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Editorial: Collaborative Archaeologies and Ethnoarchaeological Practice

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In our editorial for the relaunch of this journal in 2023, we stated that EAZ serves an increasing need for interdisciplinary perspectives. As archaeological specializations continue to narrow in scope, the imperative to bridge domains of knowledge becomes even more pressing (Piezonka et al. 2023). Collaborative archaeologies exemplify this need to work across disciplines. Such approaches essentially require archaeologists to be more ethnographic – or more like ethnoarchaeologists.

It may seem commonplace now to claim that collaborative archaeology emerged in response to the post-processual critiques of archaeology's sociopolitical contexts. Post-processualism's emphases – multivocality, reflexivity, recognition of sociopolitical context – have indeed been credited with enabling collaborative archaeological practice. Yet, we do not want to suggest a direct causal chain here. Collaborative archaeologies did not arise top-down from theoretical conviction but bottom-up from Indigenous activism – from communities asserting control over their heritage and forcing disciplinary transformation. Although post-processual archaeologists provided theoretical vocabulary for critique, the main driver for reform came from descendant communities themselves: Indigenous peoples who refused to remain passive subjects of study. As recognized by Craig Cipolla (2025),

> *Although [collaborative archaeologies] parallel aspects of postprocessual and feminist approaches, they are primarily driven by tensions between archaeologists and the outside world, namely Indigenous peoples.*

To understand why activism – not theory – drove this transformation, consider the broader evolution of archaeology, for the sake of argument. Archaeology today operates far differently than it did decades ago. We can recall its origins in antiquarian pursuit leisurely undertaken by aristocrats. This legacy has contemporary expression in the '*Tomb Raider* phenomenon': Lara Croft trains in her palatial estate in weaponry and combat, preparing to battle foes also going after various treasures – an odd mix of modern technology with fully antiquarian motives. In contrast, although actually an older franchise, *Indiana Jones* represents a slight move forward in archaeological ethics: archaeology is no longer purely aristocratic enterprise, as he demands, 'This belongs in a museum!' – an academic working in conjunction with his college. Even in these romanticized portrayals of archaeologists and archaeological practice, colonial overtones are highly present, and the voices of descendant peoples are rendered as background or silent.

To understand why activism, not theory, drove this transformation, let us further consider archaeology's evolution. As archaeology rapidly shifted toward a more scientific enterprise by the 1960s with the 'New Archaeology' of processualism, Lewis Binford (1962, 101) stated that: 'As archaeologists, with the entire span of culture history as our "laboratory," we cannot afford to keep our theoretical heads buried in the sand.' The metaphor he used presented an ideal. Yet Binford's notion of the archaeological 'laboratory' obscured a fundamental reality: this 'laboratory' was the territory and heritage of Indigenous peoples', and the 'specimens' were their ancestors – neither of which archaeologists sought permission to study. Despite methodological transformations – from antiquarian treasure-hunting to culture-historical classification to processual science – archaeology was routinely conducted without consent within the traditional territories of Indigenous peoples. Communities were subjects of study, not partners in research.

Beginning in the 1980s, post-processualists levelled a broad critique at traditional archaeological practice. They challenged its positivist stance. To keep with the metaphor, they questioned the idea that archaeology could be conducted objectively as if in a neutral laboratory setting, insulated from the sociopolitical contexts in which it operates.

Now, collaborative approaches in archaeology have since developed in many parts of the globe, involving local communities in archaeological investigations and becoming more commonplace from the 2000s onward. One of the important aspects of collaborative approaches is the decentralization of power structures surrounding material heritage. Within academia, disciplinary boundaries are generally recognized as the domains of specialists – sometimes policed or guarded. In archaeology, however, our domains extend beyond academia. They overlap with the interests of other people who have a stake in archaeological work: descendant communities with direct connections to the heritage being studied, governmental agencies managing cultural resources and local communities whose lives intersect with archaeological sites and practices.

