Heritage Hoarders? Archaeological Cultural Heritage Resources in Ontario

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INTRODUCTION

Each year thousands of archaeological assessments are undertaken by licenced archaeologists in Ontario as routine components of development projects. Although many of these assessments result in negative findings (i.e., no archaeological features or artifacts are expected or recovered), they may also result in the excavation and recovery of archaeological collections, sometimes numbering in the tens or hundreds of thousands of individual artifacts. These findings are reported on, to the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sport (MTCS); but limited attention is given to what happens to artifacts once they are collected, processed and analysed. In Ontario, licenced archaeologists are responsible for the safeguarding of archaeological resources on behalf of the Crown. With an increasing number of artifacts recovered each year, we are faced with questions regarding the sustainability of the long-term curation of these, often undesirable, artifacts.

This paper will present an overview of the framework under which archaeological resources are collected and curated in Ontario and examine some of the current issues with the existing policies and processes and identify possible means to sustainable, long-term curation of the province's material cultural heritage. The third section of this paper will discuss some potential solutions to current issues, each with its own opportunities and drawbacks. Traditional alternatives to curation by individual archaeologists include long-term loans to museums and other educational institutions. In

other cases, the most appropriate solution may be transfer to a descendant community. Another attractive solution may lie in 'Sustainable Archaeology": the practice of adopting and developing technologies and systems to manage and curate collections efficiently, and often digitally. The final solution to be considered is the return of artifacts to the earth.

FRAMEWORK

The earliest legislation dealing with archaeology in Ontario came in the form of *The Archaeological and Historic Sites Protection Act* of 1953. The 1953 Act gave the province the power to designate and protect archaeological sites and to seize archaeological or historical objects removed from those sites (lawfully or unlawfully) to be deposited in a public institution.[1] Although the legislation was a welcome step in the protection of Ontario's heritage, it was criticised for lacking teeth and for its inability to provide blanket protection for archaeological sites and resources in general, particularly those which had not yet been discovered.

An article in a 1970 the Council for Canadian Archaeology identified key problems with respect to the rate of destruction of sites, the capacity to undertake excavation, ineffective legislation to protect archaeological resources from destruction or looting, and lack of an agency or regulatory

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[1] *The Archaeological and Historic Sites Protection Act, 1953*: 7 (I)(II).

authority to oversee salvage archaeology obligations.[2] Members of the Council were disheartened by "countless examples of sites whose destruction they were powerless to prevent"[3] despite legislation that had been enacted in several jurisdictions. Specific issues raised included insufficient public sources of funding for emergency excavation of archaeological sites and a paucity of trained archaeologists; although this situation had already begun to improve by 1970.[4]

The 1975 *Ontario Heritage Act* (OHA), and subsequent 2005 amendments, led to an evolution in the landscape of Ontario Archaeology. As the post-Act framework has emerged, several positive developments have occurred. The first, is that archaeology is now an accepted part of development permitting and environmental assessment processes. This places the financial burden on the proponent, not the public, to determine the potential for archaeological resources on the property. It also decreases the likelihood of *unexpected* archaeological finds. As a result of this positioning within development processes, a field of professional archaeologists has emerged in the province. This is regulated by the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sport (MTCS), which oversees licencing and is responsible for the development of guidelines for archaeologist in Ontario; the most recent of which are the 2011 *Standards and Guidelines for Consultant Archaeologists*.

CURRENT ISSUES

Concern for the sustainability of existing long-term collections management practices is not unique to Ontario. Recently characterised as 'one of the most pressing issues facing archaeology today,"[5] this collections management issue is the result of a global history of archaeology as the pursuit of knowledge and the production of a record of the past through the accumulation of *things*.[6]

Four threats to the sustainability of current long-term curation practices will be discussed in this section. Firstly, the number of archaeological assessments undertaken each year continues to grow. Secondly, current practices leave the bulk of archaeological resources virtually inaccessible to both the general public and other researchers. Thirdly, undiagnostic or undesirable artifacts account for a large proportion of artifacts recovered from CRM excavations. Finally, succession policies have yet to be developed to deal with archaeological collections when an archaeologist leaves the profession.

At present, the vast majority of archaeological assessments in Ontario are undertaken by the Cultural Resource Management (CRM) Industry. CRM archaeology is tied to planning and development. Whereas in the 1970s and 1980s there was a much smaller group of archaeologists working in the province, who were academics, public employees, or avocational archaeologists for whom archaeology was a pastime; the unprecedented urban and suburban expansion and

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[2] Council for Canadian Archaeology, "Salvage Archaeology," *Canadian Archaeological Association, Bulletin No. 2* (1970): 44-51.
[3] Council for Canadian Archaeology, "Salvage Archaeology," 44.
[4] Ibid, 47.

