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Looted Archaeological Sites: Are They Worthy of Scientific Investigation?

Michelle J. Lundeen

Since the late 1800s, looting of prehistoric and historic sites has been recognized as a serious threat to archaeological resources throughout the world (Knoll 1991). Looting destroys both recorded and unrecorded sites in the United States (Ahlstrom 1992, Honeycutt et al. 1985, Stuart 1989). With such a great amount of looting taking place, this research paper asks a basic question: Why do archaeologists not investigate looted archaeological sites as they do non-looted sites and features? This question will be answered by reviewing the literature about looting including the archaeological reaction to looting. Two looted features, potted privies, will be discussed to test the potential of looted sites. The results of this paper will imply the necessity and importance for archaeologists to study looted features.

"I got my rights and this is a free country. I pay taxes and I can dig there if I want to—I've been doing it for years and nobody cares. I ain't bothering nobody. I got my rights! If I can't dig here I might as well go to Russia."
(Excerpt from an interview with a looter, Big Cypress National Preserve, 1981).
Smith and Ehrenhard 1991:19

In his novel, *A Thief of Time* (1988), Tony Hillerman presents a fictional account of looting that is full of adventure, danger and unlawful intrigue. Since the late nineteenth century looting has been recognized as a problem (Knoll 1991). The reality of archaeological looting may not match the romance of his story but it is a fact throughout the United States, on public lands, tribal lands and even on private property (King 1991, Monastersky 1990). It is not only fiction in Hillerman's southwest.

Statement of Problem

Looters have been stealing from archaeological sites since antiquity (Williams 1979). With looting comes destruction to archaeological sites and with that comes the irreplaceable loss of valuable information. Therefore, this paper considers a research topic often disregarded by archaeologists, looted

sites. Rather than simply assume that disturbed sites are worthless, this paper asks a research question: Why are looted sites not greatly studied by archaeologists, and even further, why are they not treated and researched to the extent of non-looted archaeological sites when they are studied? This question will be answered by researching the literature about looting, some archaeologist's views of this phenomena as well as a study of two looted features in order to identify what information, if any, survives looting.

Literature Review

It is ironic that the fascination with the past, which motivates all possible public behavior toward archaeological resources, also causes so much damage and destruction.
McAllister 1991:96

The terms archaeological looting and pothunting refer to all damage caused by collecting artifacts from prehistoric and historic archaeological sites (King 1991). Some of the problems associated with looting are that besides damaging archaeological sites, looters also damage artifacts (Graham 1988), as well as the context of artifacts. Due to looting, many

archaeological sites lack artifacts that looters consider "valuable" so the remaining artifacts are usually plain and not decorated (Fawcett 1993). It is assumed that collectors like the decorated sherds better than those not decorated and large artifacts better than small ones. Also, the majority of remaining artifacts at some sites have been disturbed and taken out of their original provenience which destroys the site and total distribution of the archaeological record. Many archaeologists stress a concern about the validity of researching artifacts that are not in their original context (Harrington 1991b). Due to the loss of artifact context, looting leaves numerous questions unanswered including the cultural affiliation, the chronology and the function the site served to its inhabitants; thus, overall looting hinders the ability to view human settlement and social organization (Fawcett 1993).

Archaeological Reaction To Looting

Archaeologists view looting as a negative impact to archaeological sites. Archaeologists take various forms of action to work around and within looted environments. These reactions to looting include attempting to prevent looting altogether, ignoring looted sites, salvaging looted sites and researching the looting. However, not many researchers who have studied looted sites did so with the intent of studying a looted site but rather, accepted the fact that a site was looted and went ahead with research in order to collect the data that remain.

Prevent Looting of Sites

Archaeologists have many opinions about how to manage looted sites because of these problems. Some feel that action should be taken in an attempt to stop looting, to limit it or to control it. Numerous ways exist for people to try to prevent the looting of archaeological sites. Two of these ways

include educating the public and forcefully stopping looting with a more physical approach.

