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PSEUDO-ARCHAEOLOGY: THE APPROPRIATION AND COMMERCIALIZATION OF CULTURAL HERITAGE

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Heritage can be defined as the use of the past to construct ideas about identity in the present. The past that this definition references is most commonly linked to tangible objects, and therefore archaeological artifacts. As such, archaeology becomes inexorably linked with cultural heritage in that many cultures are dependent on archaeological objects helping them continue to define their identity. However, there are various threats to cultural heritage, especially as more groups of peoples attempt to evoke objects as belonging to their own cultural background. This has been happening throughout history, but in the nineteenth-century pseudo-archaeology became a new threat. Pseudo-archaeology does not fall in line with academic archaeology and often attempts to appropriate or commercialize heritage to ends that are not scientific or beneficial to the conservation of heritage. Williams argues, "…pseudo-archaeology [is] one of the two greatest challenges to contemporary archaeologists- the other being the destruction of archaeological remains" (Williams 1991: 08). Merely placing pseudo-archaeology on the same level as the actual destruction of tangible heritage shows the threat the adherence to such practices imposes. In this paper, I explore the popularity of pseudo-archaeology that has emerged from several different factors, including nationalism to populism (the way pseudo-archaeology attempts to simplify archaeology for the masses). This popularity poses a threat to cultural heritage by way of appropriation and commercialization.

To understand pseudo-archaeology and its effects on cultural heritage, one must define the concept, and compare its theoretical base to that of academic archaeology. However, there is no one single theoretical concept that underlines pseudo-archaeological thought. Steibing (1987) argues that a pseudo-archaeological claim is characterized by "1) the unscientific nature of its method and evidence, 2) its tendency to provide simple, compact answers to complex, difficult issues, and 3) its tendency to present itself as being persecuted by the archaeological establishment" (p. 2). The presence of one or more of these characteristics allows for the identification of studies claiming to be archaeological in nature, and are indeed not, and helps define pseudo-archaeological thought despite its lack of solid theory. Therefore, we can ascertain whether any conclusion is pseudo-archaeological if the nature of the methods and evidence was unscientific, the quality of answers provided to complex questions is simplistic, and if this conclusion contradicts

existing archaeological explanations and claims to be persecuted by the archaeological establishment. Fagan (2006) adds to this definition of pseudo-archaeology:

> The pseudo-archaeologist can only be defined as such when he or she *willfully* ignores countervailing data instead of rethinking their position in the face of it, or when contextual considerations are *deliberately* bypassed or left unexplored for fear of destroying a preferred conclusion. Both of these failings must also be applied *systematically* (2006: 28-29).

This definition demonstrates that pseudo-archaeology is unscientific and provides simplistic answers to complex questions. It further demonstrates that these answers are the result of ignoring data that might disprove the conclusion that the pseudo-archaeologist wishes to advance. Therefore, it becomes clear that while pseudo-archaeology claims to be on the same level as academic archaeology, it is in fact its complete opposite.

By its very definition, pseudo-archaeology is destructive to cultural heritage as it attempts to use objects to fit its own agenda. Yet, like any school of thought, pseudo-archaeology has roots in previous theories. The best way to explore pseudo-archaeology and its ties to cultural heritage is to trace its history back to its emergence as a field. While there are examples of pseudo-archaeology before the mid-twentieth century, Nazi archaeology exemplifies its development into a disciplined school of thought. In the following paragraphs, I discuss the history of Nazi archaeology in order to understand how pseudo-archaeology influences cultural heritage.

Nazi archaeology developed in the early 1930s primarily out of the respective theories of two men: Joseph-Arthur Comte de Gobineau and Gustaf Kossinna (Arnold 1990: 465). Gobineau popularized what would come to be known as the "Inequality of Nations" theory, which was developed between 1853 and 1855. According to Arnold (2006), this concept "…held that all the world's peoples could be organized according to a distinct hierarchy based on their innate abilities, and that some races were biologically and culturally inferior to others" (p. 10). On the other hand, Kossinna propagated his own *Kulturkreis* (culture circle) theory in 1921, which "suggested that it was possible to map and track the millennia of struggle between the 'long skulls' (Aryan-Germanic peoples) and the 'round heads' (various eastern races, including Slavs and Jews) in the archaeological record based on ethnically distinct material culture distributions" (Arnold 2006: 11).

