaeology of colonialism to decolonise the past, the present and the future of the discipline (see Lemos in this volume).

Postcolonial thought, archaeology, and heritage

Postcolonial thought developed in the last decades of the twentieth century with the intent of dismantling the colonial-based narrative of history. Colonial discourse is based on the establishment of binary pairs (i.e. colonisers versus colonised, civilisation versus barbarianism) (Hingley et al. 2018), which generate a process of *Otherisation*. In particular, Said (1979) tackles the otherisation of the Orient; constructing knowledge about the ‘other’, most often in the shape of dualities against the better self, rationalises and legitimates colonisation (Said 1979). It is the idea of knowledge as power introduced by Foucault (1966).

Inevitably postcolonial thought led scholars to question and challenge this colonial-based discourse, to emphasise the agency of the colonised. Silliman (2005) for example, looks at acculturation as a simplistic view of the cultural interaction, which downplays the two-way relationship between societies. According to Silliman (2005), even assimilation implies agency; moreover, the author looks at the archaeology of resistance, which can be either active or passive. Similarly, Given (2004) focuses on using the archaeological record to reconstruct the experiences of the colonised, who are usually ‘voiceless’. In particular, he shapes a theoretical framework for the archaeological study of the colonised based on agency and resistance in the landscape. According to this theory, resistance takes the shape of “creating alternative meanings and symbols” (Given 2004: 10). In this context, Sparke (1998: 305) develops the concept of “rival geographies”, in the sense that landscapes of the colonised and of the colonisers

develop in parallel. These rival geographies can be revealed by systematically mapping different archaeological traces to understand the relationship between landscape and people.

Colonialism, however, does not always take the same form, firstly, modern and ancient colonialism are situated in very different historical contexts with different motivations, but even in the same historical period there can be several differences. Gosden (2004) identifies three forms of colonialism: the shared *milieu*, middle ground and *terra nullius*. These typologies are differentiated by the extent of transformations caused by the contact between the coloniser and the colonised, which go respectively from the form with less transformation (shared *milieu*) compared to the one with the most (*terra nullius*), where the previous traditions are not recognised. The middle ground is possibly the most common and certainly where ancient forms of colonisation tend to fit; in this instance there is a clear blending of cultural practices (Gosden 2004), which draws on Bhabha (1994) and his formulation of a cultural invention. In the *Invention of Culture*, he refers to the negotiation between two cultures that gives way to a new culture in which both actors play a part; this is the process commonly referred to as *hybridisation*. The idea of a hybrid culture has been also used to formulate alternative theories such as creolisation (Webster 2001) and code-switching (Shepherd 2013) to explain cultural change in colonies. Creolisation results from the combination of two cultures, also leading to the formation of a sub-culture, which is a non-elite culture (Webster 2001). On the other hand, code-switching is a concept borrowed from linguistics and applied to the adoption of different cultures according to the context (Shepherd 2013).

In this context, the decolonisation of heritage and, in particular, of archaeological narratives is becoming increasingly a pressing, contemporary issue. This does not necessarily refer only to the representation of modern colonialism, but also to the archaeological interpretation of the earliest examples of colonisation. An instance of this is the perception and museological representation of the Roman Empire and its conquests, also known as Romanisation, which refers to the one-way acculturation and conquest of Iron Age societies (Haverfield 1905). The very concept of Romanisation derives from the modern colonial discourse and is therefore quite problematic (Hingley 1996). Postcolonialism has had a positive impact on such archaeological theories, but in most instances, there is still

improvement to be made. In particular, museum narratives and media portrayals are not always aligned with postcolonial archaeological tendencies (Hingley et al. 2018), and some ancient forms of colonisation are more difficult to challenge than others. The previously mentioned instance of Romanisation, for example, is quite complicated because the West has adopted Roman heritage as the founder of its own identity (Mattingly 2010). The same can be said about Hellenisation and modern Europeans, which, according to this origin myth, are considered to be descendants of the Greek and Roman civilisations (Kristiansen 1996), and thus, superior to other contemporary ‘uncultured’ civilisations. Therefore, the concept of acculturation of ‘uncivilised’ societies becomes difficult to question; however, it is crucial to do so.