[5] Morag M. Kersel, "Storage Wars: Solving the Archaeological Curation Crisis." *Journal of Eastern Mediterranean Archaeology & Heritage Studies* 3 (2015): 42.
[6] Ibid, 42.

development that started in the late 1990s and the linking of archaeology to development permitting processes has resulted in a near mono-culture of CRM archaeologists.[7] At the time of writing, there were 183 active Professional Licences in Ontario and an additional 200 Research Licences and 26 Avocational Licences.[8] Nearly seventy percent of Professional licensees in Ontario are consultant archaeologists practicing CRM archaeology[9] compared to less than fifty percent in 2001.[10] Furthermore, although some Research Licence holders undertake their archaeological research for academic or public institutions, Research Licences are also required for field directors working under Professional Licensees at firms undertaking CRM archaeology. This allows consultant archaeologists to undertake multiple assessments simultaneously by designating responsibility to a Research Licence holder when not on site. In addition to the increasing number of licenced archaeologists practicing in the province, development pressures continue to intensify; leading to a busier field season, often extended into the winter months. Over the past five years, the number of Project Information Forms (PIFs)[11] submitted to the MTCS

has grown steadily from 1,894 in 2009 to 2,669 in 2014.[12]

Changes in the archaeological practice over the past few decades have implications with respect to the attitudes and methods surrounding field methodologies as well as the analysis and storage of artifact assemblages. The objective of CRM archaeology is to identify the potential for archaeological resources on a proposed development site and mitigate negative impacts to those resources through avoidance or mitigative excavation according to the province's *Standards and Guidelines* and to provide the MTCS with a record of the assessment.

With respect to artifacts, a typical project cycle would include: excavation of the artifact with its context or provenance being recorded at the time of discovery, followed by cleaning, cataloguing (including the assignment of numbers and often creation of a photographic record) and analysis. Analysis might include measurement and/or research on an individual artifact, or statistical analysis[13] of the assemblage. Artifacts are then placed in boxes for storage. Once artifacts have been removed from a site, recorded and analysed, it is the responsibility of the archaeologist to safeguard them. This problem is not unique to Ontario; archaeological collections throughout the world often end up stored in the offices, basements and garages of excavators.[14]

Clearly there are dangers associated with burdening a competitive and economically-driven profession with the responsibility of safeguarding the cultural

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[7] Jennifer Birch, "Public Archaeology and the Cultural Resource Management Industry in Ontario," *Partners to the Past: Processings of the 2005 Ontario Archaeological Society Symposium* (2008): 122.
[8] These numbers change periodically based on expiry dates and outstanding compliance issues. The most recent list of archaeological licence holders can be found on the MTCS website
http://www.mtc.gov.on.ca/en/archaeology/licensed_archaeologists_list.shtml#professional
[9] A breakdown of P-licence archaeologists based on the MTCS list identifies that 67% of active licensees are consultants, 25% are institutional archaeologists (some of whom participate in for-profit, CRM assessments) and the remaining 8% do not appear to be actively participating in Ontario archaeology.
[10] Neal Ferris, "When the Air Thins: The Rapid Rise of the Archaeological Consulting Industry in Ontario," (2002): 72.
[11] Each Project Information Form represents an archaeological assessment undertaken by a Professional Archaeologist.

[12] Sarah Gletnak, Pers. Comm. via email March 5, 2015.
[13] Statistical analysis of artifacts might include counts of particular types of artifacts or mapping of the spatial or temporal distribution of artifact types.
[14] Kersel "Storage Wars," 44.

heritage of the province for the public good. This is in no way meant to suggest that archaeologists are not trustworthy individuals operating within a framework of ethical standards; it simply questions the sustainability of a system currently undertaking more and more projects every year, where there is no economic benefit in leaving sites below ground, undisturbed for future generations.

In addition, the current practice leaves the bulk of archaeological resources virtually inaccessible to not only the general public, but also other researchers. Current licencing requirements create an environment where archaeologists focus the bulk of resources on completing excavations and compliance with the *Standards and Guidelines*. The current policy framework gives little attention to long-term curation of artifacts, and economic pressures leave most archaeologists with little time or impetus to consider the public benefit of the archaeological collections excavated. Thus having excavated, recorded and analysed an artifact assemblage, it is packed away with little consideration aside from the resources required to maintain the storage space.

