SUBSISTENCE DIGGERS

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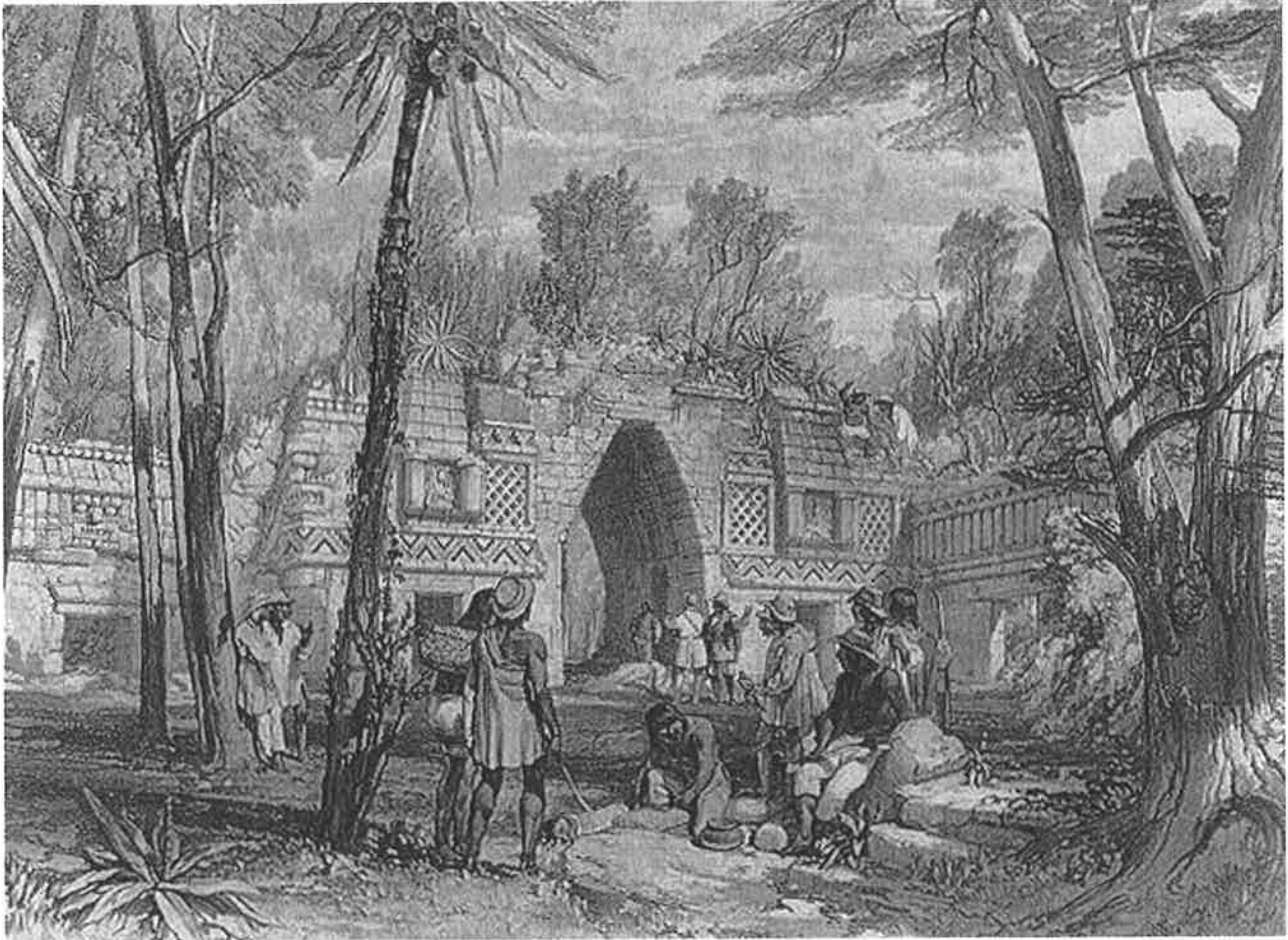
"ARTIFACT LOOTING" is one of the most controversial phrases in Latin American archaeological research. For the purpose of this article, the phrase refers to the clandestine, illicit removal of material remains from archaeological sites in Mexico and Central and South America. For nearly four decades, Latin American specialists have denounced the trade in Pre-Columbian antiquities. Despite impassioned discussions about whether artifacts are national heritage or international commodity, those who do the actual digging have received little attention, and the destruction of Pre-Columbian archaeological sites continues at an alarming pace. The effort to solve the problem of site despoliation is best served when we understand its root causes. My fieldwork in Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and southern Mexico is an investigation of subsistence digging by rural peoples and its integration into the international art market.