Perhaps one way looting can be stopped is to educate the public (Stuart 1989, Knoll 1991). Uneducated looters dig and do not understand the consequences of their actions. Educating the public should not merely consist of teaching about the value of archaeological sites and artifacts, but it should also teach about the penalties vandals confront if they are caught looting on federal or state land (Knoll 1991). Perhaps more laws, such as the Antiquities Act of 1906 and the Archaeological Resource Protection Act of 1979 (McManamon 1991) may aid in deterring vandals. The Antiquities Act of 1906 states that federal officials have to protect archaeological sites to try to stop looting and vandalism while the Archaeological Resources Protection Act of 1979 provides criminal and civil penalties for looters.

Archaeologists and antiquities agents have also taken a more physical hands on approach by attempting to stop looters in the field with the aid of weapons and law enforcers. The downside of this effect has been that archaeologists and antiquities agents have been threatened at gun point and even killed by pothunters (King 1991). It is unfair and unfortunate, but at times federal undercover agents are even outnumbered at sites by looters (Neary 1993). Looters have also been killed defending their loot (Alexander 1990). On the positive side, looters have been arrested and prosecuted.

Ignore Looted Sites

A common perception in the past was that looted archaeological sites should be completely avoided because they are robbed of scientific value (Hodge 1937). This is because artifacts are sometimes viewed as worthless if they are not excavated in their original provenience (Chase et al. 1988). The

context of an artifact reveals ninety five percent of the information about an artifact, while only five percent of the information comes from the artifact itself (Ingalls 1994). Looting does not only affect individual artifacts and features, but it also destroys site integrity as a whole (Honeycutt et al. 1985).

An example of ignoring looted sites comes from Louisiana. Douglas D. Bryant (1988) briefly discusses looted privies. In New Orleans, as in every corner of the United States, bottle collectors are rummaging through historic privies. The destruction of the artifacts and their context leaves archaeologists two options, study them or ignore looted features all together (Bryant 1988).

In his research, Bryant ignored the looted privies because he was interested solely in intact historic features and therefore, focused his research on non-looted privies. The main goal was to observe how privy pits were built in order to determine whether the construction patterns may act as temporal, ethnic or social markers (Bryant 1988). A total of eighteen intact privies were excavated. The results of this project do indeed provide information regarding chronology, ethnicity and social status (Bryant 1988).

Salvage Looted Sites

Numerous archaeologists have recognized the importance of salvaging and preserving (Davis 1972) the remaining archaeological sites from future destruction. Some even believe, contrary to others, that context is meaningless because many of the artifacts archaeologists study were destroyed and thrown away into trash middens by their original owners (Harrington 1991a).

Research the Looting

Few archaeologists take salvaging sites one step further and are

interested in studying looted sites to identify their characteristics. Even sites that had been looted and destroyed in the past have been thoroughly excavated (Ahlstrom 1992). This has been performed even though much of the information about the site has been lost.

An excellent example of how looted sites can be researched is illustrated by Douglas D. Scott (1977). This example is discussed in detail to exemplify the researching of looted archaeological sites.

Scott explains that there were two vandalized Pueblo III burials in southwestern Colorado that are the focus of this research. The site is 5MT532 and contains at least one hundred rooms. Almost every room has been plundered. The two vandalized burials were found ten meters northwest of the site and were probably put there by the vandals. It was discovered that the bones were white from exposure to the elements. The bones were also broken and mixed up (Scott 1977). Some of the bones were even missing, but there were enough remaining to differentiate between the two bodies.

Since this site was vandalized, information was lost. It cannot be determined for sure where the burials were located. Lost data also include the horizontal and vertical positions of the bodies at the site, the direction the bodies were buried, the type of burial the bodies were given and what kinds, if any, artifacts were buried with the bodies (Scott 1977). Because of this loss, many valuable details were not determined about the remains. Osteological data were lost because bones were severely eroded from being unearthed.