In some instances, an artifact collection may be the subject of a transfer or long term loan to an educational institution, museum or descent community, but these instances are rare. This is due, in large part, to the undesirable nature of a large proportion of artifacts recovered during excavation. Undiagnostic[15] artifacts account for a large proportion of artifacts recovered from excavations (*i.e.,* rusty nails, broken window glass, lithic detritus). These artifacts lack the capacity to

inform the archaeological record beyond their contribution to statistical and spatial analysis as part of the overall artifact assemblage or site. Having been mapped, counted and measured, their retention may serve no further purpose, and not many groups or institutions have resources to store such artifacts. It then falls on the licenced archaeologist, bound by licencing terms under the OHA to store these items.

Perhaps the most impending threat to this current system is the lack of succession planning. It was in the 1960s that Canadian universities began to create and expand their anthropology departments to include faculty trained in North American archaeology. In the late to mid-1970s, these schools began to produce a large number of graduates – a large cohort, many of whom would staff government agencies such as the Ministry of Culture and Recreation, created as a result of the 1975 OHA.[16] Since that time, the number of archaeologists in the province has grown considerably. Unfortunately, there is no policy in place for when these archaeologists begin to retire or pass away. Furthermore, the MTCS has recently begun to revoke licences or place conditional terms on some licensees due to compliance concerns. [17] Yet no consideration appears to have been given to artifacts that these non-compliant archaeologists are safeguarding. Clearly, there need to be policies in place for when an archaeologist can no longer care for collections, or for when they are deemed unfit to do so.

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[15] In an archaeological context, artifacts are either considered to be diagnostic or undiagnostic. Diagnostics are those artifacts which provide clues about the site, such as the date of the deposit, use of the site, or the demographics of the artifact's user.

[16] Ferris, "When the Air Thins," 57.

[17] Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sport, *Memorandum to Licenced Archaeologists* and *Licence Fact Sheet.* March 5, 2015.

POSSIBLE OPPORTUNITIES

Traditional alternatives to curation by individual archaeologists include long-term loans to museums and other educational institutions, transfer to a descendant community, 'Sustainable Archaeology', or returning archaeological collections to the earth. Each of these possible solutions has advantages and drawbacks.

Transfers or Long Term Loans

On the surface, transfers to museums or other public institutions may appear to be the most straight-forward solution to the long-term safeguarding of archaeological artifact collections in Ontario. Museums display artifacts to visitors and educational institutions such as universities and colleges are places of research. Who better to curate archaeological collections? In some instances, the transfer or loan of archaeological collections to museums or academic institutions has a number of benefits, including increased access to archaeological knowledge and storage of artifacts in appropriate conditions for conservation.

Unfortunately, museum resources are finite and there are costs associated with the storage and display of artifacts, which require specific conditions for conservation (*i.e.,* space, security, climate control). Many museums and academic institutions are already facing long-term curation problems with their existing collections. This environment of under-funding is not limited to Ontario; in many areas of the world museums are chronically under-appreciated and under-funded at local, provincial and federal levels.[18]

At the local level in particular, archaeological collections pose dilemmas for museums. One museum professional interviewed for this paper identified three concerns with archaeological collections being donated or transferred to their institutions - in addition to practical issues related to adequate storage space. The first, was the fact that out of their archaeological provenience, many artifacts lose their historic value and may have limited interpretative use without a statement of heritage value. In order to best curate an archaeological collection, the artifacts should be complimented by information required for their analysis and interpretation, including field notes, digital records, maps, photographs, plans and reports. This leads to a second issue, which is a lack of subject matter expertise required to identify and analyse archaeological artifacts, particularly once those artifacts are out of context. Although complimentary, the skill sets of museum professionals and archaeologists are quite different. Finally, the undiagnostic or undesirable nature of most artifacts recovered from excavations greatly limit their value for research or interpretation. Only a very small number of individual artifacts recovered from archaeological sites are able to tell the story of a site, community or historical theme out of context. And so, a museum might accept an archaeological collection, but only be able to display a very small number of its artifacts.

In the end, transfers and loans to institutions essentially transfer the problems associated with long-term curation of archaeological collections, rather than providing a solution.

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[18] Kersel "Storage Wars," 44.