Archaeology and colonialism: an entwined relationship from its inception and a lingering legacy

Archaeology and colonialism intersect on many different levels. First and perhaps most obviously are the origins of the modern field of scientific archaeology; which not only benefitted immensely from colonisation but served to justify it via the promotion of theories such as the unilineal model of evolution à la Lewis Henry Morgan (1878). Archaeology played an essential role in this by providing not only the material culture needed to fill the typological display cases of the first museums (Ames 1992) but by supplying artefacts used for comparison in the classification of Indigenous peoples as lower on the evolutionary scale (Schmidt and Patterson 1995; Trigger 1984). The empires of the West, such as Great Britain and France, were rapidly conquering new territories and this new way of thinking helped to validate this colonial behaviour as bringing a ‘civilised’ influence on ‘primitive’ people that were stuck in the past.

It is no coincidence, then, that the ‘golden age’ of Western colonial expansion coincides with the origins of archaeology as a scientific endeavour. Archaeology and the colonial project were thus almost intrinsically entwined from their earliest beginnings during the Age of Discovery (Gathercole and Lowenthal 1990). The early sense of entitlement that promoted the widescale looting and destruction of archaeological landscapes in conquered regions stemmed from and was reinforced by policies such as the Doctrine of Discovery which granted ownership rights to the ‘discoverers’ of foreign lands occupied by non-Chris-

tians (Alexander VI 1493). Invoked as a legal precedent as recently as 2005 in a United States Supreme Court Ruling (*City of Sherrill v. Oneida Indian Nation of New York*, 544 U.S. 197), the Doctrine was only officially repudiated by the Catholic Church just two weeks before this piece was written (Joint Statement of the Dicasteries 2023).

Archaeology also intersects with colonialism in far more subtle ways. Hegemonic techniques such as the ‘vanishing Indian’, the ethnographic present, the denial of coevalness, and the Western process of ‘Othering’ are all at risk of being perpetuated by the archaeologist. For instance, the classic example of the Kennewick Man –a single skeleton which sparked a racial controversy that has lasted for nearly thirty years (Thomas 1999). Or the ways in which settler colonial nations, such as the United States or Australia, have controlled the narrative regarding the prehistoric past; often gatekeeping archaeology from the very people whose past they are digging up (Deloria 1969). The incorrect assumption that indigenous peoples were uncivilised, defined the ways in which archaeologists interpreted their finds by limiting technological innovation and cultural advancement to more ‘superior’ cultures (Trigger 1984). Anything that did not match up with this narrative was seen as evidence of ancient lost races that were actually capable of advanced culture (Silverberg 1969) such as the builders of Cahokia, Great Zimbabwe, and even Newgrange. These theories, as outlandish as they may seem, are still actively supported by figures such as Graham Hancock (2019) and by multi-national institutions like the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Dahl 1961).

The Environmental Legacies of Colonialism: from local to global changes

One of the increasingly significant impacts of colonialism is its effects on the climate and environment. While this issue is not extensively covered within the volume, we felt it was incredibly important to highlight this relationship due to the impending climate crisis that our world is currently facing.

In recent years, a growing body of research has examined the environmental legacy of colonial empires (Wallman et al. 2018). This refers to the enduring effects on the environment that resulted from practices such as exploitation or reconfiguration, which were imposed by these empires as part of their economic

agendas (Hirschfeld et al. 2023). These practices were in most cases abruptly superimposed on the Indigenous populations' long-standing and adapted practices of managing and shaping the landscape over millennia (e.g. Fletcher et al. 2021a). While the amplitude of these changes can be circumscribed locally or regionally in most cases (e.g. Studnicki-Gizbert and Shecter 2010; Wells et al. 2018), at least until further research reassesses this picture, it has been demonstrated that the intensity of colonial impacts has led to a shift in the climate system over a planetary scale (e.g. Koch et al. 2019; Lewis and Maslin 2015; Roberts et al. 2018).