Summary

This literature review summarizes looting, the impacts of looting and the archaeological reaction to looting. From reviewing the literature

about looting it is obvious that archaeologists view it has having a negative impact on the field of archaeology. Perhaps it is also the case that archaeologists know about non-looted sites and features to excavate; therefore, looted features take secondary priority.

Two Looted Features

This paper will now focus on two looted features. This emphasis will aid in testing the potential of looted features, more specifically, looted privies.

During the summer of 1997, in conjunction with plans for a major stormwater, traffic management and construction project, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Anthropology Department conducted excavations, the Antelope Valley Archaeology Project, in the urban Malone neighborhood of Lincoln, in Lancaster County, Nebraska. Along with other domestic features such as brick sidewalks and house foundations, excavations revealed two privies that had been looted by bottle diggers. In fact, all of the privies in the research area had been looted. A study of those two features was undertaken to identify what information remains in looted features once the looters have damaged the site. The research question that was asked was: what kinds of information survive looting? Therefore, the research goal was to identify the variety of data that survives looting. The results suggest that looted privies have similar artifact types as various other historic sites but also lack artifacts due to looting. Some of the topics that historic archaeologists are currently researching including status, ethnicity, gender, date, diet and social issues are still applicable to looted features.

Bryant defines a privy pit. A privy pit "...is the wood or brick lined pit dug below an outhouse, which served primarily as a receptacle for human

waste prior to the advent of indoor plumbing" (Bryant 1988:68). Whether it is called an outhouse, a necessary or a jake, privies are easy archaeological features to identify (Hume 1969) by looking at soil stains and the texture of the soil, as well as knowledge from historic documents. These privies provide archaeologists with a surplus of information. Interesting artifacts were often thrown into privies during the use life of the pits (Bryant 1988). Artifacts that were often thrown into privies were domestic objects such as widow glass, bottles and plates. Some objects were disposed of into the privy because they were broken while other objects were whole when they were tossed out by the owners. Due to the fact that privies contain wet and organic matter the artifacts that were tossed into them were preserved (Hume 1969).

Privies are common archaeological features and many are uncovered during urban and rural development programs. Archaeologists have studied these privies and have recorded a vast amount of information over the years about them. Private household privies have been excavated, as well as privies on a larger scale, such as officer's latrines at various historic forts across the United States (Scott 1989, Fort Snelling 1997). Through these privies archaeologists have been able to study various issues, such as social status (Bryant 1988). However, not much has been researched with looted privies. In fact, if a privy is determined to be looted, it is often disregarded. This is due to the fact, mentioned earlier, that privies are common archaeological features and archaeologists expect that they can always find a different one to excavate that has not been looted. Also, looted privies are thought not to have much research potential.

It was unfortunate that the privies in the Malone neighborhood were looted. However, this research

shows that looted privies also answer the question regarding the information that survives looting. Although certain artifact types are obviously missing, looted privies are full of many other insightful artifacts.

All of the topics can be summed up (Table 1.1). Table 1.1 is a simple check list for issues that can and cannot be determined from the two looted privies in Lincoln, Nebraska. As seen in the table, status, gender, date, diet and social issues can be observed from the looted privies while ethnicity cannot.

Table 1.1 The Presence and Absence of Markers

	Yes	No
Status	X	
Ethnicity		X
Gender	X	
Date	X	
Diet	X	
Social Issues	X	

Status

Status is of great interest to historic archaeologists. The social status of the family who used the privy can be recognized by the discarded artifacts. Status can be determined from looking at the archaeological record such as faunal remains (Reitz 1987, Singer 1987); quality of adobe (Staski et al. 1996); and ceramics (Baugher et al. 1987). By observing their artifacts, it can be determined that the residents of the Malone neighborhood, who used these privies, were not of particularly high social status, but were middle class. The residents of Malone did not have extremely expensive ceramic vessels

but rather utilitarian objects that could be used daily, such as whiteware dishes. Also, some of the cuts of meat they ate included knuckles and feet, typically those portions that do not contain much meat. Cuts that contain a lot of meat are considered valued cuts (Reitz 1987). However, the users of the privies enjoyed a variety of meat including beef, pork, chicken, lamb and fish, which is a status marker (Reitz 1987). Therefore, they had enough money to have diverse diets.