Descent Community

In many ways, the archaeology field struggles with persistent colonizing attitudes and conflicts regarding authority over the heritage being studied. Manifestations of this continuing struggle are seen in debates over what sites can be excavated, and by whom, or in questions raised over the authority of archaeologists to analyse certain archaeological remains. Martindale and Lyons aptly state, "what exactly we can and cannot say about [the people we are studying] or on their behalf from the imperfectly preserved and non-representative sample of their material gestures is not, and never has been, very clear."[19] Along these lines, the possession of artifacts by archaeologists – whether on behalf of the people of Ontario or not – is, in the very least, questionable when those artifacts can be attributed to a living community. Holm and Pokotylo point out that artifacts might "have considerable cultural significance to contemporary First Nations that are quite different from the scientific perspective of archaeology."[20] In fact, the cultural significance attributed to the artifacts might be diametrically opposed to the traditional *scientific* perspective that the artifacts should be studied and displayed or stored. It is, therefore, appropriate to consider transfer of archaeological collections to descent communities whenever possible.[21]

As with transfers to public institutions, this option is not without its issues. The most immediate concern is capacity and resource allocation. The descent community—if in fact one can be identified—may not have the resources to care for an archaeological collection. Furthermore, there are philosophical questions that need to be asked when considering the transfer of material culture to a descent community, including: to what extent does the greater community wish to store and preserve the material culture of the past once it has been excavated by archaeologists? The very process of excavating artifacts to display in museums is fundamentally a colonialist concept—where historically, occupying nations would take advantage of archaeologically rich nations and remove their cultural heritage to display in the occupying nation's museums.[22] If archaeological collections are to be transferred to descent communities, there needs to be an understanding that the community be allowed to determine the most correct way to curate their heritage, regardless of how it may adhere to or conflict with prevailing professional standards for artifact curation. In other words, in giving up ownership of the objects, archaeologists (and the province) should relinquish ownership of authority over the heritage manifested in the objects.

'Sustainable Archaeology'

In 2010, 'Sustainable Archaeology', a joint research initiative between Western University in London, Ontario and McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario was launched. The aim of the program is to

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[19] Andrew Martindale and Natasha Lyons, "Introduction: Community-Oriented Archaeology," *Canadian Journal of Archaeology* 38 (1) (2014): 424.

[20] Margaret Holm and David Pokotylo, "From Policy to Practice: A case study in collaborative exhibits with First Nations." *Canadian Journal of Archaeology* 21(1997): 34.

[21] Unfortunately, the return of objects recovered from archaeological excavations may be considered by some to be an end in itself. The transfer of artifacts to descent communities – or the inclusion of descent communities in decisions about the long-term curation of collections – is simply one step in a much larger change that needs to happen within the archaeological community in terms of respecting and integrating the insights of Indigenous archaeology into

mainstream archaeological processes rather than relegating Aboriginal ways of knowing to the margins. See Nicholas, 2010; Martindale and Lyons, 2014; and DeVries, 2014

[22] Kersel, "Storage Wars," 48.

consolidate Ontario's archaeological record and convert it into digital information to increase access to the vast amount of archaeological data that has been recovered since the 1970s. 'Sustainable Archaeology' develops and applies digital technologies to archaeological collections in an effort to "provide a solution to this problem of accessibility, sustainability and dissemination of our cultural heritage."[23] The program has successfully developed standards for collections management that could be applied to projects across the province, particularly those collections that are planned to be transferred to their repository. In addition, Sustainable Archaeology has advanced the use of digital technologies to create virtual records of artifacts, including accurate 3D models using 3D scanners.[24]

Given available technology and the current issues surrounding curation, there is an argument to be made for the creating of digital records rather than the collection and storage of physical artifacts. Archaeologists already, as a matter of process, create a digital record in the form of photographs, maps of artifact scatters, catalogues, notes and reports. However, despite the use of technologies to create thorough digital records of archaeological collections, many resources are still spent on collections management and storage needs of physical objects, in the form of large repositories. An alternative to the physical storage of artifact collections would be deaccessioning and divestment, particularly once digital records have been created.

Divestment

Deaccessioning of an object may be necessary when that object is no longer deemed valuable or its curation is no longer possible. For some, deaccessioning is an affront, while others see it as a necessary part of a sustainable system. To be sure, it is a divisive topic. Critics argue for a cautious approach – saving as much as possible since it is impossible to divine which objects will be valued in the future or what might be needed for scientific analysis.[25] A more pragmatic view of the current situation would likely result in the realisation that deaccessioning is a necessary step in solving a looming curation crisis.

Because of very real concerns about potential ethical issues with deaccessioning, a deliberate and well-developed divestment process with appropriate oversight would be necessary before the province, or archaeologists acting on behalf of the province as the current caretakers of archaeological collections, could even begin to consider divestment of artifacts. Such a process could require, for example, that collections must first be offered to descent communities and local museums or educational institutions. A second step could be to require that relevant government agencies be offered the collections. Finally, there needs to be a process in place for the disposal of artifacts.

