The Past in Peril

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The Past in Peril by Mike Toner is the fifth volume in the Readings in Archeological Resource Protection Series published by the Southeast Archeological Center, National Park Service, in Tallahassee, Florida (previously published by the Interagency Archeological Services Division, National Park Service, Atlanta, Georgia).

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Cover: Dusk settles over a man-made moonscape near Mocollope, Peru. By night, looters dig amid the ruins of the 1,500-year-old Moche city. By day, village children sift the backfill for beads and other small items, and the Peruvian army uses the looters’ pits as foxholes for training maneuvers. (David Tulis, AJC Staff)
Foreword

When I answered the phone on one of those cool, crisp October mornings in Tallahassee, back in 1999, the voice at the other end identified himself as Mike Toner, science writer for The Atlanta Journal-Constitution. He explained that he was researching and writing a series of articles entitled *The Past in Peril*. Like so many others, he was alarmed at the rate of destruction of the world's cultural heritage and felt compelled to inform the general public about some of the underlying causes of this epidemic—the most prevalent being looting, unmanaged urban sprawl, massive dam projects, agribusiness, greed, ignorance, poverty, and ethnocentric assumption.

Our conversation ended with Mike scheduling a visit to the Southeast Archeological Center (SEAC) the following week. His visit was an eye-opener for us. He asked numerous probing questions and expected us to defend our answers. He prodded us for possible solutions and then, playing the devil’s advocate, proposed the reasons why he doubted such options would work. Finally, he asked “Why is it important at all that we protect the past?”

The answer is anything but simple. To respond, because it’s the right thing to do, only leads to more questions. Whose past are we saving? Who are we saving it for? If it’s not my past and not my people, why bother?” One must recognize that alternative world views about the past elicit diverse beliefs about its value. The result is a myriad of interpretations of, and many degrees of appreciation for cultural resources. Nevertheless, the world’s cultural sites remain fundamentally interdependent in one way. They are the most tangible records of our existence on this planet. This is why, in response to Mike’s question, in my view it is important that we protect the past.

Mike’s powerful, thoroughly researched articles provide a global view of the crisis surrounding the loss of the world’s cultural heritage. In recognition of the outstanding quality, content, and scope of his series, in 2001, the Society for American Archaeology presented him with their prestigious Gene S. Stuart Award, given each year for the newspaper article or series that best enhances public understanding of archaeology. Mike also received the Society for Georgia Archaeology’s George S. Lewis Archaeological Stewardship Award and special mention in the International Centre for the Study and Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property’s quadrennial Media Save Art Awards.

We were most pleased when The Atlanta Journal-Constitution agreed to let SEAC reprint this series—which remains timely as the world’s cultural resources continue to spill into oblivion. We hope that readers will be left with the conviction that, within our own world views, we are all in some manner archivists of the past. The better we educate ourselves, the more instrumental we will be in providing future generations with a better opportunity to learn about the past. I believe *The Past in Peril* is cause for hope as it brings awareness, appreciation, and understanding of our human heritage to a greater public.

~ John E. Ehrenhard
Director, SEAC
National Park Service
Like many people, I value old things—for their beauty and for what they can teach us about the past. I can understand collectors who devote their lives to acquiring pieces of the past, but I think many people who love old objects don’t fully appreciate the consequences—often unintended. Their desire to possess sometimes encourages looting and illicit trade, and when it does it diminishes opportunities to understand a past we all should share.

~ Mike Toner

Change is coming even to the timeless landscape of Machu Picchu, the walled city the Inca built on a lush mountaintop near present-day Cuzco. Even though growing throngs of visitors are eroding the mystical atmosphere that makes Machu Picchu the highlight of most visits to Peru, Peruvian authorities are planning to build a tram system that will double the number of visitors who can reach the site from the valley below. (David Tulis. AJC Staff)
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The world's cultural heritage is vanishing and the causes are many. Greed. Poverty. Ignorance. War. Vandalism. Technology. Farming. Urban sprawl. Even a well-intentioned love of the past that makes it irresistible for some to hold—and own—historical artifacts.

Whatever the cause, no culture, no corner of the Earth is too remote to be safe.

Originally presented as a six-part series, The Past in Peril appeared intermittently between July 1999 and April 2000 in the Sunday "Perspective" section of The Atlanta Journal-Constitution. The articles are reprinted herein in chronological order by publication date.

The Past in Peril project was conceived and reported by Mike Toner, a Pulitzer Prize-winning science writer, who for twenty-five years has reported on a variety of science topics. Since joining The Atlanta Journal-Constitution in 1984, he has covered everything from the space program to antibiotic resistance.

Staff photographer David Tulis, who came to The Atlanta Journal-Constitution in 1991, traveled with Toner to Peru, Italy, Greece, England, and several other countries in the preparation of this series. A selection of his photographs are included in this reprint.

This series reports on the decaying ruins of Pompeii, the war-scarred archaeological sites of Beirut, and 120 million-year-old dinosaur tracks hacked out of stone in West Australia. It takes readers on a journey from deep-sea shipwreck sites to the battlefields of America's Civil War.

Part 1: Lost Treasures of Peru relates what Peru and other countries are—and aren't—doing to halt the loss of their cultural heritage.

Part 2: Buying, Selling, Stealing History explores the global market in antiquities that cuts across the lines of science, art, politics, economics, crime and history. Much of the burgeoning trade in ancient art and artifacts is legal; too much of it is not—a blurred distinction that has long intrigued Toner.

Part 3: Coveting Thy Neighbor's Past explains how museums, in striving to preserve the past, sometimes contribute to its destruction.

Part 4: America the Looted hits closer to home with the author focusing on the impact of looting on our yet-to-be-recorded national history.

Part 5: Tourism Takes Its Toll reveals how neglect and overuse are eroding some of the world's best known ruins.

Finally, Part 6: Developing Conflicts probes the tension between development and heritage preservation.
Part 1

Lost Treasures of Peru

What Peru and other countries are—and aren’t—doing to halt the loss of their cultural heritage.

July 11, 1999
Stealing a Nation's Heritage

Haunting scenes of desecration litter the landscapes of Peru. They are mute witness to an epidemic of looting and grave robbery that is stripping the country of a most precious resource.

Peru has been looted for gold and silver before. Now it is losing its history.

Like other culturally rich, economically poor nations, Peru is the victim of a growing global market for antiquities—pieces of the past valued more on the open market for their beauty or rarity than for the stories they might have told.

Because Peru's ancient civilizations had no written language, the loss of Peruvian art and artifacts is as devastating to its cultural heritage as ripping up the Magna Carta or destroying the Declaration of Independence.