For 550 years, colonial empires impacted landscapes through the imposition of land use strategies by altering local and Indigenous human-environmental ecosystems to the accumulation and exploitation of local resources. One example is the case of the landscape changes that occurred across Central America and northern South America between 1545 and 1822 CE following Spanish silver mining and new types of land use brought by colonialism (Branding and Cross 1972; Enfield and O'Hara 1999; Studnicki-Gizbert and Shecter 2010). Precisely, wide areas close to ore sources in Mexico and northern Peru underwent massive deforestation and soil erosion caused by wood consumption for fuelling the silver mining and smelting industry during the early phase of colonial expansion. However, it was only with the combined effect of crop monoculture practices, intense overgrazing by sheep and goats and population expansion, that heavy soil erosion caused the landscape desertification and aridification of many areas of Central Mexico.

Another case is that of the Philippine Archipelago on the Pacific Ocean, where the effects of the Spanish Empire colonialism were buffered by the absence of environmental and edaphic conditions suitable to the immediate adaptations of intrusive fauna and vegetal species (Amano et al. 2021). However, by ca. 1850 CE when the Spanish Empire was reformed by the Bourbons, monoculture plantation and intensified deforestation resulted in marked forest cover contraction, landscape destabilisation, and possibly alteration of the Philippine Archipelago climate system (Amano et al. 2021 and references therein). A third case of complex ecological interactions between colonial land use and the environment is that of the Caribbean Islands in the Neotropics. A phase of landscape degradation followed the introduction of sugarcane mono-crop agriculture by the British col-

onisation on the island of Antigua between 1655 and 1835 CE (Wells et al. 2018). However, the soils of Antigua were managed to avoid further soil loss leading to a built environment associated with sugarcane farming. It was discovered that the abandonment of this field system was responsible for much more pronounced soil erosion in the last 200 years compared to that of 400 years BP.

Accordingly, the impact of colonialism has left behind a diverse array of local historical ecologies across the Atlantic and Pacific worlds (e.g. Carney 2021; Castilla-Beltrán et al. 2020; Elliott et al. 2022; Haines 2021; Mamdani 1982; Oas and Hauser 2018; Ofcansky 1984). However, the effects of colonialism went beyond these local ecosystems and ultimately resulted in disruptions of the climate conditions on a global scale (Koch et al. 2019; Lewis and Maslin 2015; Roberts et al. 2018). In their seminal work, Lewis and Maslin (2015) have suggested that colonialism, along with associated global trade and the coal industry, have determined the start of the new geological epoch in which we are currently living, the Anthropocene, though not formally defined as a geological unit (<http://quaternary.stratigraphy.org/>). In support of this, Koch et al. (2019) have found evidence of a net dip in the atmospheric CO₂ levels over a global scale, due to the carbon uptake by vegetation re-growth following the deaths of more than 55 million indigenous people between 1500 and 1600 CE as a result of European contact. Locally resolved environmental proxy archives also indicate marked changes in regional ecosystems after the sixteenth century CE (e.g. Brugger et al. 2019; Velez et al. 2021). Nevertheless, other multiproxy investigations have questioned previous evidence of extensive deforestation occurring across Tropical environments of South America during the prehistoric period, thus challenging the effective contribution of subsequent forest recovery upon European contact to decreasing atmospheric CO₂ levels (Piperno et al. 2022).

It is clear that European colonial practices dramatically altered landscapes and ecosystems which were constructed and managed by Indigenous people through cultural land use practices. These Indigenous land use systems, which included intelligent and resilient management practices, shaped and constructed richly-biodiverse environments perceived as ‘natural’ by colonisers, and even modern scientists (e.g. Fletcher et al. 2021b). Perhaps, it is only through taking into account and bringing Indigenous cultural land management back into place that the environmental legacy of colonialism can be finally redeemed.