Framing the Debate

In 1973, as the United States considered the adoption of legislation prohibiting the importation of Pre-Columbian monumental sculpture and murals, archaeologist Karen Bruhns wrote, "Today almost every male in the Central Cordillera [region of Colombia] . . . is involved in illegally opening and looting ancient tombs" . . . [i]f *quaqueros* are not digging on their own land, and many are not, the owner may appear and force them to abandon their work or yield any finds."[1] Unfortunately, Bruhns did not address the fact that these impoverished people dig for artifacts for subsistence because they are otherwise barred from profitable enterprise.

The research of Thomas Weil and others who worked in Colombia before Bruhns looks at the socioeconomic circumstances that make "subsistence digging"[2] for artifacts a viable means of supplementing agricultural shortfalls. "In the early seventeenth century the crown expressed its concern for the Indians through the establishment of *resguardos* [communal landholdings]. The Indians enjoyed the rights of



Frederick Catherwood, *Gateway at Labnah,* Views of ancient monuments in Central America & Yucatan. The Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USZ62-47896.

use but not ownership, and could not sell their plots. Many of the Indians, however, can no longer gain an adequate subsistence from *resguardo* lands and are . . . entering the fields of neighboring landlords as sharecroppers, tenant farmers or laborers. The cyclical pattern of poverty, indebtedness, and lack of education has perpetuated itself for generations and has prevented *campesinos* [peasant farmers] from changing their way of life."[3]

Solon Kimball and William Partridge, who worked in the highlands of Colombia some seven years after Bruhns, came to much the same conclusion: "The combination of population pressure, advance purchase credit at usurious rates . . . and the successful expansion of townspeople's land holdings results in a steady outmigration of indigenous offspring in search of work. The *Mestizo* [people of mixed indigenous and European blood] townspeople cultivate the land of the fertile valleys, while indigenous farmers are pushed into more remote mountain regions."[4]

Ignorance of the causes of subsistence digging leads many purely contextually oriented archaeologists and art historians to misunderstand the reasons for the continued tempo and mode of site destruction. Focusing attention on anti-crime legislation diverts attention from subsistence diggers' need to supplement agricultural incomes. Small landholders, landless tenant farmers, seasonal plantation workers, underpaid wage and contract laborers, and refugees become diggers because they have no other way to survive. Subsistence digging is not the cause of social ills. Rather, it is the result of basic human rights denied.

The Artifact Economy

The vast majority of the people who make up Mexico and Central America's underground artifact economy are, in local parlance, *huecheros* (humans who leave tell-tale holes like a *hueche,* a burrowing animal). When they are not subsistence digging, *huecheros* are primarily farmers, drawn from indigenous populations (i.e., descendants of Pre-Columbian peoples), lower-class *ladinos* (those who identify with European conquerors and Western ways of life), and mestizos. Because of endemic land shortage and agricultural shortfalls, these *milperos* (small-scale farmers) are unable to make ends meet. Subsistence artifact looting supplements their traditional agricultural practices and enables them to avoid malnutrition and starvation.