Money can't measure the loss. Finely worked Moche turquoise and gold earrings, worth tens of thousands of dollars at auction, are a testament to metallurgy craftsmanship a thousand years before Columbus that jewelers today can only marvel at.

At some sites, looters have literally been throwing away the most precious treasure of all: seemingly worthless tangles of knotted cord that archaeologists now believe are the closest thing any of Peru's cultures ever had to a written language.

The cords are quipus, ledger-like devices used by the Inca to tally crops, census data, taxes, send messages and record myths. Each contains hundreds of cords. The color and length of each string, the spacing, the size and type of knots all have meaning. Each quipu contains clues that may help in understanding another, but these knotted records of the Inca are rare and fragile. Only a few hundred are known—and each one destroyed or lost to looters destroys another piece of the Inca puzzle.

Legends lost: Quipus, knotted cords used to record information and legends, were developed by the Inca to keep records when they ruled Peru. Not knowing what they have found, looters are tossing these ancient records aside as they search for "treasure." (David Tulis, AJC Staff)
Lost Treasures of Peru

Puamape, Peru

Shallow craters march across the hillside—a bleak moonscape at the edge of an abandoned fishing village on Peru’s north coast. The scattered pot shards and broken human skulls are evidence that grave robbers have been busy.

Worlds away, on the auction blocks in New York and London, the exquisitely crafted 2,000-year-old ceramics and rainbow-hued textiles of Peru’s ancient civilizations are objects of beauty—and spirited bidding that can reach into the six figures.

Here, hundreds of freshly dug pits and a scattering of human remains among the drifting sands reveal the darker side of a booming worldwide market for ancient artifacts. Fresh tracks of heavy machinery in the soft sand attest that, when it comes to digging up their ancestors, Peru’s huaqueros have graduated from shovels and picks.

To dig these holes, they used a backhoe.

“This was probably the burial ground for a thousand people; now look at it,” says archaeologist Thomas Dillehay, scuffing his boot through a pile of brittle, whitened bones. “This is the worst looting I have seen. Before long the bones will be gone too. They take them and grind them up for animal feed.”

Dillehay is bitter. And frustrated.

The University of Kentucky archaeologist has devoted his life to the study of early American peoples. Until he spotted this dimpled hillside from across the river, no one suspected that there was an archaeological site here. The discovery came weeks too late. The wholesale, mechanized looting has ensured that any scientific value the site might have had was lost before it was found.

“We could have studied the lifestyle of these people. We could have learned something about their social structure. At least we might have known who they were,” he says. The location is one of dozens of previously unknown sites Dillehay and his team have found in the region. But the discovery is bittersweet. “Anything these burials might have told us is gone now. In a few more years there won’t be anything left.”
Most archaeologists take students on field trips to study ancient cultures. Jorge Silva of San Marcos University in Lima simply leads them out the door. University construction has erased most of the 900-year-old adobe pyramids that once stood on the spot, but there are still opportunities for young scientists to learn about the Huari city that existed there. (David Tulis, AJC Staff)

Peru has more than its share of such untold stories. Long before the Inca, this was the Americas' Egypt. Its rugged coastal valleys nurtured a succession of cultures so advanced that today a drive along the Pan American Highway reveals the weathered remains of their towering earthen pyramids, walled imperial cities, roads and irrigation systems rivaling those of ancient Rome.

From Peru's desertlike coastal plains to the Amazon jungles, the remains of these ancient civilizations—all thriving cultures long before Columbus set foot in the New World—are being obliterated by a growing global appetite for pieces of the past.

In the final years of the 20th century, Peru isn't the only country witnessing the wholesale destruction of a cultural heritage that has survived centuries, even millennia.

In West Africa, the looting of 500-year-old graves for Djenné terra-cotta figurines has left Mali's inland delta looking like Swiss cheese. In Cambodia, armed looters use power saws to carve sandstone statuary out of 12th-century temples at Angkor. Even in the United States, collectors' thirst for Indian and Civil War relics—whetted in recent months by expanded sales of artifacts on the Internet—is fueling an epidemic of looting in the nation's parks and public lands.

But if countries everywhere are bleeding history, Peru is hemorrhaging.

Off-road vehicles have made once-unreachable ruins more accessible. Modern mountain climbing technology has made it easier to loot the frozen mummies left by the Incas on the highest peaks of the Andes. Heavy machinery has added new efficiency to the grim business of grave robbery. And the growing market for pre-Columbian material worldwide has made looting a way of life for thousands of Peruvians.

"The buying and selling of illegal artifacts is this country's second-biggest export business," says Jorge Silva, an archaeologist at San Marcos University in Lima. "The biggest is the traffic in illegal drugs.

"Peru has a well-organized network here for smuggling artifacts out of the country," says Silva. "They use some of the same people and some of the same routes that the drug traffickers do. These smugglers don't bother with the airport. It's easier to drive a truckload of artifacts across the border to Colombia, Brazil or Chile. From there, the most beautiful pieces are shipped to Europe or the United States."

The third-largest country in South America has been looted with impunity for centuries—ever since Francisco Pizarro conquered the Inca in 1533, melted down their gold and silver, and sent shiploads of it home to Spain. A popular Peruvian folk song, "The Old Huaquero," celebrates a tradition of grave robbing that spans centuries.

But the wave of looting now sweeping Peru is more insidious. For precious metals, Pizarro destroyed the Inca empire. For the clay pots and feathered headdresses the conquistadors would have considered worthless, today's
Left: When his customers don’t have the cash, they sometimes pay mechanic Manuel Mora in pre-Columbian artifacts. At auctions in New York or London, a late Moche vessel like this one might net thousands of dollars. But in the village of Guadalupe, the price for this one was welding a broken axle on a tractor.

Above: Looters were the first to unearth the royal Moche tombs at Sipán, one of the richest archaeological discoveries in Peru. Once the looting was stopped, however, archaeologists made some stunning discoveries as well, including this 3-foot-wide chest decoration. The gold-plated ornament has eight curved tentacles reminiscent of an octopus, and more than 100 separate parts.

Left: Moche craftsmen made intricate designs of gold, silver and gilded copper such as this warrior figure. The 10-inch-high figure was found in a tomb at Sipán that looters didn’t destroy.

Left: An ear ornament of turquoise and gold reflects craftsmanship of artisans who lived 1,500 years ago.

Left: This 6-inch-wide gold pendant features some of the intricate handiwork typical of artifacts found in tombs at Sipán. Prominent are gem inlays over the eyes and mouth. Treasures from Sipán have turned up in a variety of places around the world in the past decade.