Although post-processual archaeologists provided theoretical understanding of the broader contexts of archaeological practice, the contexts they emphasized tended to be macro-scale influences such as biases resulting from nationalist or capitalist ideologies. They did not focus as much on the concrete arenas of local practice, such as relationships between settler archaeologists and Indigenous or descendant peoples. To take one example, at Çatalhöyük – one of the signature post-processual projects led by Ian Hodder – the first article on working with descendant groups did not appear until Sonya Atalay's publication in 2010, long after collaborative archaeologies had been operating elsewhere. Atalay noted that descendant peoples had been involved in excavations since the project's beginning but always as paid laborers (screeners or haulers) or as informants for ethnoarchaeological studies – thus maintaining the traditional structure of extractive archaeology rather than practicing even collaboration. Notably, it was an archaeologist with Indigenous heritage as Anishinaabe-Ojibwe who introduced collaborative practice at Çatalhöyük, although the project was independently funded and separate from the main excavations.

Yet this is 15 to 20 years after the post-processual critique. Collaborative archaeologies do involve approaches that are explicitly conscious of the sociopolitical contexts in which their investigations are carried out. However, their emergence was not driven top-down by theory. For instance, collaborative archaeologies did not become prominent in England, despite it being the home of many prominent post-processual works. Instead, collaborations proliferated in two other regions: British Columbia and Australia. Both share a critical distinction – they did not negotiate treaties with Indigenous peoples during colonization. This absence led to ongoing legal disputes over Aboriginal title, fundamentally reshaping archaeological practice. Where treaties were absent, Indigenous communities could not be ignored, especially in the political climate of recent decades, as colonial attitudes came under scrutiny and Indigenous peoples reasserted their rights. Although early post-processual arguments provided the theoretical basis for critique, including arguments for cognizance of sociopolitical contexts and multivocality in the archaeological record, the main driver for such reforms came from descendant communities themselves.

In British Columbia, Canada, most of the province was established without the negotiations of treaties with Indigenous peoples – contrasting with much of the rest of North America. This context of developing archaeology on unceded traditional territories pushed archaeologists in the province toward more collaborative approaches. For instance, beginning in the 1950s, the Musqueam requested that Charles Borden conduct excavations on their reserves and instructed him to share the results with the community, providing an early precedent for collaborative archaeologies in the province. This was driven by advocacy on part of the Musqueam, who would later use these ar-

chaeological results in their land-claims negotiations with the province. As Borden stated,

> *What is especially important, I think, is the demonstration that we are doing this not for our own gain, but as the result of a request which has come from them and as part of the Museum Project conceived by them.*
>
> *(as quoted in Roy 2016, 141)*

Similarly, in Australia – another region where treaties were never negotiated with the Indigenous peoples – Jim Berg, a Gunditjmara Elder, advocated for the repatriation of remains to Melbourne's Kings Domain Garden in 1985. His efforts resulted in landmark legislation, despite significant opposition from the archaeological community (Faulkhead/Berg 2010). In such regions without treaties, Indigenous peoples retained stronger legal claims to unceded territories, giving them leverage to assert control over heritage sites. Archaeology could no longer proceed as if Indigenous peoples or their heritage were merely subjects of study.

Efforts to force more engagement with Indigenous communities also occurred in other contexts, such as in the U.S., with its history of treaties. Through activism and advocacy, Indigenous groups such as the Cheyenne – under William Tallbull's leadership – challenged museum practices after visiting Smithsonian collections and seeing some of the 18,000 ancestral remains stored like a vast tomb – yet not a place for the dead to rest, but to be studied (McKeown 2012, 14). Tallbull's activism encouraged the enactment of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) in 1990, which had a massive influence on archaeology worldwide (McKeown 2012). The opposition of many archaeologists in the early years of NAGPRA indicates that it was activism that enacted legislation forcing collaboration, transforming archaeological practice in lasting ways.

Collaborative approaches require archaeologists to design their projects with full awareness of the sociopolitical context in which they operate. This demands an adjustment from our often highly specialized technical or theoretical niches to greater engagement with ethnographic understandings of culture – not just in the past but also in the beliefs and practices of descendant groups' today. Such engagement informs appropriate protocols concerning heritage (Angelbeck/Grier 2014). This history of engagement sets the stage for the articles in this issue, which concern collaborative archaeology and ethnoarchaeology. Together, they demonstrate how these approaches intersect in practice: both demand that archaeologists work across disciplinary boundaries, and both show that such methods produce richer archaeological understanding.