The Nazi system as a whole made pseudo-archaeology viable, for "…the constant surveillance [of a totalitarian system] and pressures eliciting conformity contribute to minimize critical comments" (Maischberger 2002: 217), meaning no critiques could be

made of such pseudo-archaeological conclusions. Meanwhile, when both Gobineau and Kossinna were combined with the racial program of the Nazi party, archaeology was used to prove that the Nazi mission was viable. In other words, not only could the Nazi party argue that the Aryan race was indeed superior to other races (Gobineau), but they could use archaeological assemblages to support geographic expansion by arguing the Aryan-Germanic race traditionally lived in certain areas (Kossinna). It then became in the Nazi's best interest to find archaeological sites in the areas they wished to invade as a means to substantiate not only their territorial claims there, but their superiority as well. This is where Nazi archaeology can be considered as a form of pseudo-archaeology, because it has advanced a predetermined conclusion, and, to borrow Fagan's (2006) words, *willfully, deliberately,* and *systematically* altered archaeological data to fit this conclusion. Therefore, it is for these same reasons that the Nazi party utilized pseudo-archaeology as a means to appropriate and commercialize cultural heritage for its own political ends.

While the Nazi party exploited archaeology in order to justify both the Nazi cause and expansion, pseudo-archaeology was also expended at sites in Germany itself. In the case of the *Externsteine* (Stones of the Ridge), archaeological data was skewed at this site in order to promote both a sense of nationalism and tourism. Both of these reasons reflect forms of appropriation and commercialization that are the most damaging to cultural heritage. The *Externsteine* are five naturally occurring sandstone pillars found in northwestern Germany. The pillars are of archaeological interest because they possess reliefs and other forms of artworks, pottery shards, and an alter structure at the top of the tallest pillar. In fact, it is the so-called alter that generated the most interest of Nazi archaeologists in the site. Argued to be evidence of a solar based religion, as the hole in the alter wall admits sunlight only at sunrise on the summer solstice, original excavator Julius Andree proposed that the *Externsteine* had been the "center of the spiritual Germanic universe" until its destruction by Charlemagne (Arnold 2006: 14). In 1933, Wilhelm Teudt, part of the *SS-Ahnenerbe* (a study society founded by Heinrich Himmler that led Nazi archaeology), took this interpretation to mean that the *Externsteine* were a Germanic temple, and as such was a sacred sight and needed to be treated as so (Arnold 1990: 470). He ultimately persuaded Himmler to set up the *Externsteine-Stiftung* (Externsteine Foundation), which was a foundation that turned the *Externsteine* into a German heritage site, hoping tourism of such a site would spur nationalist identity (Halle 2002: 359).

Studies conducted as recently as 2002 have revealed that neither the small archaeological assemblages found by Andree, or even the architecture itself, point to the site's religious purpose (Halle 2002). Therefore, Nazi archaeologists appropriated the *Externsteine* in that they gave it a cultural significance it did not have. Both Andree and

Teudt were pseudo-archaeologists in that they took an archaeological site and made it fit into presumed conclusions about its importance to Germanic culture. Their studies affected the real cultural heritage of the site in two ways: 1) by destroying any real cultural links to the site through mainstreaming its identity as a Germanic temple, and 2) by turning it into a tourist attraction. Today, the site attracts over a half to a million people per year, most of whom believe the site to be a temple, leading to its physical destruction because tourists are allowed to roam freely. Thus, the nationalistic policies driving pseudo-archaeology in Nazi Germany has threatened the true cultural importance of the *Externsteine* on multiple levels.

Nationalism is seen to have stimulated the popularity of pseudo-archaeology in North America as well. While today well understood as Native American sites, the mounds found throughout the southeastern United States were not always attributed to those who constructed them. Instead, in an attempt to construct a national identity, European settlers attributed the creation to a whole new race- the Mound Builders. Pseudo-archaeology's detrimental effects on cultural heritage are exemplified by how the myth of the Mound Builders was fashioned and how the Europeans appropriated the archaeological past of the natives. Silverberg (1968) introduces his readers to the myth of the Mound Builders by noting that European settlers were disappointed that the New World did not hold splendid treasures of some past race, as did the Old World, and as such, they were constantly on the lookout for anything that would lend itself to a romantic myth of the past (p. 2). It was not until the late eighteenth-century, up through the mid nineteenth-century, as the colonists began to move westward and southward, they began to come upon sites like Cahokia in Illinois and the Serpent Mound in Ohio. The fact that the natives of the Midwest were sparse in population by the time the settlers arrived, mixed with negative stereotypes about the 'red savage,' and the need to fill the colonial imagination, all lent to the idea that it was not Native Americans who had built the mounds, but some older, superior race. To that end, it could not be decided which race, as evidenced by a work from 1873:

> …On page 338 we find them coming from Brazil at a very remote time, not from Siberia. On page 341, he apparently agrees…that the Toltecs are identical with the Moundbuilders. Then on page 351 we find the Moundbuilders being expelled from the Mississippi Valley, only to take refuge in Central America… The one certain conclusion, according to Foster, is that the American Indian was not the Moundbuilder (Williams 1991: 73-74).

