SAA ARCHAEOLOGY IN ACTION

Using and Curating Archaeological Collections

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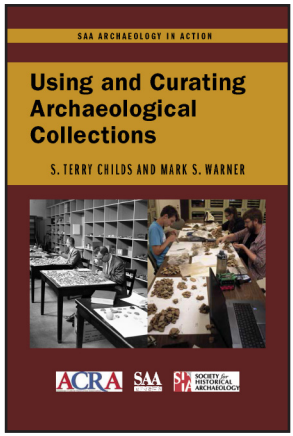

Using and Curating Archaeological Collections

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Reviewed by Brooke M. Morgan, Curator of Anthropology, Illinois State Museum, Springfield.

This edited volume arose from a need identified by the Archaeological Collections Consortium, a working group comprised of representatives from the Society for American Archaeology (SAA), the Society for Historical Archaeology (SHA), and the American Cultural Resources Association (ACRA). The most recent guides on curating archaeological collections are fifteen years old, and it is about time for an updated resource that summarizes current knowledge regarding collections-related issues. The result is a practical volume with contributions relevant to the sustainable management of local, state, and federal archaeological collections. As Jenna Domeischel and Michael K. Trimble note in the epilogue, interest in collections or curation—as gauged by presentation topics at the annual SAA meeting—has increased six-fold in the past decade. Archaeologists are reckoning with the "curation crisis" first identified in the 1970s—one that continues to foment despite impressive advancements.

The book is divided into three sections: 1) Valuing, Benefiting from, and Using Archaeological Collections; 2) Tackling Collections Issues; and 3) Finding What You Need: Resources for Archaeological Collections. The third section consists of lists of resources by topic. It is also available on the SAA website and is meant to be an evolving document. A common theme running throughout this book is the need for integrating curation education into university curricula and requiring curation training prior to or in conjunction with archaeological field schools. Danielle M. Benden tackles this topic directly and offers sample syllabi to jumpstart the process. Teaching students and young professionals to consider long-term care of artifacts, samples, and associated records collected and produced in the field is necessary for developing a "collections management ethos" as advocated by Teresita Majewski. In such an ethos, collections management is not an afterthought, but incorporated into project planning from the start. This jibes with the standards being set by granting agencies such as the National Science Foundation, which requires submission of a detailed Data Management Plan with a grant proposal.

A vital aspect of curation in North America is considering how tribal voices are incorporated in caring for archaeological collections, especially since the promulgation of NAGPRA regulations. Angela Neller notes there is a continued disconnection of tribes from archaeology collections, with institutions privileging a scientific interpretation of material remains while excluding other ways of knowing. At History Colorado, however, Sheila Goff reports that tribal consultation has had palpable impacts on how staff understand, care for, access, and use artifacts. As institutions embrace decolonizing efforts, establishing relationships

with tribal partners will be paramount. For example, the Illinois State Museum has a Cooperative Agreement with the Peoria Tribe of Oklahoma to curate NAGPRA objects from historic Illinois sites on behalf of the tribe. Working together, artifacts are selected for exhibits to provide a tangible link to Peoria ancestral homelands.

Curators face numerous practical challenges, including legal questions about their collections with regard to ownership, caring for orphaned or legacy collections, and deaccessioning—all of which may intertwine. Sara Rivers Cofield rightly suggests that ownership should be determined before a project begins and trying to do so after a project is completed takes time and resources neither the cultural resource management (CRM) firm nor contracting agency can provide. Federal and state projects often cross property lines and multiple owners are not uncommon for CRM work, so it is of utmost importance to establish clear title. Orphaned or legacy collections present their own problems: they may have few corresponding records, require extensive rehabilitation, or contain materials subject to NAGPRA. Heather L. Olson and Danielle R. Cathcart present five tasks they have established for addressing these types of collections, but acknowledge such an undertaking requires resources beyond what is normally available to curatorial staff.

Perhaps one of the biggest points of contention among archaeologists is deaccessioning, or formal removal of artifacts from a collection. Deaccessioning can be used as a method for culling artifacts that are redundant or have minimal research value, thereby reducing the overall volume of curated materials. As S. Terry Childs explains, for federal collections there is no process in place for deaccessioning except via NAGPRA or ARPA regulations. Childs and others have been working toward amending 36 CFR 79 (the primary legislation applying to federal agencies) to allow for thoughtful deaccession of objects that are of "insufficient archaeological interest" (p. 132). Feedback provided by archaeologists indicates some perceive this as a slippery slope toward wholesale disposal of artifacts. However, given the substantial volume of unmodified rock, fire-altered rock, and countless fragments of historic artifacts that provide limited information (see Mark S. Warner's chapter for a thorough discussion of mass-produced commodities and curation options), incorporating deaccessioning policies into 36 CFR 79 would provide a clear path for addressing the curation crisis. On the other hand, an experiment conducted by Brian Crane and Michael Heilen suggests limiting collections volume by employing a no-collect strategy and performing in-field artifact analyses results in significant errors in identification and should be avoided.

Lynne P. Sullivan and S. Terry Childs write that "curators are archaeology's tradition keepers" (p. 88). But what they keep is only as good as the primary information that comes through the door. Project managers must make collections care a priority during the planning stage by writing curation into budgets and communicating with the intended repository for curation guidelines. Thus while this book has great practical value for curators and collections staff, it is a worthy addition to the shelves of any archaeologist committed to ethical stewardship of the archaeological record.