In this issue, Lindsay Amundsen-Meyer (2025) provides a reflection upon her ten years of practice in collaborative and Indigenous archaeologies with the Siksika Blackfoot in Alberta. While the aim of such approaches is to level the playing field between researchers and community members, she argues that equality in approach does not mean equal access to knowledges. Rather than attempting to 'braid' Western and descendant knowledge systems, non-Indigenous archaeologists should position themselves as facilitators who provide archaeological expertise to advance community-defined objectives, allowing communities to integrate findings with their own cultural knowledge on their own terms. She further notes that most archaeology in Canada today is still conducted by settler archaeologists, even when the major focus of investigations concerns Indigenous heritage.

The relationship between collaborative archaeology and ethnoarchaeology merits consideration. While collaborative archaeology emphasizes the restructuring of power relations in archaeological practice, ethnoarchaeology engages living communities to better understand material culture production and use. Both approaches recognize that archaeological knowledge emerges not solely from laboratory analysis but through engagement with people – whether descendant communities asserting rights over their heritage or communities maintaining traditional practices that illuminate archaeological questions. This intersection becomes particularly productive when ethnoarchaeological research operates within collaborative frameworks, in which community members are not merely 'informants' but active participants shaping research questions and interpretations.

Oinam Premchand Singh's ethnoarchaeological work in Northeast India offers a different yet complementary perspective. His documentation of ongoing megalithic traditions demonstrates how sustained community engagement can reveal social dimensions that remain invisible in the archaeological record alone. India is a particularly vibrant region for ethnoarchaeological research, given its many Indigenous communities and researchers involved in this strand of archaeological investigation. Current research by Indian scholars provides a wealth of ethnoarchaeological studies covering topics such as pottery production, metallurgical techniques and megalithic building traditions (e.g., Jamir/Müller 2022; Varma/Menon 2017).

This issue includes a case study on the latter topic in Singh's paper, 'Cooperative Networks in Megalith Construction: Ethnoarchaeological Insights from Maram Khullen Village in Manipur, Northeast India' (Singh 2025). Northeast India has a particularly rich history of megalithic building traditions, some of which survive to this day, offering some of the world's few remaining examples of ongoing megalithic construction. Singh presents a study documenting 1633 megalithic monuments, as well as findings from interviews and participant observation during the construction of a new monument. He describes in rich detail the decision-making process, the search for a suitable stone, its transport and embellishment, the erection itself and the feasting that marks the completion of the endeavour.

This account offers archaeologists working on this thematic complex a possible *chaîne opératoire* of megalith building that serves as an illuminating and inspiring example. Most importantly, however, it provides a detailed discussion of the social regulations and norms as well as the networks involved in the distribution of items, food and money. Megalithic building practices involve a complex set of actors and motivations that can only be understood in their potential variability through ethnoarchaeological accounts. We are therefore delighted to include this study in the current issue.

Benjamin M. Sichert and colleagues (2025) offer an ethnoarchaeological study of marketplaces in Morocco's High Atlas Mountains, demonstrating how contemporary archaeological theory has embraced decentralized frameworks. They draw upon Actor-Network Theory to argue that markets function as networks collectively shaped by diverse actors, both human and non-human. Non-human animals enabled what could be brought to market and from what distances, thereby influencing the composition of visitors, range of products and marketplace activities. Previous archaeological research on marketplaces, they note, has often focused primarily on material evidence of transactions among people, overlooking the role of non-human actors in enabling much of what occurs in these spaces. Without broadening scales of analysis, archaeologists risk producing only partial understandings of these complex networks.

This theoretical move – distributing agency beyond traditional centres of power to include previously marginalized actors – parallels the practical shift in collaborative archaeology, where knowledge-making authority extends beyond academic institutions to descendant communities. Both transformations reject hierarchical models in favour of recognizing multiple nodes of agency and expertise. The articles in this issue exemplify this interdisciplinary imperative outlined at the outset, whether by distributing authority among human actors or by recognizing the agency of non-human participants in archaeological interpretation.

Taken together, research papers in this issue demonstrate that collaborative archaeologies and ethnoarchaeological practice both require archaeologists to bridge domains of knowledge – not simply as a methodological choice but as a necessity of responsible practice. They remind us that archaeology's objects of study – whether heritage sites or material culture production – exist within ongoing social and political contexts that extend well beyond academic domains. In this way, they serve as correctives to blind spots inherent in any scale of analysis, demanding attention not only to what we study, but also to how we study it and with whom we work.

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