

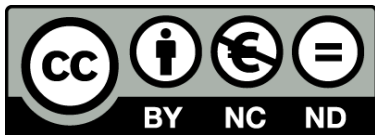
## Of War and Peace: Towards an Archaeology of Hope and Reconciliation

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## Of War and Peace: Towards an Archaeology of Hope and Reconciliation

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Eighty years after the Second World War and thirty-four years after the end of the Cold War, we stand, once again, on the precipice of global conflict. This is not coincidental. Major conflicts recur with troubling regularity, often when the lived experience of previous wars has passed away. And while I am sceptical of ‘generational’ theories that attempt to identify cyclical patterns in national histories (Strauss and Howe 1992), it seems to me that reflections on perceived past failures or national humiliations often congeal and combine at critical junctures to create new conflicts. Many current conflicts have been initiated by powerful septuagenarians with no personal experience of war and a highly idealized, chauvinistic view of the past. The cycle of vengeful destruction continues, as every new generation of old men attempts to re-fight their father’s war.

The question posed by the *Forum Kritische Archäologie* is therefore timely and demands a frank assessment of archaeology’s historical complicity in the narratives that frame armed conflicts and a thoughtful consideration of how the discipline might be reimagined to better serve humanity and to promote global peace.

Archaeologists and cultural heritage professionals have served their respective nations for decades, documenting conflict sites, analysing locations where atrocities occurred, and creating memorials to past violence. In recent years UNESCO has conferred World Heritage status upon former concentration camps and cities devastated by atomic bombs (Roettjer 2015; Atabay et al. 2024). Battlefield tourist sites and war museums may be found on almost every continent. In the case of the Battle of Gettysburg, a diverse range of interpretative experiences exist for different audiences (Desjardin 2003; Sabol 2009; Chronis 2012).

This burgeoning archive of atrocities has, however, failed to prevent the recurrence of genocide, territorial aggression, or the slide toward global conflagration. Indeed, archaeological and heritage practices have often been mobilized to exacerbate rather than ameliorate conflict.

Heritage work that memorializes armed conflicts operates under a fundamental paradox. Whilst we meticulously document past conflicts and atrocities, this very documentation can be weaponized. Archaeological evidence is routinely deployed to support territorial claims, to prove ethnic or national primacy, and to legitimize historical grievances (Díaz-Andreu and Champion 1996; Hamilakis 2007; Meskell 2018). From the Balkans to the Middle East and North Africa, from South Asia to East Africa, archaeological narratives have been constructed to justify present-day violence. To give just two examples, consider how ideas about Aryan migrations continue to fuel Hindu nationalism in India and territorial disputes with Pakistan (Fatima et al. 2023; Lazzaretti 2025) or how so-called ‘biblical archaeology’ has been mobilized to legitimize Israeli settlement expansion into occupied territories (Greenberg and Hamilakis 2022). In such circumstances the material record becomes not a warning but an arsenal.

This problem goes far beyond fieldwork and the selection of sites for investigation. When conferences continue in aggressor states, when scholarly exchanges persist with institutions supporting territorial expansion, when publication networks circulate work advancing imperialist claims whilst marginalizing voices stemming from occupied territories, the discipline only serves to provide academic legitimacy to destructive ethno-nationalism. In the face of active conflict, archaeologists and the organizations that host them all too often remain silent, resorting to claims of neutrality.

Such institutional timidity reflects deeper structural problems. The technical complexity of archaeological interpretations creates opportunities for political manipulation, whilst the discipline's slow pace of research and publication limits immediate accountability. Archaeology continues to operate as if technical expertise can be separated from moral responsibility – a position that contemporary conflicts render increasingly untenable. And, most critically, heritage work fails to frame conflict as a recurring structural pattern rather than a series of discrete historical events. This temporal displacement prevents recognition of the warning signs when they appear in our own societies.

It does not have to be this way. Other more socially useful archaeologies are possible. Archaeology possesses remarkable potential for building bridges across cultural divides, precisely because it engages with the deep time of human experience. Archaeological evidence consistently demonstrates the porosity of cultural boundaries, the universality of human migration and cultural exchange, and the shared challenges that all societies have confronted (Kristiansen 2014; Hodos 2020). So rather than supporting narratives of ethnic purity or territorial inevitability, careful archaeological interpretation can reveal the contingency of all cultural formations and the fundamental interconnectedness of human communities.