Photos: David Tulis, AJC Staff
Archaeologist Walter Alva braved gunfire and the insults of angry villagers to protect the ruins at Sipán from further looting. Among the most intricate treasures that Peru’s best-known archaeologist recovered in the course of his own excavations are these beads of finely formed gold spiders—with legs and webs of evenly wrought gold wire that Moche craftsmen produced more than 1,500 years ago. (David Tulis, AJC Staff)

Looters are destroying the last intact traces, not only of Inca culture, but of earlier civilizations. The cultural wealth of Peru’s past is being mercilessly mined to remedy today’s poverty.

“Because of what is being lost, these amazing New World cultures will never be as appreciated as the great civilizations of Egypt and the Middle East,” says Carol Mackey, an archaeologist at California State University, Northridge. Her excavations at Chan Chan, near Trujillo, first revealed the splendor of the pre-Columbian city whose nine walled palaces are now designated a world heritage site by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

“Archaeological sites are the only way we have to learn about these people,” says Walter Alva, Peru’s best-known archaeologist and the director of the Bruning Museum in Lambayeque. “Looters are ripping up the pages of our history. How would Americans feel if someone ripped up the Declaration of Independence?

“Once a site has been disturbed or destroyed, the context which could tell us about these people is destroyed forever,” he says. “Trees and animals may grow again, but once the knowledge from an archaeological site is lost, the story is gone forever.”

Today, the stories of these vanished people—Moche, Chimú, Paracas, Chavin—are known only by what they left behind.

Archaeologists value these artifacts and the context in which they occur—things as simple as scraps of fabric, grains of pollen or soil types—for the details they can add to the untold stories.

But private collectors and museums covet the intricate gold and turquoise adornments, charming ceramic portrait vessels cast in the likeness of real people, and flawless textiles woven in bright, geometric designs. As the popularity of their craftsmanship has increased, so have prices. Old is better than gold. Ten years ago, simple Moche portrait vessels might have fetched a few hundred dollars at auction. Today, they sell for $15,000.

Unfortunately, the most likely way to “harvest” such treasures—whether for science or for profit—is to dig up the people buried with them. And these days, when it comes to digging, archaeologists are in a minority. Whether collectors acquire an artifact legally or not, it is usually the end result of looting.

At Batán Grande, a huge site in northern Peru that in-
cludes the ruins of more than 50 pyramids, authorities have counted more than 100,000 holes—graves that looters stripped of artifacts and sold, through a network of middlemen and dealers, to private collectors in Lima and abroad. Hundreds of other coastal sites are also riddled with holes.

“Almost all of our archaeological sites have been looted,” says Alva. “Flying over Peru, you can see these huge anthills of looted sites that have been utterly destroyed.”

Alva knows firsthand what can be lost, and what it means to Peru’s history. For more than a decade, he has been at the center of a storm of archaeological intrigue that reads like the script from some yet-to-be-made Indiana Jones sequel. New chapters of the script are still being written. In places like Philadelphia, Miami, New York and Santa Fe, the stolen gold from a royal tomb of Sipán continues to surface.

Alva’s story began on Feb. 25, 1987, when a midnight call summoned him to the police station in Chiclayo for help in identifying a hoard of newly confiscated artifacts. He was stunned by what he saw: bags full of finely crafted objects, hammered gold and gilded copper ornaments made by Moche craftsmen 1,500 to 2,000 years ago. Police had seized the artifacts from looters in the nearby village of Sipán.

Alva knew they could have come only from a royal tomb the likes of which, if it were intact, would provide archaeologists with unprecedented insights into the mysterious people who inhabited the region long before the Inca.

But it was too late. In the preceding two weeks, looters tunneling into the ruins of Huaca Rajada, a cluster of pyramids near Sipán, had indeed found a royal Moche tomb. As word of the discovery spread, gold fever erupted in the village. Hundreds of people swarmed to the pyramid to grab what they could. Fights broke out over the loot. Police hurried to the village to keep order. A shootout ensued. In the melee, one of the looters was killed and several others arrested. By the time Alva got there, most of the gold was gone and the tomb was a shambles.

Once order was restored, Alva and others excavated the rest of the site to see what the looters had missed. Despite sporadic gunfire and threats to their lives, they recovered one of the richest archaeological finds in Peru’s history—a collection of Moche art and artifacts that revealed many new details about the civilization’s social order, warfare and ritual sacrifice.

The hundreds of objects they unearthed now fill several rooms at the National Museum of Anthropology and Archaeology in Lima and at the museum Alva oversees in Lambayeque. But the exhibit still has empty cases—space reserved for the missing treasures of Sipán.

"Even with all the material initially seized by the police, we have recov-
The towering adobe pyramid at Dos Cabezas, named for its two-headed profile, is yielding new evidence of the Moche culture. UCLA archaeologist Christopher Donnan, who has worked at the site since 1994, has unearthed the only Moche royal tombs found outside of Sipán. (David Tulis, AJC Staff)

erred only a fraction of what was taken,” says Alva. “So much of it has disappeared into private collections in Europe, the United States and Japan, we may never see it again.”

“Ninety percent of what was taken has found its way into private hands,” says archaeologist Christopher Donnan, a 36-year veteran of Peruvian archaeology who helped arrange funding for the Sipán excavations.

Donnan, who runs UCLA’s Moche Archive, should know. In the years since, he has tracked down and photographed most of the looted material. Despite objections from fellow archaeologists who say his dealings with looters and collectors legitimize their crimes, he wants to learn as much as possible from the scraps of information remaining.

“Most of the looted material is still in Peru, but in the coming years, there is going to be a lot of material turning up that we will know came from the looted tomb.”

Some of Sipán’s treasures are already surfacing. And as surely as the treasures saved offer fresh insights into ancient cultures, the treasures lost are providing some revealing glimpses of the workings in today’s black market for antiquities.

Ordinarily, looted artifacts are exceedingly difficult to track. Artifacts stolen from a person or institution can be identified by their previous owners, but the origin of looted pieces is known only to the looter, who is a player in the illicit traffic. Unless the looter is caught in the act, prosecution is virtually impossible. Subsequent owners can claim that the item came from an existing, and thus legal, collection. It’s up to law enforcement agents to prove otherwise.

Because the importation of objects from Sipán has been illegal in the United States almost since the first looting incident there, many of the loopholes have been plugged. The distinctive style of Sipán’s artifacts—from signature necklaces of gold and silver peanut shapes to renderings of a ritual executioner known as “the decapitator”—also makes them readily identifiable.

Even so, many of the pieces looted from Sipán were quickly smuggled out of Peru and sold in countries that, unlike the United States, do not adhere to the 1970 UNESCO convention on the protection of cultural property—the legal basis for U.S. seizures of Sipán’s errant treasures in places as diverse as Sotheby’s New York showroom and the parking lot of a Philadelphia hotel.

