# Memorializing Peace

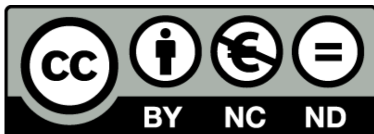
**Shannon Lee Dawdy**

Zitiervorschlag
Shannon Lee Dawdy. 2026. Memorializing Peace. Forum Kritische Archäologie 15, Theme Issue: Orienting Archaeology towards Peace: 2–4.

URL https://www.kritischearchaeologie.de

DOI http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/refubium-51887

ISSN 2194-346X




Dieser Beitrag steht unter der Creative Commons Lizenz CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 (Namensnennung – Nicht kommerziell – Keine Bearbeitung) International. Sie erlaubt den Download und die Weiterverteilung des Werkes / Inhaltes unter Nennung des Namens des*der Autor*in, jedoch keinerlei Bearbeitung oder kommerzielle Nutzung.

Weitere Informationen zu der Lizenz finden Sie unter: http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/deed.de.

# Memorializing Peace

**Shannon Lee Dawdy**

Professor Emerita, University of Chicago, sdawdy@uchicago.edu

Gerald Holtom, photographed by Birchall Danny, CC0, via Wikimedia Commons [public domain].

According to the National Monument Audit (Monument Lab 2025), the United States is home to at least 15,758 war memorials. In contrast, only 1,221 sites are associated with peace. War memorials are sponsored by federal, state, and local agencies, as well as privately-funded ones in cemeteries, city parks, and traffic circles from organizations as diverse as the Daughters of the Confederacy, the National Park Service, the Alpha Delta Phi fraternity and the Vietnam Veterans of Oregon. Many of the peace memorials, which represent a little over 2% of the total recorded in the audit, could have just as easily ended up in the war column. They often do double duty – memorializing dead soldiers or victims of Hiroshima, Nagasaki, or the Holocaust in order to make a negative plea for peace.

Peace movements are peculiarly difficult to sustain. It is hard to distinguish them from anti-war movements, or at least from the regrets of war. Once a war is over, most peace movements evaporate, many fall into oblivion. How many of us know about the “Pax Dei” movement of the early Middle Ages, the New York Peace Society (est. 1815), the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (est. 1919) or today’s Peace Abbey in Sherborn, Massachusetts? More likely, we are familiar with the Christian “peace churches” (Quakers, Anabaptists, Church of the Brethren) in the West and pacifist Buddhism and Gandhism in the East.

Due to what we might call its dominant *commemoration function*, cultural heritage work parallels the war:peace memorial ratio and the structural problems it indexes. Archaeology and heritage practices have so often been connected to nationalist politics and the memorialization of war that it makes it difficult to imagine an alternative. In recent years there has been a surge of excellent work focusing on “dark heritage,” especially in Europe, that brings the horrors of war to the surface as a warning to the present. But dark heritage work shares the glitch of not really being about peace, even if that is the moral value of its subtext. In fact, we just don’t seem to have a body of “light heritage” work that focuses on international peace movements. One issue is that many of the longer-lasting peace movements have a religious bent, which makes most secular archaeologists uncomfortable, or they are tangled up with early socialism, which might be locally touchy. Another problem is temporal framing. Wars, battles, treaties, bombings, and sieges are all events. Peace is a non-event, a process. It makes for dull storytelling. There’s little drama.

Archaeology and historical preservation projects are largely funded by national entities, enabled by federal-level legislation, and justified in the public eye through appeals to ethnic heritage or preserving a nation’s history in the service of present-day political agendas (which are about as long-lived as parliamentary governments). It varies by country, of course, but I think it is safe to say that wherever you are, only a small percentage of archaeology and preservation projects are supported by entities unplugged from the state apparatus. Most heritage work depends upon the war machines that we call modern nation states.

