

Icon Archaeology Group

A brief guide to the principles of archaeological conservation

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Introduction

These guidelines outline the principles that govern good practice in archaeological conservation. Archaeological conservation investigates and helps to preserve the evidence inherent in excavated physical remains of the past. This may include information regarding the methods and materials used in manufacturing an artefact, any pre-burial modifications, its use, re-use and burial and the nature of its burial environment; post-excavation restoration work may also be of historic interest. Conservation is also the process both of managing change, and realising the potential of any object or material to inform, instruct and inspire.

Some fundamental principles are common to all areas of conservation but since the value of archaeological remains as evidence generally outweighs any aesthetic or financial value, and as their burial and post-excavation history can cause such dramatic changes to their composition and appearance, the following are particularly significant for those dealing with archaeological material. There is also a particularly wide range of archaeological specialists who usually need to be consulted in the course of conservators' work.

Archaeological conservation should be carried out within the recognized frameworks of project management within the UK heritage sector, for example 'The Management of Research Projects in the Historic Environment (MoRPHE, English Heritage 2006). Conservators should seek to apply 'best practice' to the conservation of collections and archives, by referring to policy guidance such as 'Archaeological Archives: A guide to best practice in creation, compilation, transfer and curation' (Archaeological Archives Forum 2007). Archaeological conservators should also apply a value-based approach to their work, recognising the evidential, historic, aesthetic and communal potential of the material in their care, for example as discussed in 'Conservation Principles: Policies & Guidance' (English Heritage 2008) Sources that discuss principles relevant to work throughout the Museums, Archaeological and Heritage sectors are provided in the Further Reading list.

Principles of archaeological conservation

To avoid compromising the value of archaeological artefacts as evidence, the following principles should be followed in their treatment and care:

- Before any conservation work is proposed for an artefact, its provenance and the legality of both its original sourcing and its acquisition by the owner should be established. *For the law on Treasure see the references provided below.* Where an artefact comes to the UK from abroad, the relevant national laws on the protection of cultural property should be consulted. *These are available from the UNESCO Cultural Heritage Laws database - see the website listed below*
- The standard of care given to any material, artefact or collection should not be affected by its financial or aesthetic value or any other subjective quality.

- The artefact and any relevant documentation should be examined in detail before treatment or analysis is carried out, to assess its condition and establish any causes of deterioration. Only intervention consistent with the preservation needs of the artefact should be undertaken. Any analysis undertaken should have a clearly stated aim and be beneficial for the interpretation of the artefact or contribute to a research agenda.
- Interventive treatment of an artefact should be carried out only within the professional competence of a conservator and any conservation work delegated to students or volunteers should be appropriately supervised by a conservator.
- A full record, including photos and drawings if appropriate, should always be made before and after the interventive treatment or analysis of an artefact and the record made accessible as part of a permanent archive to all interested parties.
- Any intervention should be confined to the minimum necessary to achieve a given conservation or analytical aim and to fulfil wider archaeological or museum project aims. Preventive care and non-destructive analysis should be preferred to physical intervention.
- Conservators should ensure that interventive treatment or handling will not compromise any potential scientific analysis, including dating, consulting other specialists where necessary.
- Non-destructive analytical techniques should be used wherever possible. Destructive analysis, including the taking of samples, should only be carried out after consultation with the relevant finds specialists, archaeologists or curators, and with the permission of any owner. Analytical samples should be of the minimum size and quantity necessary for the intended analytical technique.
- The short and long term effects of techniques or materials should be understood as far as they are known, before application to an artefact, referring where necessary to past conservation research. The future role and function of the artefact and the environmental conditions of its intended location should be considered in the choice of intervention.
- Information regarding treatment methods and the composition and properties of all materials, techniques and equipment used in treatment or analytical work, should be fully disclosed as far as they are known. Commercial products of uncertain composition should be thoroughly tested before use with archaeological material, wherever possible, products of known composition should be used in preference.
- Nothing should be removed from an artefact unless it is clear that it is not part of the use or function of the artefact prior to burial. Repairs and alterations since its excavation may be significant to an artefact's history and may also need recording and/or conservation.
- Restoration of a missing part should only be carried out where the form of the part is known. Reshaping of distorted artefacts should not be attempted unless essential to the interpretation of the artefact for publication or display. There should be careful assessment of any potential damage to the artefact in doing so and prior consultation with the owner and finds specialist, archaeologist or curator as relevant. Any restoration work carried out

should be clearly identifiable on the artefact (though not necessarily obtrusive) and clearly documented. Restoration work should not be carried out with the sole purpose of increasing the financial value of an artefact.

- Conservators should liaise closely with related professionals eg archaeologists, finds specialists, curators, illustrators, photographers and designers in the course of their work and should be sensitive to their requirements and priorities. When working as part of a team, conservators should always promote good collections care in the handling, packing, and transport of artefactual material, as well as the selection and use of appropriate storage and display materials. *See also English Heritage Guides and Guidelines such as MoRPHE and other ICON-AG Guidelines.*
- Conservators should familiarise themselves and comply with current health and safety, insurance and other legal requirements. *For further information see HSE website listed below.*
- Conservators should ensure they keep up with current knowledge and continue to develop their skills in order to enhance the quality and effectiveness of their work and to further the interests of conservation as a discipline. The ICON-administered scheme for the professional accreditation of conservator-restorers provides a framework that supports this. *For further information on PACR accreditation and the professional standards it uses see the ICON website listed below.*
- Conservators should take every opportunity to encourage public awareness and appreciation of their role, promote the role of conservators within the archaeological, museum and allied professions, provide training for students and advice on artefact care to the public where needed. *Free leaflets and posters are available via the Archaeology Group section of the ICON website under "Resources".*

These "principles" have been produced by the ICON Archaeology Group, who can be contacted for further information and advice. Contact details are provided on the ICON website www.ICON.org.uk under the Archaeology Group section.

Further Reading

The Treasure Act 1996 Code of Practice (Revised) England and Wales

English Heritage 2008 Conservation Principles: Policies & Guidance for the sustainable management of the historic environment

English Heritage 2008 Investigative Conservation

www.english-heritage.org.uk/server/show/nav.18870 for information regarding Management of Research Projects in the Historic Environment (MoRPHE)

www.finds.org.uk/treasure for information regarding the law regarding Treasure for Great Britain and Northern Ireland

www.hse.gov.uk Guidance on health and safety at work

www.icomos.org/australia/images/pdf/BURRA_CHARTER.pdf for details of the Burra Charter – the Australia ICOMOS charter for places of cultural significance 1999

Museums & Galleries Commission 1992 Standards in the Museum care of Archaeological Collections

UNESCO Cultural Heritage Laws Database - portal.unesco.org

Walker-Tubb K(Ed) 1995 Antiquities Trade or Betrayed: Legal, Ethical and Conservation Issues (Archetype Publications Ltd)