Last year, the FBI presented Alva with a spectacular gold backflap, a piece of ceremonial armor, which vanished in the initial frenzy of looting. FBI agents seized it in Philadelphia during a sting operation that resulted in the conviction of two Miami men and the indictment of a Panamanian consul general, who was charged with smuggling the piece into New York in a diplomatic pouch. The backflap, which had been hidden in Peru for years, was brought out only after undercover agents offered $1.6 million for it.
U.S. Customs last year returned more than 200 Peruvian artifacts—including 10 pieces from Sipán—that were discovered during a routine inspection at Miami International Airport. Agents checking a crate labeled “Peruvian handicrafts” for illegal drugs instead found $1.5 million worth of artifacts that were being transferred from a South American cargo plane to a Zurich-bound flight.

“The Miami seizure leaves no doubt in my mind that we are dealing with organized, systematic looting,” Alva says. “Those pieces, which were of the highest quality, represented nine different Peruvian cultures. It was as if they were assembled to stock a museum. It shows that entire collections are being mobilized to meet the increase in demand.”

Once again, Peru got its treasures back, but such recoveries are the exception, not the rule. “What we have recovered is probably less than 1 percent of the total traffic in Peruvian artifacts,” says Alva.

**THE GOLD TRAIL: TRACKING THE TREASURES OF SIPÁN**

It has been more than a decade since grave robbers ransacked a royal tomb near Sipán, an impoverished village in northern Peru’s fertile Lambayeque Valley. Most of the treasures of the ancient Moche civilization that vanished in that frenzy of looting in 1987 have never been recovered, but they continue to surface in some faraway places, from airports to auction houses, including:

**Santa Fe, N.M., Palace of the Governors**

Three gold Moche artifacts, two on loan to the Museum of New Mexico and one—a golden monkey head—owned outright by the museum, were seized by the FBI in November 1998 and removed from public exhibit. All three pieces, claimed by Peru, still are being held by the FBI pending a determination of ownership.

**New York, Sotheby’s showroom**

Three items featured in Sotheby’s twice-a-year auction of pre-Columbian art—a gold head bead and two turquoise and gold necklaces—were seized by the Customs Service after Peruvian authorities identified them in a Sotheby’s auction catalog and the company declined to withdraw them from sale. All items were returned to Peru in 1996.

**Philadelphia, Adam’s Mark Hotel parking lot**

A ceremonial gold Moche backflap, valued at $1.6 million, was confiscated in 1997 by FBI agents during a sting operation. Two Miami men pleaded guilty to smuggling and served nine-month sentences. A former Panamanian consul general, accused of bringing the piece into the United States in a diplomatic pouch, has been indicted and remains a fugitive. The backflap was returned to Peru in 1998.
Archaeologist Carol Mackey, who has spent much of her professional career excavating the ruins of Chan Chan, surveys the remains of the walled city, which once supported 50,000 people. The crumbling ruins of the imperial city of the Chimú empire now stand on the outskirts of Trujillo, within sight of the city’s airport.

(David Tulis, AJC Staff)

The case of the smuggled artifacts in Miami underscores why the rate of successful prosecutions is so low. Although the shipment bore an address in Switzerland, whose liberal export and import regulations make it a favorite point for the laundering of illicit antiquities, Swiss police declined to take action. And Peruvian authorities have never located the person in Lima whose return address was on the crate.

But Alva, who helped U.S. Customs identify the artifacts, says he thinks the collection was assembled in Lima by a wealthy art dealer, Raúl Apesteguía, who had previously served prison time for violations of Peruvian antiquities laws.

Three months after the customs seizure in Miami, Apesteguía was shot and killed by masked gunmen at his townhouse in Lima. The gunmen boldly carted off boxes of pre-Columbian artifacts while neighbors watched. Peruvian police have made no arrests in that case either, although local customs agents did intercept some of the stolen artifacts at Lima International Airport.

Lima’s high-end art dealers, however, are merely the apex of a network of buyers, sellers and diggers that reaches deep into Peru’s impoverished countryside.

“Looting is a way of life for many people here, and the pace of it is definitely accelerating,” says Dillehay, who often encounters grave robbers in the course of his survey work. “It’s not clandestine like it used to be. On many days, we find them out here digging in broad daylight.”

To make his point, Dillehay steers his dust-covered Jeep Cherokee toward the ruins of a crumbling 800-year-old pyramid, the Huaca Corbacho, which rises starkly out of the surrounding sugar cane fields. As he pulls up, three looters scamper out of freshly dug holes and flee across a landscape riddled with foxhole-sized pits.

“There they go,” he says, pointing. “Actually, it’s a good thing that they’re running. The ones that are armed usually don’t run.”

Although looting is usually conducted by small groups of huaqueros, Dillehay says, the nearby village of Cayalti is home to something new in Peru’s artifact trade—a looters syndicate, with as many as 400 individuals who work assigned territories, share equipment and swap information about their discoveries.

“When sugar prices drop and they need money, the men come out here and dig like hell,” says Dillehay. “This site has been totally butchered. And every hillside in the valley is being destroyed just like this.”

Mackey, who has worked for 20 years in Peru, has watched her own excavations pillaged by looters. Sometimes they wait until archaeologists are gone for the season. Sometimes they come at night. And sometimes they don’t wait.
“The presence of archaeologists only makes looters more interested,” she says. “They come like pickpockets to a fair. There are times we’ve been on one side of a site working while looters are digging on the other side.

“Most people look on looting as a kind of national lottery. Everyone wants to strike it rich. Discoveries like Sipán keep the dream alive.”

Any riches, however, seldom trickle down to the local level. In his auto repair shop in Guadalupe, just off the Pan American Highway, mechanic Manuel Mora offers a short course in the economics of illicit artifacts as he leads visitors to a side room, furnished with a simple cot and shelves of motor oil boxes.

The boxes contain museum-quality ceramics that he accepts as barter when his customers have no money. Mora’s pots aren’t for sale, but he occasionally gives them to family members as wedding or birthday gifts.

Unwrapping crumpled newspapers, he holds up a piece of Moche pottery adorned with a bird and serpent. Pots like it sell for $5,000 or more at U.S. auctions. He received it in exchange for welding an axle on a tractor.

His prized possession is a copper tumi, a ceremonial knife that would easily bring $10,000 at auction. He received it from the local police for repairing their patrol car.

“At night, they take prisoners from the jail and drive them out to the ruins,” he explains. “They make them dig. When they find something, the police keep what they find and use it for their own needs.”