During my fieldwork in Belize I gained access to the higher levels of *huechero* organizations and an introduction to their methods of operation. Financiers (those who sponsor and profit from looting) and *esteleros* and *patrons* (the heads and the local bosses, respectively, of ruling councils of looting consortiums) often have a legitimate business or occupation that fronts for their illegal activities. These individuals launder profits and finance the ongoing operation of the mafia-like consortiums. Armed guards, *jefes,* are fourth in command, and protect on-site operations. They manage the laborers and motivate them, by force if necessary, not to steal. This upper echelon represents a scant fraction of those involved in the procurement of Pre-Columbian antiquities. As the command and control structure of artifact looting consortiums, the members of this upper-level echelon are the distributors and, in part, the consumers of the underground artifact economy. They loot artifacts full-time for profit and a living wage, move contraband from outback to urban areas, and secure passage across national and international borders.

Each *huechero* council is comprised of an *estelero* and four or more *patrons* from villages ten to twenty miles apart. Council members contribute four to twenty workers to a labor pool, or consortium. As a territorial organization, the council has intelligence about and access to the archaeological sites on several hundred square miles of land. Sizable consortiums of a hundred or more diggers can loot the ceremonial edifices of a single Mayan site within weeks. More commonly, small groups of four or five *huecheros* dig in a number of different ruins over a longer period of time. Ruins are located for the council by a complex network of scouts and spies. Chicle hunters, marijuana growers, hunters, and traditional healers scout for uncharted ruins on their regular treks to remote forests and mountains. The scouts pass information on to corrupt local officials, bush pilots, long-distance truckers, and foremen in isolated timber stands, who act as paid informants for the consortiums.

When promising ruins are located, the informants notify the *patron* from a nearby town. To avoid exposure, this local *patron* remains behind the scenes, covertly instructing non-local council members as to how they might bribe, influence, or intimidate those able to grant access to a particular ruin. After any objections have been quelled, council members meet to plan the looting of the nearby archaeological site. When all intelligence has been evaluated, the non-local *patrons* make plans to mobilize, provision, and clandestinely transport their laborers. At the ruins, the

activity of the *huecheros* comes under the direction of *patrons* or site bosses, who secure a site being looted from intruders.

The Failure of Subsistence Farming

Why do the *huecheros* dig for subsistence? To answer this question, I look to the historical context and contemporary regional circumstances that force indigenous and lower-income peoples to become subsistence diggers, and examine how *huecherismo* has become an integral part of the yearly subsistence cycle. While anti-looting advocates often fail to look beyond the stereotyped portrayals of those involved in subsistence digging, I wanted to focus on the needs of those at the bottom of this socioeconomic hierarchy, rather than the greed at the top.

The integration of subsistence digging into traditional farming expanded exponentially when prolonged civil violence in Central America turned *milperos* and small landholders into refugees and forced them into unfamiliar ecosystems. In these outback areas with marginal land, no seed crops, and unstable weather patterns, the demand for artifacts found in uncharted archaeological ruins offered a viable alternative to starvation, and a preferred way to rebuild subsistence living.

Joint research by Americas Watch and the American Civil Liberties Union emphasizes the economic plight of farmers in El Salvador, an area typical of the region: "El Salvador has experienced a dynamic process of land concentration and land eviction in the last century. It began during the coffee boom of the late 19th century, when communal lands farmed by indigenous peasants were abolished in favor of private property. . . . One researcher estimates that landless rural workers rose from 11% of the labor force in 1961 to 29% in 1971 and 40% in 1975."[5]

And in Guatemala, according to Americas Watch: "In the mid to late seventies, when export prices rose and the Guatemalan economy as a whole grew rapidly, peasant living standards actually declined as speculators and military officers seized increasing amounts of their lands. . . . Most of the nation's land, including the most easily cultivable holdings, is concentrated in the hands of less than 2% of the population."[6]