Archaeology and colonialism through space, time, and place

The articles in this issue demonstrate how the intersection of archaeology and colonialism is not only increasingly relevant but pivotal for the future direction of this field. Contributors considered the role of colonial ideology in different parts of the world (fig. 1), as well as past and current archaeological practices in problematising current explanatory narratives and in crafting new ones. Overall, the volume dismantles many current colonial dichotomies that are prevalent throughout academic disciplines, in favour of those that emphasise the interaction of multiple active agents within their archaeological and historical context.

Pintar and Martinez examine the role of colonial, imperial, and nationalist narratives in the portrayal of the prehistoric past. Specifically focusing on how Neanderthals are represented in comparison to *Homo sapiens*, they illustrate how the decline of the former has been interpreted through the lens of colonialism; i.e. suggesting that their decline was a result of inferior cognitive abilities, inability to adapt to changing landscapes, or widespread warfare between the two groups. The authors then go on to explore how these same ideologies influenced attitudes toward Siberia in the early twentieth century through notions of authenticity, antiquity, and primitiveness.

Moving to Cyprus, Nikolau focuses on the establishment of nationalistic archaeological narratives, considering colonial ideologies as the foundation for these. In particular, there seems to be a dichotomy between Greek and Turkish archaeological narratives, which further perpetuate division on the island. This case is striking because it reminds us of the effect that colonial-based archaeology can have in contemporary socio-political matters. After highlighting the impact of nationalism and colonialism on archaeology, the author discusses the potential for inclusive developments to address the historical traumas and attempt a “cosmopolitan resolution”.

Kaljanac et al. explore how the establishment of Austro-Hungarian governance in Bosnia and Herzegovina, following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, prioritised the development of the National Museum of Sarajevo as a matter of national importance. Despite this focus on establishing a national museum, however, the authors reveal the lack of scientific archaeological research and care that went into collecting the artefacts to be placed within; demonstrating that

they have little to no archaeological value. Thus, national identity and prestige were ensured but at a great scientific expense.

Another intertwined relationship between colonial ideology and archaeology is brought to light by the instance of the Hanseatic culture, as described by Immonen. In the paper, it is showcased how the same concept of an Hanseatic culture is inherent to a colonial rhetoric which utilises fields such as archaeology as a classificatory device. In this context, the Hanseatic league becomes endowed with colonial agency, which is explained in the paper through the example of stoneware trade and incorporation into domestic culture.

Michaut's paper provides another example of the establishment of an authorised history which follows colonial thinking. In this case, the author convincingly explores archival documents to demonstrate the silencing and invisibilisation of women in enslaved memories in Senegal. As shown in the paper, this androcentric narrative is a result of the effects of colonialism. The noteworthy conclusion underlines the role of archaeology to dismantle such androcentric biases through the study of 'unbiased' material traces.

Noelli and Sallum's work focuses on the Indigenous group of the Tupí Guaraní people from São Paulo, Brazil, and on decolonising these people by thoroughly exploring their materiality and cultural connections within the Brazilian region. The analysis of the archaeological materials related to the Tupí Guaraní people linked with an examination of photographic and demographic data led the authors to expose how colonial-based narratives have erased, until today, the history and archaeology of the Tupí Guaraní Indigenous group.

In the final paper of the volume, Sheik exposes convincingly how colonialism has affected cross-latitudinal and cross-cultural archaeological reconstructions, still impacting the life and the archaeological record of people. Through a comparative study of past and present societies and the entanglement between environmental disruption and colonialism, he concludes with a thought-provoking call to decolonise the archaeological field and to prioritise the dialogue between local and Indigenous history and materiality.