Even under ideal conditions, Peruvian authorities acknowledge that putting a stop to looting would be a monumental task. In reality, even slowing the pace has proved to be impossible—a reality that Peru tacitly recognizes every July 28, when entire families may celebrate Peruvian independence day with a trip to the country for a picnic, a little looting, and another chance to strike it rich—assured that the police will be looking the other way.

“The problem is immense,” says Miguel Pazos Rivera, adviser to the director of the National Institute of Culture, the arm of the government responsible for protecting Peru’s cultural resources. “We have over 100,000 archaeological sites in Peru that we know of. But only one-third of the country has even been surveyed.

“Very little is done to control looting,” he says. “We don’t have the money or the manpower to deal with it. And lately we seem to be moving in the wrong direction.”

Still struggling to recover economically after a decade of guerrilla warfare waged by the Sendero Luminoso and Túpac Amaru, President Alberto Fujimori’s government has been scaling back the protection of Peru’s archaeological riches.

The cultural institute’s staff has been cut by more than half. And in 1998, a series of presidential decrees undermined Peru’s 1926 law that declared all cultural objects part of the national patrimony. By law, landowners now retain rights to anything, including ruins and artifacts, found on their property—just as they do in the United States.

“Our laws are getting more permissive,” says María Ofelia Cerro, one of the few advocates for archaeological protection in the Peruvian Congress. “There is no control anymore. It is so open now that sometimes when I’m stuck in traffic, I have people come up to the car and try to sell me beautiful pieces.”

But she says Peru will never be able to halt traffic in illicit antiquities by itself.

“I understand the looters,” she says. “If you can’t eat, you have to sell something to make money. But the rest of the world must recognize that it is the collectors—especially those in Europe, Japan and the United States—who are the real looters. They create the demand. They are feeding the trend. And the result is that the tragic loss of our heritage is increasing.”
Peru’s Pre-Columbian Cultures

Peru is the cradle of civilization in South America. Vast empires with roads, aqueducts and carefully planned major cities rose and fell there for thousands of years. But unlike the great civilizations of Egypt and Mesopotamia, they left no written record, so people know them today only by the ruins of their cities and the works of art they left behind. Among the best-known cultures of ancient Peru:

Chavin
1900 B.C. to 900 B.C.
Northern and Central Coast and Highlands

The progenitors of Peruvian high culture, they were among the first to build large ceremonial centers, notably Chavin de Huántar in the central Andes. They introduced advances in textiles and metallurgy—gold, silver and copper.

Paracas
1300 B.C. to A.D. 200
South Coast

Renowned for their superb weaving and pottery, they built a large burial tomb, or necropolis, on the Paracas Peninsula, containing the mumified remains of hundreds of people and the most coveted textiles in all of Peruvian antiquity.

Nazca
A.D. 200 to A.D. 800
South Coast

They left little in the way of architecture, but made up for it with the gigantic precise figures and geometric designs they drew on the Nazca plain—known as Nazca lines. Among them: a 270-foot monkey and a condor with a 400-foot wingspan.

Moche
A.D. 100 to A.D. 800
North Coast

Best-known for their artistic genius—exquisite gold and silver ornaments and stunningly lifelike portrait vases—they also built a powerful empire with canals and cities dominated by adobe pyramids. Huaca del Sol, towering 135 feet above the desert, was built with 140 million adobe bricks, making it the largest structure in pre-Columbian America.
**Chimú**

**A.D. 1000 to A.D. 1550**  
North Coast

Successors to the Moche, they built on the tradition of art and urban development with several large walled cities on the north coast. The capital, Chan Chan, was built in 1300. By the time the Spanish arrived in Peru in the 1500s, Chan Chan's population was about 50,000 and it covered 10 square miles.

**Chachapoya**

**A.D. 800 to A.D. 1450**  
Northeastern Slopes of the Andes

The "cloud people" of the upper Amazon basin farmed terraced hillsides and built stone citadels on the mountaintops, including what many consider to be Peru's most magnificent—and least-known—"lost city," the fortress at Kuelap, with its 75-foot-high stone walls.

**Inca**

**A.D. 1200 to A.D. 1550**  
Most of Peru and Parts of Ecuador, Bolivia and Chile

Starting as a small aristocracy near the Andean city of Cuzco, the Inca quickly came to dominate much of Peru, thanks to their administrative skills, military might and a 13,000-mile system of roads. They built the famous mountaintop city of Machu Picchu, and elevated craftsmanship of precious metals, textiles and ceramic to a fine art. They declined swiftly after the Spanish captured Cuzco in 1533.

*Jerome Thompson, AJC Staff*
Grave Robbers Pursue Riches in Looting of Ancient Tombs

Leimebamba, Peru

Lázaro the looter hardly looks the part of a grave robber. He is clean-cut, slightly built for his 22 years, still struggling to grow a manly mustache. He picks nervously at a beer bottle label as he recounts the misdeeds that have earned him a rare distinction in Peru’s 400-year struggle to protect its cultural heritage.

Since the time of the conquistadors, countless thousands of people, rich and poor, Peruvian and foreigners, have looted the country’s archaeological treasures with impunity. Unlike most of them, Lázaro Mestanza got caught.

Sitting in the open-air courtyard of a house on Jirón de Verdad—the Street of Truth—he fidgets as he talks, discomfited as much by gringos’ questions as by the presence, in an adjoining room, of the 200 mummies that now bear silent testimony to the frenzy of destruction Mestanza and his friends unleashed on their centuries-old tombs.

Under the stern, watchful eye of the mummies’ current custodian, archaeologist Adriana von Hagen, Mestanza and his companion in crime, Miguel Huaman, 21, haltingly tell the story of what they now call the “miserly mummies.”

It began innocently enough one November afternoon in 1996, when Mestanza and a friend, taking a break from their chores on a ranch along the lake, glanced across the waters of Laguna de los Cóndores and saw something they had never noticed before.

“We were going down to go fishing when I looked up high on the cliffs and saw what looked like a window and a wall with red paint,” says Mestanza. “We wondered what it could be, so early the next Sunday three of us decided to climb up and see.”

A few days later, they used machetes to hack a trail up the side of the limestone cliffs after reaching the far side of the lake. Five hours of scrambling through the cloud forest vegetation and one waterfall later, they found what looked like “a little house.”

The field hands had discovered what most archaeologists only dream about. They had stumbled upon an undisturbed chullpa, a stone and wood mausoleum built by the Chachapoya, a pre-Inca culture that flourished along the eastern slopes of the Andes 1,000 years ago.

Today, so little is known of these so-called “lost warriors of the clouds” that they are scarcely mentioned in accounts of Peru’s ancient civilizations.