Grant Jones's work in Belize (arguably the nation most sensitive to the rights of its indigenous and lower-income populations) underscores the desperate straits of traditional farmers: "The average thirty-acre plot is, in the opinion of the government, sufficient for a small farmer to

make a decent living from the cultivation of sugar cane and subsistence crops. . . . The average rural agriculturalist . . . has . . . in any given year, about ten acres in production. . . . He must keep in fallow an amount of land equal to that planted in sugar cane, as the cane must be replanted . . . every six to seven years . . . the farmer finds that about four acres are uncultivable due to swampy patches or large amounts of rock. Only eight acres remain . . . [and] this amount of land would be insufficient for even two further crops. . . . He could hope for no more than a two-year fallow [in an area where four to seven years may be required]."[7]

The definition of subsistence agriculture in the everyday lives of the Maya of Central America is elastic; climactic variation, insect and animal damage, disease, taxes, and other forms of overhead all take their toll on agricultural income. Subsistence agriculturalists recognize these risks and, land permitting, plant more than they need in hopes of breaking even. In a good year, *milperos* may have a small surplus; in an average year, just enough to feed their families. In a bad year they may salvage little or nothing from their crop.

What happens when *milpa* agriculture does not provide sufficient crops for subsistence, when there is nothing left to share, no one to borrow from, and what little cash there was has run out? The peasant farmers do what their ancestors have done for thousands of years; they supplement subsistence agriculture by hunting and gathering. Guatemalan, Honduran, and Salvadoran refugees I met in Belize told me about extended families without seed corn or other resources who fled military strife to outback regions and survived by hunting and gathering for up to three years. More common are stories of Maya and other low-income rural people who periodically run out of corn and other staples between summer and winter harvests; they take to the forests, where they hunt, gather, and forage for "earth" and "country" foods.

There are dramatic differences between harvesting subsistence staples and cash cropping. Shifting crops and fallowing land make it possible to grow subsistence staples in thin, nutrient-poor soil. However, cash crops like coffee, citrus, and cane cannot be periodically replanted, and the poor soil they inhabit must be enriched with expensive chemical fertilizers. Subsistence farmers keep insects in check by patiently picking them off staple crops. Cash-cropping farmers must use expensive pesticides to keep pests from burrowing into their produce. Coffee and citrus plants take from five to ten years to mature, and farmers must

provide a steady input of fertilizers and insecticides for nearly a decade before realizing any profit from their investment. Once committed to cash cropping, traditional anti-starvation strategies are no longer viable, and farmers need money to protect their significant investment in cash crops. If the harvest fails or the market price falls below the cost of overhead, *milperos* cannot survive on their reduced subsistence staple parcels and garden plots.

In these circumstances, cash-cropping farmers have few options. They can work for the petty capitalists who produce arts and crafts for tourist and export markets, but if they are non-local or ethnic outsiders, they are often locked out of piece-rate networks and factory jobs. They can return to plantations, but the owners have developed schemes to subvert their goals. One field manager I interviewed explained, "You can only get so much from these undernourished workers, you know. The slightest thing and they are out sick. If you pay them too much, they go into business for themselves and stay away. If you pay them too little, well, they are useless. You have to underpay them so they borrow from you to eat. That is the way you keep them."

Plantation owners are continually on the lookout for sources of labor to undercut their current workers. "What we need is a war someplace and lots of refugees from there to work. That refugee-shit, they work. . . . They have nowhere to go, no other possibilities. They are not like the peasants from my country. You pay them and right away they leave for home and their fields. Foreigner-shit, you don't have to pay them as much and like a dog they come back when you call them. If there was a war and refugees came here to work, I would fire that peasant-shit."

It is no surprise, given the plantation official's commitment to exploitation, that low-income rural peoples prefer to plant their own crops and seek other means to sustain traditional life-ways.