The future of archaeology

Revisiting the archaeology of colonialism does not have implications just for this sub-field itself, but for the future of archaeology as a whole. For this reason, the rethinking of archaeology and colonialism should be at the centre of current discussions. Eurocentric archaeology has dominated the field since its inception and it has only been recently that alternative epistemologies have begun to transform it (Cippola and Hayes 2015; Gathercole and Lowenthal 1990). These counter-movements are crucial not only within archaeology but in the broader sense of colonial legacies as ‘decolonial’ frameworks seek to dismantle the processes behind these structures which continue to operate through the modern day (Fanon 1963; Veracini 2011; Wolfe 1998, 2006). While archaeologists can certainly seek to ‘decolonise’ their practices by, for example, centring alternative narratives or community-based approaches as demonstrated in this volume, it is important to note here that “decolonization is not a metaphor” (Tuck and Yang 2012: 1) and requires real actions, real consequences, and real disturbances.

Moreover, there is an existent parallelism between modern colonialism and ancient colonialism (i.e. Romanisation, Hellenisation, Orientalisation and so on) according to which local pre-colonial material culture is used to parallel the Indigenous communities colonised during modern imperialism, showing their ‘primitivism’. For this reason, in the process of the decolonisation of heritage, it needs to be considered that the representation of the past itself can be colonised and requires challenging assumptions based in colonial ideology. Otherwise, all current decolonisation attempts of modern colonialism are in vain. As Lemos (2023) explains, revisiting the past through archaeology is not only essential to rewrite history and decolonise the past, but also to decolonise the present and the future. This can be done through “narratives of reparation” (Lemos 2023: 31), which refer to the unveiling of alternative histories to offer compensation. In fact, although many archaeologists have been involved in creating alternative postcolonial narratives for decades, it is difficult not to wonder if we are perhaps stuck to the concept of hybridisation, where everything started. These theories, or alternative narratives, are definitely postcolonial, and have been a great step forward in academia, but they are not fully decolonial, in the sense that they do not offer reparation, which should be the aim of archaeologists moving forward.

The articles in this volume illustrate the varied and evolving ways in which modern archaeology is attempting to shed the skin of its colonial past. While archaeology cannot erase its problematic origins, nor should it, there are many ways in which it can act as an agent of positive transformation both in academia and the broader world by influencing the ways in which the past is interpreted, presented, and evaluated.

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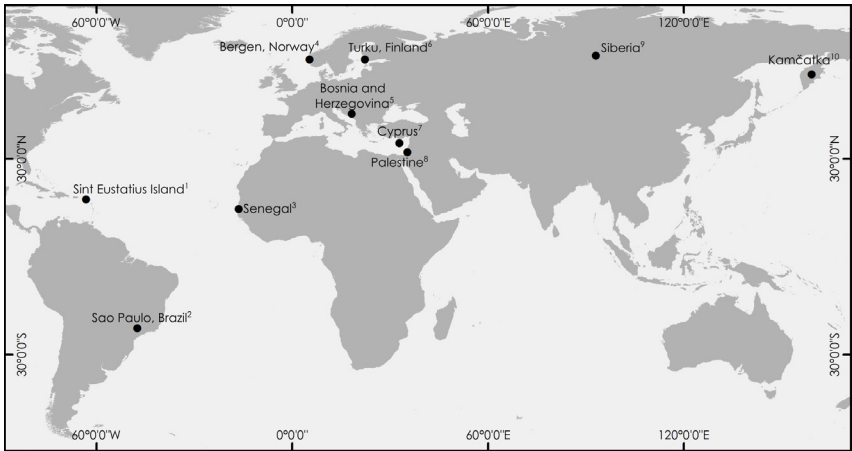


Fig. 1. Map of all locations discussed in the volume: 1) Sheik; 2) Noelli and Sallum; 3) Michaut; 4) Immonen 5) Kaljanac et al.; 6) Immonen; 7) Niikolau; 8) Sheik; 9&10) Pintar and Martinez.