To reach the tombs, Mestanza and his friends had to lower themselves by ropes to a narrow ledge where the tombs were protected by overhanging rocks. The six-room structure they encountered was overgrown with vegetation, but in one open window, a lone bundled mummy—painted with a simple face—stood guard.

Inside, undisturbed since pre-Columbian times, lay the remains of more than 400 men, women and children—
Below: As Peru’s huaqueros grow bolder, looting is no longer just a clandestine, nighttime activity. In broad daylight at Huaca Corbacho in the Zaña Valley, two grave robbers, one carrying a shovel, flee over the top of a hill at the approach of archaeologists. Behind them they leave a half-dozen freshly dug pits in the midst of hundreds that make the site one of the most heavily looted areas in Peru. (David Tulis, AJC Staff)

Above: In a fresh dig site in the ancient settlement of San José de Morro, archaeologists unearth pots, human remains, sacrificial animal bones and other items of everyday life. In their quest for gold and treasures, looters often destroy such sites, which can reveal much to archaeologists about the ancient people who left them. (David Tulis, AJC Staff)

Above: Looters Lázaro Mestanza and Miguel Huaman are outflanked by some of the “miserly mummies” that they tossed out of a cliffside mausoleum at Laguna de los Cóndores, Peru, in an ill-fated search for salable artifacts. The mummies are now safely stored in a house in nearby Leimebamba. Mestanza and Huaman, who work as field hands in Peru’s Amazonas province, were each fined the equivalent of a year’s wages. (David Tulis, AJC Staff)
shroud-wrapped skeletons in wooden coffins, tightly bundled mummies with painted faces and embroidery—and thousands of brightly colored textiles, decorated ceramics and gourds, wooden idols, flutes and feathered headdresses.

“It’s truly incredible to think that there could be a site like that with such amazing preservation,” says von Hagen, whose crusade to save the mummies has made her known throughout the town as “the doctor Adriana.”

“This was probably the biggest—and richest—pre-Inca discovery ever made in this part of Peru.”

When they pushed their way into the tombs that Sunday, however, Mestanza and his friends had riches of a different kind in mind.

“We took six pots that first day and wrapped them in plastic and carried them home,” he says. “They were pretty. We planned to sell them, but we were afraid the patron, the big boss, would take them away, so we hid them before we got back to the ranch.”

Two weeks later, with visions of silver and gold dancing in their heads, they returned to the cliffside tombs to begin ransacking them in earnest.

“We started cutting the heads of the mummies off with machetes to see what was inside,” Mestanza recalls. But there was no silver. No gold.

“We cut open 10 mummies or so and we didn’t find a thing,” he explains. “When we realized we weren’t going to find anything valuable inside them, we started throwing them over the cliff. Eventually we just gave up on the mummies and took more pots.”

To the ranch hands, the sophisticated, brilliantly colored textiles were mere rags to be discarded. Knotted cords—intricately knotted strings called quipus, which archaeologists say are the closest things to written language that such cultures had—were merely scraps with no meaning.

Despite their pique over the “miserly mummies,” Mestanza and his companions returned to the tombs several more times, deciding that the brightly painted clay pots they took would at least provide some modest return for their efforts.

In Celendin, four hours away by bus, they sold several pieces for $3 each—more than twice what they were paid for a day’s work on the ranch. Similar ceramics routinely sell for several thousand dollars at auction in the United States and Europe.

As the looters’ secret hoard of pots grew, however, word of the discovery began to leak. Angered by their decep-
tions, their employer, as they had feared, confiscated the pots. Believing that he intended to sell them himself, Mestanza went to the police—and promptly got himself and his friends arrested for looting Peru’s cultural heritage.

Each of the young men who participated in the looting was fined the equivalent of a year’s wages for field hands in Peru’s Amazonas province.

No action was ever taken against their employer, who eventually surrendered the artifacts, but as word of the discovery reached the outside world, the problems at Laguna de los Cóndores snowballed.

“People flocked to the site,” says von Hagen. “It didn’t matter that it’s a two-day drive from the coast over treacherous mountain roads just to get here to Leimebamba. It didn’t matter that it’s still a 10-hour trip by mule from here to the Laguna. People came anyway. There were hundreds of them. They churned through the site looking for anything of value. We’ll never know what they carried off. It was impossible to control.”

In desperation, von Hagen and an archaeologist friend formed a private foundation and set out to rescue what was left of the site’s ancient treasures. One by one they packed the mummies and their belongings on mules and brought them to town.

For the moment, von Hagen’s two-story home doubles as a storage vault for the mummified remains and a laboratory for their preservation and study. In time, she hopes, the new foundation will build a proper museum, so that Leimebamba—now served by a single-lane road, three telephones and electrical power for only six hours a day—will have a legitimate tourist attraction.

“It’s tragic to think what was lost,” she says. “We know from what people left behind that these textiles are the most sophisticated ever produced during this period in this part of Peru.

“We will learn a lot from them, but it could have been so much more.”
Fresh excavations at Huaca de la Luna, one of Peru's nationally protected archaeological ruins, are uncovering colorful painted walls that line the sloping ramp leading to the top of the pyramid. The meager budget for maintenance and archaeological studies at the site is funded entirely from the fee 35,000 visitors a year pay to visit the ruins. (David Tulis, AJC Staff)

Among the items from José Casinelli's private collection of pottery is this piece (right), believed to date from A.D. 200. (David Tulis, AJC Staff)

Not all of Peru's finest antiquities are in public museums. In Trujillo, a place to see good examples is the basement of the Mobil station on Avenida Nicolás de Pierola, where José Casinelli keeps his private collection of pottery (below) from a half-dozen pre-Columbian cultures. (David Tulis, AJC Staff)
Museum’s Gold Would Dazzle Even Midas

Lima, Peru

Miguel Mujica Gallo discovered his life’s passion at the age of 17. While most teenage boys from Peru’s wealthiest families dreamed of horses and beautiful women, young Miguel decided all that glittered really was gold.

For more than 70 years, he has unrelentingly pursued his passion. Since he began collecting pre-Columbian gold in the 1920s, Mujica has assembled one of the largest privately owned collections of its kind in the Western world—more than 10,000 exquisitely crafted pieces of Peruvian gold, virtually all of it acquired, in person, from looters, grave robbers and the middlemen who sell the booty of Peru’s huaqueros.

Now frail and in failing health at the age of 89, Miguel Mujica is seldom seen in public, but his heirs say he can still drive a shrewd bargain when he sees a piece he wants for his family-owned Gold Museum, which is housed in a vast, closely guarded basement vault in the family’s walled compound on the outskirts of Lima. No public museum in the country comes close to rivaling the size and scope of the Mujica gold collection.