How have so many *campesinos* climbed back from bankruptcy and starvation? Governmental and nongovernmental aid programs, though few, have helped to rejuvenate local agriculture by encouraging cooperatives and offering direct-contract assistance. Extended families, religious networks, and municipal redistributions provide important safety nets during lean years. But these methods alone cannot account for the continued survival of Maya and lower-income rural smallholders, who must deal with widely fluctuating market prices and bad harvests three of every ten years. The goal of most Maya and low-income rural peoples

is to achieve a blend of resource procurement strategies in which the income from commodities such as cash crops and antique artifacts supplements the traditional mode of life associated with subsistence agriculture. Once farmers have established a steady revenue stream through subsistence digging, their profits—after paying maintenance costs and family and community obligations—are reinvested in agriculture. This reinvestment restores the basic pattern of subsistence activities to something approximating pre-contact life. In this way, hunting and gathering artifacts fits neatly into the continuing tradition of *milpa* agriculture.

The *Huechero* Life

The removal of artifacts from ancient Mayan sites dates back to Classic (600–900 CE) and Terminal Classic (900–1200 CE) Pre-Columbian periods.[8] Centuries after the collapse of the Mayan city-states, farmers continue to uncover ancient objects when they turn over soil and till their fields. A *milpero* relates: "One day, after I had cleared and burned my field, I was returning to a place where I left some tools. Then I was underground. I had fallen through the . . . [roof] of an ancestor's tomb. I thought the devil was coming for me until the dust cleared and light came through the hole in the roof. I took some things home and soon people came to hear my story for themselves and look at the precious things. Many began to tell me that these *semillitos* [a combination of words for seeds and artifacts meaning ancestors' gifts] are worth money."

Farmers who return to their fields after a rain often find the ground covered with shimmering stone and ceramic artifacts. Most farmers keep a small collection of artifacts, either hidden, on public display, or for sale. Special artifacts usually adorn the family shrine, next to the portraits of Christian saints, deceased family members, and mythological ancestors. On rare occasions, villagers use stone idols as doorstops, small vases for target practice, and figurines as children's toys.

Huecherismo enables several million Mexicans and Central Americans to maintain traditional lifestyles by using looted artifacts as a cash commodity to supplement subsistence agricultural income. The seasonal round begins when small farmers select a plot of land and slash and burn the naturally occurring biomass during April and May. In June, groups of patrilineally related men form work-gangs to finish preparing the land and to plant the summer subsistence and cash crops. In late June, they

decide who will stay behind to tend maturing crops, as preparations for the first of three looting seasons begin.

From July through late September, farmers become *huecheros* and venture into outback regions in search of ruins, tombs, and artifacts. Other groups of subsistence diggers, from one to more than one hundred, operate for prolonged periods as semi-nomadic hunter-gatherers who stay close to home and fields during the week and forage for artifacts on odd days and weekends.

By late September, subsistence diggers are again *milperos*. Summer crops are harvested, and throughout October until mid-November the work-gangs prepare the fields and plant winter crops. Following *fagina* (reciprocal communal labor) patterns, a few workers are again assigned to tend the crops and provide support to the families of *huecheros* who set out to scour the countryside for artifacts. The *huecheros* are home to harvest the winter crop in March, they are back hunting and gathering cash commodities during April, and in May they return to the fields to begin the seasonal round again.

Often, subsistence-digging patterns are similar to those employed in shifting agriculture. Diggers harvest an archaeological site until it no longer produces sufficient artifacts or the danger from armed competition is too great. Subsistence diggers then let one ruin lie fallow while they harvest another. When conditions are no longer profitable or safe, *huecheros* shift to another site, or they rotate back to a previous ruin.

Subsistence digging by *huecheros* can become a full-time occupation when the seasonal round is interrupted by the sensationalized discoveries of media-savvy archaeologists. Headlines like "Arthur Demarest and the Temple of Doom" confer cachet and add dollar value to artifacts from specific sites, as this telephone conversation between a *patron* and his antiquarian connection illustrates:

"You have heard about the new places and rich things," says the *patron.*

"Yes," replies the antiquarian, "the news about an ancient Mayan jade source has been in the papers, magazines, and on TV. . . . Do you have access to the sites?"