Ethnicity

In contemporary society, it seems that historical archaeologists are interested in making ethnic groups, such as Native Americans, African Americans and Euro-Americans more visible in past societies. Both ethnicity and social class were found to be interrelated (Clark 1987). Ethnic differences have been observed from faunal remains (Reitz 1987). However, ethnicity was not made visual by observing the artifacts recovered from neither of the looted privies in the study area.

Gender

Numerous archaeologists have studied gender because gender can be viewed through the archaeological record (Hardesty 1994, Jackson 1994). Gender should be taken into account while researching past groups of people because gender structures cultural and social organizations (Hardesty 1994). Gender has been studied as to whether males or females used particular types of artifacts (Hill 1995). This idea of relating artifacts to either men or women can be applied to the two looted privies. Out of all of the artifacts recovered from these two privies, there was a bisque doll leg. This makes females visible in the archaeological record, even more specifically, a young girl. Also, women are seen by the bone needle case recovered. Men are also visible through bullet shells and a variety of metal

hardware.

Date

Existing artifacts allow archaeologists to not only date the artifacts themselves but also to determine the time period when the privy was used. This is because artifacts in privies are often well preserved (Hume 1969) and the artifacts date to the time of occupation (Scmits et al. 1987). Some privies are located on Sanborn Insurance Maps and this dates the privies, whether they are looted or not. These two privies contained numerous diagnostic artifacts including a glass Mason jar that had the date, 1858, embossed on it.

Diet

Diets can be inferred through the animal remains uncovered in looted privies. Also, different cuts of meat and different animals are associated with different values (Reitz 1987). A variety of butchered bones were recovered. It can be observed that the diets of the people who tossed their trash into this privy ate beef, pork, chicken, lamb and fish. The bones remain because they are of no value to the bottle digger, yet they are useful to archaeologists.

Social Issues

Social aspects can be seen through the artifacts in a looted privy. For example, there is a large number of bottle glass from medicine bottles. It can be assumed that a certain individual or the whole family may have been plagued with ailments. However, since the medicine bottle glass is extremely fragmented it cannot be determined what the medicine, contained in the bottles, was supposed to relieve.

Summary

The artifacts recovered from both looted privies during the summer of 1997 were also identified, dated and used to address some of the current

issues in historic archaeology including identifying status, ethnicity, gender, date, diet and social issues through the archaeological record. Results confirm that markers indicating status, gender, date, diet and social issues were all observed from the looted privies. Ethnic markers were not observed.

This leads to the conclusion that looted features reveal the same information as non-looted sites. I feel strongly that looted sites contain as much valuable information as non-looted sites; therefore, archaeologists should not ignore looted features, but instead carry out research that will continue to aid in the understanding of looted sites. They are not any less valuable to the archaeological record because they have been looted. Archaeologists should not dismiss sites just because someone else got there first.

Conclusion

The results of this research provide beneficial insights into not only the archaeologists world of looted privies but also that of looted features in general. Archaeologists do not invest time nor energy into looted sites because they believe that information in the form of context, provenience and artifacts is lost. However, this paper has demonstrated that looted features do retain valuable information. If archaeologists do not wish to study such sites, only then will information be lost forever.

Hopefully, future research will aid archaeologists in better understanding looted features and sites. This information will be a valuable tool not only for the field of historic archaeology, but for the field of archaeology as a whole. With pothunters constantly on the search for "buried treasure" the avenue to research these sites will always be open.

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