“At first, the old man may feign disinterest in the prof­fered piece of gold. With thousands of museum-quality artifacts in his collection, he can afford to be choosy. But his eye is as keen as the day when, as a teenager, he bought one of his first pieces—a crescent-shaped ceremonial knife, a tumi, that is now insured for more than $1 million.

“The collection is so large now that he only buys choice, top-quality pieces,” says the younger Mujica, who, as his father has aged, has assumed day-to-day responsibilities for the museum and the family foundation that runs it. “They always ask a lot, but he always gets them down. Once a deal is struck, he pays cash.”

Seventy years of such hard-nosed bargaining with looters has produced a collection worth tens of millions of
Above: Miguel Mujica Gallo spent his life buying gold from Peru’s looters. With 10,000 gold pieces on display in the private museum behind the walls of his family compound, he clearly had a Midas-like touch for collecting. But archaeologists say the lack of information about the objects and where they were found makes the world-class collection virtually useless for the study of Peru’s ancient cultures.

Photos: David Tulis, AJC Staff

Right: Gold and silver beads in the shape of human heads are among the many artifacts at Miguel Mujica Gallo’s Gold Museum. In sheer size and scope, the Mujica collection surpasses any in Peru’s public museums.

Left: An Inca head-dress, made of gold medallions, occupies a prominent position in Lima’s privately owned Gold Museum, but the museum’s archival system has deteriorated to the point that many priceless artifacts are misnumbered or have no accompanying identification at all.
dollars. Hundreds of glass cases and cabinets display prehistoric craftsmanship that spans 3,000 years of history and a dozen cultures—holdings that are more extensive than those in all of the country’s public museums combined.

Gold isn’t the only thing Miguel Mujica has collected during his lifetime. Other buildings in the family compound house an eye-popping collection of more than 2,000 pre-Columbian textiles—and a museum-class collection of military regalia that includes everything from medieval suits of armor to Simón Bolívar’s silver sword.

But archaeologists say Mujica’s unquenchable appetite for pre-Columbian gold—and that of others like him—has devastated important chapters of Peru’s prehistory.

“Eighty percent of the authentic pieces in the Mujica Gold Museum have been hauled out of a place on the north coast of Peru called Batán Grande,” says Izumi Shimada, a Southern Illinois University anthropologist who has spent two decades studying the pre-Inca civilization there—a culture that built a complex of at least 50 adobe pyramids and produced gold pieces of unrivaled craftsmanship.

“We will never know as much as we could about these people because Batán Grande has been looted so heavily and so repeatedly,” he says. “I personally have counted over 100,000 looters’ pits over a 20-square-mile area—and there are hundreds of trenches that have been dug with front-end loaders.”

That so much of Peru’s archaeological heritage should wind up so firmly in private hands is a consequence of the country’s often incomprehensible, frequently inconsistent, approach to the protection of its cultural treasures.

Theft or destruction of what Peru calls the “national patrimony,” anything deemed to be part of its cultural heritage, has been considered illegal since 1926—but private collections of artifacts, no matter how lavish, are widely and openly tolerated. In theory, the artifacts still belong to Peru. In practice, the owner need only register them with the government to retain possession. The export of artifacts is expressly forbidden, but those laws, which often require the participation of foreign law enforcement agencies, are unevenly enforced.

Like his father, Pedro Mujica insists that the family’s gold collection will never be turned over to the government. As the elder Mujica, now 89, scales back his lifelong passion for collecting, his son plans to continue the family tradition of driving a hard bargain in acquiring gold artifacts for the museum. (David Tulis, AJC Staff)
Below: Most of Peru’s archaeological sites have yet to be discovered, at least by professional archaeologists. As known sites are lost to looting, archaeologists such as John Warner of the University of Kentucky are scouring the country for signs—a few pot shards or other hints of occupation presence—that will enable them to get a clearer picture of ancient humanity. (David Tulis, AJC Staff)

Left: Brightly painted reliefs like this ferocious deity—complete with fangs, double ears and snakes for hair—decorate the interior of Huaca de la Luna, which was part of a double pyramid complex that served as the capital of the Moche empire. In places, looters have used power saws to cut decorated panels out of the wall. Portions of the pyramid complex still show signs of looting by Spanish colonists. (David Tulis, AJC Staff)

Right: All that remains. A skull and shattered pottery at the ruins of Pacatnamu show what Peruvian looters left behind. (David Tulis, AJC Staff)

If the gold itself were the only thing of value, it would not really be lost. The collection has been open for public viewing since 1966, when friends convinced Miguel Mujica that hoarding such artifacts for his private enjoyment was selfish.

Today, thanks to traveling exhibits, portions of the gold collection have been seen on five continents. The permanent collection is one of Lima’s most popular tourist attractions, although the $5 admission fee—stiff by Peruvian standards—means that more than 90 percent of the visitors are foreigners.
Visitors to the museum inevitably marvel at the quantity and variety of gold artifacts crafted by Peru's prehistoric people. Pedro Mujica's personal favorite is an elaborate gilded human skull with rose quartz inlays in place of teeth.

But the dazzling array of priceless artifacts affords no opportunity for anyone to learn anything about the people who produced the objects, how they did it, or why. The museum employs not a single archaeologist to catalog or interpret the objects that Mujica spent a lifetime assembling. There are no plaques to explain where the pieces came from or their significance. In the absence of interpretation, the countless cases of pre-Columbian gold bear an uncanny resemblance to Mujica’s big-game trophy room.

And Pedro Mujica concedes that even the catalog of reference numbers that museum employees once used to identify his father’s acquisitions has fallen into disuse. Some items are simply not numbered at all.

“My father knows what all these pieces are, but he has never written it down on paper,” he says with regret. “But all that information is going to be lost when he is gone.”

In the absence of interpretation, the countless cases of pre-Columbian gold bear an uncanny resemblance to Mujica’s big-game trophy room.

**Antiquities Under Siege**

**Egypt**

The great Cheops pyramid at Giza has been reopened after a yearlong effort to repair the damage done by tourists. The Egyptian government has mended cracks, removed graffiti, restored wall paintings and arrested the damage caused by excessive humidity and by thousands of visitors trooping through the 451-foot-high pyramid.

The repairs mark the second time in six years that Egypt has had to close the pyramid to tourists. To prevent further damage to the 4,600-year-old structure, authorities will limit the number of people who can tour the pyramid to 300 a day.

**Cambodia**

Looters have ransacked four temples in Cambodia’s ancient Angkor complex in recent weeks. At least 10 people, including two police officers, have been arrested for removing statue heads and a bas-relief carving of an elephant from the 800-year-old stone temples.