"Not yet, but soon," the *patron* says.

"I need artifacts, jade artifacts," says the antiquarian. "I don't care from where. They will do until you can get to the new sites."

Sensationalized accounts encourage not just site-specific subsistence digging but region-wide artifact looting as well, and link archaeologists and their funding institutions to the clandestine, illicit removal of material remains from Pre-Columbian archaeological sites.

Conclusion

The stereotype of the artifact looter in the popular press is of an ignorant peasant. In this portrayal, the *huecheros* clandestinely loot their ancestors' graves because they do not know any better, are wantonly criminal, or are too inept or lazy to conduct legitimate business. In covering archaeological issues, the media portray beleaguered law enforcement engaged in running gun battles against evildoers who are reaping profits on a scale surpassed only by the illegal trade in drugs and weapons. Archaeologists play the hero's role, reserving for themselves and their institutions the mantle of science. Yet archaeologists are beholden to funding interests and tenure tracks, and many are loath to criticize the human-rights abuses of governments that grant their excavation permits. Too many archaeologists have forgone serious publication of their excavations in peer-reviewed journals, writing for the general public and working lecture circuits instead—and thereby helping to stimulate collecting.

Education in local heritage is recommended as the solution to site destruction, yet the governing elite within these source countries often actively discourages education for the poorest in their population. Strict enforcement of international trade restrictions is held to be essential, yet as the artifacts leave the countryside for private collections and national museums, the same elite have become some of the primary collectors of indigenous artifacts, and only the *huecheros* suffer under enforcement of patrimony laws.

A more complex, multi-perspectival reality is hidden behind the sensationalized coverage. Participation in cash economies such as artifact looting within these Latin American source countries is motivated not by the attractiveness of wage labor but by severe economic realities. The fact that artifact looting is a way of life practiced for subsistence is discomfiting to some archaeologists and art historians. For if these are not "artifact looters" but survival-oriented subsistence diggers, then the

justification for their excavation of material remains is as compelling as that of the archaeologists and art historians themselves.

In fact, many of the subsistence diggers regard the debate over who may or may not loot artifacts as an aspect of class warfare. To paraphrase one perspective expressed by my informants: "Every year the archaeologists dig up the artifacts and take them away. The next year they come back with more money, people, and equipment. They talk of our ancestors with reverence, but treat us like ignorant peasants. The excavations are often run like plantations where we are exploited. The archaeologists want strong backs and weak minds. When we work for them, they pay us little and do not treat us with respect. We are never asked what we think, and there is no chance for advancement. The artifacts represent money and power to archaeologists. That is how they make their upper-class living. To us, these gifts from our ancestors mean seed corn, food, clothes, and security. This is how we live our lower-class lives."

The indigenous peoples of Central America are the populations most affected by neocolonial policies and practices that result in glutted markets, mechanized agriculture, and unstable employment as corporations seek cheaper labor. As familiar, sustainable environments and technologies are replaced by unsustainable cash-crop economies, *milperos* lose knowledge of subsistence life-ways, and the safety nets provided by communal social relations disappear. In these dire straits, subsistence digging puts food on the table. A broader understanding of the diggers' plight is basic to resolving the issues of subsistence looting. Solutions must address the *huecheros'* contemporary needs and respect their traditional life-ways if they are to succeed.

Subsistence diggers are not "my people," nor do I condone what they do. Like my anthropological and archaeological colleagues, I work to end the need for clandestine removal of material remains from Pre-Columbian sites. To paraphrase John Henry Merryman, in the past four decades much has been written on illicit digging that appeals primarily to the emotions, diverts attention from the facts, and discourages reasoned discussion of the issues. I attempt to challenge the prevalent stereotypes through anthropological research, asking instead, "Who is clandestinely digging up Pre-Columbian artifacts, and what are their motives?" The people I found were, with few exceptions, not artifact looters but survival-oriented subsistence diggers.