Which is not to say that we haven’t tried to transcend this through international collaborations, and most prominently through UNESCO. The World Heritage program was founded with a post-WWII utopian vision of crafting a new era of global peace. But as Lynn Meskell’s (2018a) critical work reveals, heritage is increasingly wielded to stir up old conflicts, or even brew new ones. Just days before I sat down to think about what an ‘archaeology of peace’ might look like, intense armed conflict resurged between Cambodia and Thailand, primarily over disputed territory near the ancient Angkorian temples of Preah Vihear and Ta Muen Thom, with both sides accusing the other of weaponizing these UNESCO World Heritage sites, leading to significant damage, civilian displacement, and international concern over cultural heritage destruction. Then there is the Russian-Ukrainian War, which has been characterized in part as a “memory war” (after Koposov 2017). Russia uses Soviet-built World War II monuments within Ukrainian territory as propaganda to claim that the current war is an effort to reunify a “greater Russian” ethnos. In the occupied regions, Russian forces have preserved, renovated, and even erected new Soviet monuments while destroying those commemorating Ukrainian historical memory. In Mariupol, in the Donetsk region, a 2004 memorial to victims of the Holodomor, the 1932–33 famine caused by Stalin’s policies that killed millions of Ukrainians (recently reframed as a genocide) was dismantled by Russian soldiers in October 2022 and replaced with the pro-war Babushka Anya memorial, after an elderly woman who appeared to welcome the arrival of Russian troops by waving a Soviet flag. Babushka Anya went from meme to monument in a matter of months in the fast-moving memory war.

What would it mean to do an archaeology of and for peace? Pragmatically, it would mean finding alternative publics and funding instruments. Peace is by definition a transnational project. Could NGOs or religious organizations be possible partners? I can hear my colleagues groan that such a path risks scientific integrity. But working under the thumb of national entities, or even the UN, has hardly been a course safe from politics.

I have been thinking about the 1960s peace movement. While in part a protest against the Vietnam War, with its ubiquitous peace symbol, it was something bigger – a cultural movement. It wasn’t just about refusing the draft through conscientious objection. It meant greeting one another with the two-finger peace symbol, collectively dropping out of capitalism’s rat race, and participating in non-violent sit-ins for all kinds of social justice causes. It was not just a political movement, but what archaeologists call a cultural horizon – a swiftly moving ideology and way of life with its own material culture. In this case, secondhand fur coats, floppy hats, vegetarian food, back-to-the-land settlement patterns, new forms of kinship, and a ubiquitous symbol that archaeologists of the future may well see as the icon of a religious movement – the peace symbol. The peace symbol has become so heavily associated with patchouli-scented counterculture that it seems as outdated as paisley shirts. Has peace itself become outdated? Is it hard to rally around an idea that lacks a material embodiment, whether amulet or a monument?

Digging into the Wiki history of the peace symbol, I found, not too surprisingly, that it has an international pedigree. It was designed by a British artist and pacifist named Gerald Holtom as the emblem for the Campaign for

Nuclear Disarmament (CND). Inside the circle, the lines represent the simplified semaphore (hand-flag) symbols for "N" and "D". Its original meaning was to promote solidarity around nuclear disarmament. In 1960, University of Chicago freshman Philip Altbach brought back buttons with the symbol and succeeded in getting the Student Peace Union (1959–1964) to adopt them. Soon thousands were being sold or given away on college campuses and the symbol leapt onto the hoods of VW vans and embroidered jeans. Holtom didn't trademark his design. Predictably, in 1970 two U.S. companies tried to claim it but it had by that time become too ubiquitous, too cultural – as a symbol it had become intangible heritage. Despite all the associations Holtom's design picked up on its wild ride through the 60s and 70s, its political message was still potent. So much so that in 1973 it was banned by South Africa's apartheid government.

Many archaeologists and historic preservations have decried the war on heritage – from the iconoclasm against the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan and the looting of Palmyra in Syria to the demolition of the White House's East Wing. The war on history is ideological. Whether you call that ideology religious or secular doesn't change the outcome. Archaeologists and preservationists must contend with the fact that the memory wars are going to rage on with or without them. It would be shameful to remain silent on the sidelines out of fear. But what might be even more effective than picking specific fights is shining a light on cultures and communities committed to peace as something more than just the absence of war. The peace movement of the 1960s was a cultural revolution. It remains unfinished, understudied, and in danger of slipping into the repressed zones of our collective memory. Let's get to work on a heritage of the light.

## References

Koposov, Nicolay. 2017. *Memory Laws, Memory Wars: The Politics of the Past in Europe and Russia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Meskell, Lynn. 2018. *A Future in Ruins: UNESCO, World Heritage, and the Dream of Peace*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Monument Lab. 2021–2025. National Monument Audit. https://monumentlab.com/audit#data. Last viewed 15.12. 2025.