Archaeology's contribution to peace depends on its capacity to educate broader publics about human diversity and shared heritage. This requires moving beyond specialist publications to engage with schools, museums, media, and digital platforms that shape popular understandings of the past (Staley 2003; Jameson 2004). Archaeological education must emphasize critical thinking about evidence and interpretation whilst challenging nationalist appropriations of heritage. Students need to understand how archaeological knowledge is constructed and how it can be manipulated for political purposes (Preucel and Mrozowski 2010). They must also learn to appreciate the complexity of cultural identity and the dangers of essentialist thinking about ethnicity and territory.

At a community level archaeology can play a crucial role in building bridges between diverse social and ethnic groups. When archaeologists co-work with local populations, explaining their methods and findings whilst listening to community perspectives, they can help build trust and understanding across cultural divides (Marshall 2002; Matsuda and Okamura 2011). Despite a growth in such work in recent decades, the potential for community involvement remains largely unrealised, as the majority of archaeologists labour to satisfy the needs of commercial clients, and state and academic institutional structures continue to serve nationalist rather than humanistic ends. The choice facing archaeology is not between political engagement and scholarly neutrality, but between serving divisive nationalism and promoting human understanding and conciliation.

So, what can be done? If archaeology and cultural heritage work is to contribute meaningfully to peace, it must shift from documentation to prevention, and from a focus on commemorating the past to actively using archaeological knowledge to anticipate and define future crises. Archaeology is uniquely positioned to teach pattern recognition – to show not merely that violence happened, but how societies move toward violence, and crucially, how to recognize these processes in real time. Archaeologists might therefore reposition themselves to offer a forward-looking body of expertise to warn when material culture and public monuments are once again harnessed to give legitimacy to state violence.

Educating those who will be responsible for making decisions in the next potential cycle of conflict will require different tiers of intervention. In order to reveal the recurrent structural patterns of war, we need to move beyond teaching students about specific wars and should develop curricula that reveal the structural patterns visible in the archaeological record: how resource competition intensifies under certain environmental conditions, how 'otherness' is materialized, and how propaganda becomes embedded in everyday objects (González-Ruibal 2008). Students should learn to read their own material worlds for these warning signs.

Next, we need to embrace technologies that allow transnational sharing and access to comparative information through accessible, globalised databases that make patterns of conflict visible across cultures and temporal periods. Digital platforms could map contested resources and identify the hardening of political rhetoric and the process of escalation leading to violence. The goal of such a process would not be moral instruction but the honing of analytical skills – teaching young people to recognize that the nationalism emerging in their own society follows predictable patterns that have been documented archaeologically worldwide. This work builds on conflict archaeology and forensic anthropology (Saunders 2012) but shifts the focus from post-conflict documentation to pre-conflict identification.

Finally, just as media literacy programmes have been created to teach critical approaches to the consumption of news, we need ‘heritage literacy’ initiatives that instruct teenagers and young adults to recognize when archaeological and historical narratives are being weaponized. This means training them to ask: Who funds this excavation? What territorial claim does this museum exhibition support? How is this memorial being used politically? These programmes would create peer networks capable of challenging nationalist archaeology as it emerges, before it becomes embedded in state ideology.

The approach outlined acknowledges that human societies will always compete for resources and status. The goal is not to eliminate conflict but to develop collective capacity for early detection and intervention before competition escalates to violence. I see this as a socially useful contribution and would counter the claim that this strays into political activism by saying that all archaeology is inherently political (Shanks and McGuire 1996) and that the motivations and intended outcomes of this proposed contribution are at least explicit and transparent.

The barriers to this work are, nevertheless, formidable. Nation-states actively suppress critical education when preparing for conflict. Archaeologists are funded by these same states and work within national institutional frameworks. Academic archaeology remains fragmented across national traditions, with limited international coordination. We may therefore need to explore other ways of sharing our work. Digital networks, international NGOs, and diaspora communities operate partially outside state control. Initial programmes could be piloted in these spaces. Youth climate movements and Black Lives Matter protests have shown how globally networked young people can challenge state narratives; similar networks focused on conflict prevention could emerge from heritage literacy initiatives.

So, to conclude, our value lies not in proving that ‘this happened’ but in demonstrating ‘this is how it happens, and here is what it looks like when it begins again.’ This requires abandoning the comfortable fiction that documentation alone fulfils our ethical obligations to society. A new kind of archaeological investigation can be imagined that runs through education, particularly education targeted at the generation that will reach decision-making age during the next potential conflict cycle, in an effort to finally interrupt the generational rhythm of forgetting. This is archaeology and cultural heritage’s potential contribution to peace: not preserving memory but working to use our unique tools and expertise to actively inform moves towards peace and reconciliation.

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