Yet, despite the uncertainty of the ancestry of the Mound Builders, it did not stop the colonists from ascribing the mounds to their own cultural past. Confident that there were no connections to the Native Americans, archaeologists and historians began to peruse documents for mention of mounds in the Old World, and they came across many. Eventually, there were ties to the Greeks, the Vikings, and even the Bible; all the while these same academics were ignoring Spanish documentation that the mounds were indeed the product of Native Americans (Silverberg 1968: 6, 7). The myth of the Mound Builders is evidence of pseudo-archaeology for a variety of reasons, namely that eighteenth-century scholars ignored the data they had in order to create a myth which granted European colonists their own ties to, and the right to live in, the New World. Such conclusions were detrimental to the cultural heritage of the true mound builders because it was appropriated to fit European ends, ignoring the significance to the history of their builders. While the myth of the Mound Builders has been debunked today, pseudo-archaeology still remains popular in American society.

Interestingly, while Nazi archaeology and the myth of the Mound Builders may readily come to mind as examples of pseudo-archaeology, many every day examples may not. These include television shows on channels like History, Discovery, and so on, as well as a variety of books. Pseudo-archaeology is most damaging to cultural heritage when it is popularized in ways like these, yet it is because it is popular it becomes difficult to differentiate what is truth and what is false. As Fagan (2003: 46) writes, "A viewer lacking previous knowledge about the sites presented or how archaeology works would not necessarily see any distinction between rational deductions drawn from observable evidence, baseless speculations, and ideologically driven pseudoscience." Belief in their own conclusions means that pseudo-archaeologists represent their work as being wholly scientific in nature, and often mix illegitimate science with real archaeology, making it even harder to differentiate between the two. Furthermore, it is introduced to the public as being real science. **"**They are written, billed, advertised, stocked and sold as books about the real past, usually found in the archaeology section of bookstores when they really belong along side screeds on alien visitations, psi-factor and the Bermuda Triangle (Fagan and Feder 2005: 720)." It is because pseudo-archaeology is sold to the public as being real archaeology that it becomes difficult for the average person to discern the difference between the two. When pseudo-archaeology cannot be differentiated from academic archaeology, is when it potentially becomes the most dangerous to the conservation of cultural heritage.

Take for example the Spike TV show, American Digger. The premise of the show is that the crew conducts archaeological digs on private property in search of artifacts that they will then turn around and sell for profit. When one looks at the show's website, it even espouses the crew as being "comprised of *recovery expert* Rue Shumate, [and]

battlefield *historian* Bob Buttefuse" (Italics added, 2012). Yet, nothing about the digs they conduct, or what is done with the artifacts, follows the same guidelines that a true archaeologist would. Thus, pseudo-archaeology, especially when contained in popular television shows like American Digger, threatens cultural heritage because it gives the public the wrong idea about cultural heritage and commercializes archaeology. By teaching inappropriate and misleading archaeological technique, popular media is essentially destroying tangible heritage not only by using those techniques themselves, but also by encouraging the public at large to use a backhoe to dig up potential sites.

By being able to define pseudo-archaeology as the practice of willfully construing data to fit a predetermined conclusion, it is easier to recognize when it is at play. It is important to be able to see when pseudo-archaeology is at work, as it poses a serious threat to the preservation of cultural heritage. As explored in the examples discussed above, many factors can play into the popularization of pseudo-archaeology, particularly nationalism and its simplified arguments. Yet, with nationalism and simplification usually comes appropriation and commercialization, which are the reasons why pseudo-archaeology poses a threat. As seen with the *Externsteine* and the Native American mounds of the southeastern United States, nationalism caused pseudo-archaeology to be employed to appropriate tangible heritage to construct an identity. On the other hand, commercialization of heritage plays a huge role in the integration of popular media and archaeology, as shows such as American Digger attempt to make a profit off of archaeological objects. The question then becomes, what can academic archaeologists do to combat the popularity of pseudo-archaeology and its detrimental effects on cultural heritage? Perhaps, academics could take a lesson from their detested pseudo counterparts and attempt to make real archaeology more accessible to the public. Then, two purposes could be served at once- academic archaeologists would be substantiated and the public, their imagination quenched.

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