Reburial

All things considered, the size and number of archaeological collections in Ontario may simply exceed the capacity for proper long-term management. A final deaccessioning strategy might

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[23] Sustainable Archaeology, *Sustainable Archaeology: Inspiration for the Project."* (2015) accessed March, 2015 at http://sustainablearchaeology.org/about.html
[24] Connor Schmid, "Imaging and Re-associating Artifact Context." *Sustainable Archaeology* (2015) Blog-post form February 13, 2015
http://sustainablearchaeologyuwo.blogspot.ca/

[25] Kersel "Storage Wars," 48.

be required in which archaeological collections could be reburied or returned to the earth. The location and manner of reburial could then become part of the record of the archaeological site. When one considers that the artifacts have undergone analysis and that a record of their removal and analysis has been created, access to the physical object may be of limited value. Although there are exceptions, in general, there may little benefit to continuing to commit resources to the storage of physical artifact collections.

Burial of archaeological collections need not be seen as an end to the conservation process, on the contrary, it can be viewed as an alternative conservation strategy. In her 2012 thesis, McArthur explores the application of the concept of fallowing an agricultural landscape to an architectural strategy for urban regeneration. In much the same way, the concept of fallowing could be applied to archaeological collections. Artifacts could be returned to the earth, to be *left unsown* for a period of time. The process is intentional, thoughtful, and can be ritualistic.[26]

A form of 'catch-and-release archaeology' is already practiced in some areas of the world. This excavation strategy involves the systematic collection, measurement, analysis and photography of artifacts *in situ*, to be returned to their places of origin following documentation.[27] While it would be difficult to employ this exact model in a development context, where artifacts would be placed in immediate danger, more thorough in-the-field documentation and analysis might allow for artifacts to be relocated to a suitable location rather

than packed in boxes. Other criticisms of this method include the costs associated with extra time and specialists needed in the field for analysis and documentation, as well as valid concerns that re-depositing artifacts creates a false or confusing site for future researchers.[28] To an extent, the 2011 *Standards and Guidelines* allow archaeologists in some situations to undertake analysis in the field and collect samples of some traditionally undiagnostic and ubiquitous artifacts rather than collecting redundant artifacts.

Ultimately, the most effective solution to the current problems regarding archaeological collection storage may be a change in prevailing attitudes and archaeological practices that would result in fewer artifacts being removed in the first place. In order to respond to the existing burden of archaeological collections, a system of excavating less artifacts would to be coupled with thoughtful and respectful deaccessioning strategies in order to decrease the burden of storage of redundant archaeological objects. In many philosophical and practical ways, reburial is the ideal alternative conservation strategy to deaccession for undiagnostic or redundant archaeological collections.

MOVING FORWARD

There is clearly no one solution to sustainably managing all of the archaeological collections that have been unearthed in Ontario to date; however, there are decision-making models that could be applied to potentially deaccessioning redundant or undiagnostic artifacts and there are numerous opportunities to leverage digital technologies to create detailed records for macro-level research and comparative analysis.

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[26] Heather Gayle McArthur, "Regenerating the Urban Landscape: An Architectural Journey through Fallow Time." Master of Architecture Thesis, Carleton Univeristy. Ottawa, Ontario. 12-13.

[27] Kersel "Storage Wars," 47.

[28] Ibid, 47.

New partnerships can be formed between the province, professional archaeologist, descent communities and public institutions that could benefit from the vast archaeological heritage that is available in the province, without any one group being burdened with capacity concerns due to the sheer numbers and varying conditions of all of the archaeological collections in the province. These new partnerships may require the archaeological practice to relinquish authority and ownership of the heritage being conserved.

Finally, alternative conservation methods, such as reburial, must be considered despite traditional archaeological praxis which are firmly rooted in the belief that every feature and artifact has the potential to yield scientific information and should therefore be retained. Given our current capacity to create detailed digital records of artifacts, reburial in a thoughtful and deliberate manner may not be as antithetical to the current archaeological *modus operandi* as it may initially appear.

Although, in the end, this paper is unable to identify one stand-alone solution which is the most appropriate in all cases, one thing is clear. It is time for a concerted, forward-thinking effort to develop and implement succession planning strategies, sustainable practices and alternative methods of conservation that consider collection management concerns throughout the archaeological process, rather than as an afterthought.

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