The latest wave of destruction—believed to be part of an international “loot-to-order” syndicate that operates out of Thailand—occurred despite efforts by more than 400 Cambodian police to patrol the sprawling temple complex, which includes Angkor Wat, one of the world’s premier cultural monuments.
Utah

Looters broke through a locked iron gate that authorities had erected to protect a cave near Wendover, Utah, that is thought to hold evidence of the earliest human habitation in the state. The intruders dug at least one hole in the floor of Juke Box Cave and expanded another hole dug before the mouth of the cave was barred two years ago.

It is the second attempt at breaking into a sealed prehistoric cave in western Utah’s Danger Cave State Park, which borders the Bonneville Salt Flats. In 1997, vandals pried apart iron bars in an effort to enter another cave, one of several that archaeologists believe may contain evidence of human presence going back as long as 13,000 years.

Cyprus

The systematic looting of Cypriot antiquities has prompted the United States to impose an emergency import ban on Byzantine ecclesiastical and ritual objects from Cyprus. The ban covers a wide range of 4th- through 15th-century bronze, silver, gold and ivory objects, which have been stolen in increasing numbers from archaeological sites and churches on the island nation.

The U.S. action comes on the heels of an eight-month sting investigation by German police that resulted in the seizure of $40 million worth of smuggled Cypriot frescoes, artifacts and religious objects. The enterprise was part of a major looting operation that authorities believe may have smuggled as many as 15,000 to 20,000 objects out of Cyprus in the past decade.

The United States imposed a similar emergency ban on pre-Columbian artifacts from Nicaragua. Earlier import bans cover ancient artifacts from Guatemala, El Salvador, Peru, Canada and Mali.

Syria

Canadian Customs is returning to Syria a priceless set of 1,500-year-old mosaics that had been smuggled into Canada by at least three different routes, most recently in the back of a truck crossing the Canadian border last year at Champlain, N.Y.

At least 10 of the multihued limestone and glass panels, which were looted from the 6th-century city of Aleppo in northern Syria, are still missing and are presumed to have been sold on the black market. Syria is planning to display the 8-by-12-foot panels in a new museum. A brief display of the mosaics in a Montreal museum this year drew large crowds—and one museum-goer who was stopped by authorities when he attempted to make off with the corner of one of the mosaics.
Part 2
Buying, Selling, Stealing History

The international market for artifacts and ancient art and its impact on archaeological resources.

September 19, 1999
History for Sale

History, like everything, has its price—and pipers who must be paid.

Hedge fund manager Michael Steinhardt paid $1.2 million for a 2,400-year-old Greek bowl and lost it when U.S. Customs agents seized it from his Fifth Avenue home in Manhattan.

America’s Cup skipper Bill Koch paid $2 million for a collection of ancient coins and gave them up this year when Turkey sued to get them back.

The prices for pieces of the past hawked on the Internet are less lofty, but for many experts in ancient culture, they are no less problematic.

In spirited bidding last week, eBay buyers paid $1,500 for a 15th-century Chinese bronze and $1,331 for a pre-Columbian Colima ceramic dog from Mexico.

Over at Amazon.com’s auction site, a 4-foot-high pre-Columbian limestone statue, currently on loan to the Trout Gallery in Carlisle, Pa., with a minimum bid of $400,000, didn’t get a nibble. Neither did the human skull from Pompeii ($25,000 asked) that an anonymous California seller offered in July.

A year ago, such items would have been available only in big-city galleries and lushly illustrated catalogs published by dealers in ancient art. Now, hundreds of sites on the Internet offer everything from Chinese bronzes selling for six figures to arrowheads from Georgia that fetch a few dollars.

Are they genuine or fake? Legal or illicit? Ripoffs or real steals?

In a market where “Let the buyer beware” has always been sound advice, the spread of antiquities sales into the frontiers of cyberspace is stirring concerns that go beyond the traditional buyers’ caveat.

“The Internet has brought the artifact market into everybody’s living room,” says Phil Young, special agent for the National Park Service, the lead enforcement agency for U.S. cultural property laws. “The market is the driving force behind looting. And this trend makes the access to artifacts, legal and illegal, much easier.”
The golden phiale of Achyris may soon be winging its way home to Italy—the last leg of a decade-long odyssey that has spanned the cultural divide between an antiquities smuggling ring in rural Sicily and the Fifth Avenue apartment of a Wall Street financier.

Four years after U.S. Customs agents seized the 2,400-year-old bowl from the home of hedge fund manager Michael Steinhardt, a U.S. appellate court has affirmed that the 24-karat treasure was illegally imported into the United States.

The courts say Italy, not Steinhardt, is the rightful owner. Antiquities dealers say the decision could cripple the thriving trade in ancient art. Archaeologists say it's a milestone in the effort to protect the world's eroding cultural heritage. Italy just hopes the phiale's return will send a message to collectors as old as antiquity itself: Let the buyer beware.

Steinhardt's star status on Wall Street and the $1.2 million price he paid for the phiale guaranteed a high profile for the case from the beginning. But in a legal arena where art and archaeology are often at loggerheads, the case has become a cause célèbre for another reason. The shallow bowl, which once held ancient Greeks' offerings to the gods, has served up a rare, revealing glimpse of the international antiquities market in action.

Every year, shipping crates and suitcases full of ancient art and artifacts—large and small, legal and illegal—spill across the porous borders of the world: Turkish icons to Germany; Cambodian temple reliefs to Thailand; Malian terra-cotta figurines to New York; Native American artifacts to Tokyo.

For a host of reasons—fear of theft, fear of taxes, fear of publicity—even legitimate transactions in the world of ancient art are often very private affairs. Because the traffic in illicit antiquities is even more secretive, determining its scope is like the proverbial blind man trying to guess the shape of an elephant by touching only one part of it.

Italy, which has been waging an aggressive war against the illegal antiquities trade, has seized 122,000 pieces of art and artifacts in the past five years, but authorities don't know how many got away. Mexico last year recovered 10,000 artifacts stolen from its archaeological sites, but acknowledges that the seizures are a fraction of the total. In America, the National Park Service, the lead agency for archaeological protection, spends more than $3 million a year on enforcement, but manages to arrest someone in only about 10 percent of the 800 looting incidents each year on federal lands.

Interpol, the international police agency, says the global market in looted and stolen antiquities ranges from $4 billion to $5 billion a year. That puts the smuggling of antiquities on a par with illegal arms, and second only to international traffic in narcotics.

"With its clandestine deals, code of silence, smuggling networks, laundered titles and phony export licenses, the antiquities trade has more in common with drug trafficking and organized crime than with most legitimate enterprises," says Ricardo Elia, a Boston University archaeologist who studies the trade of illicit artifacts. "The difference—and the problem for law enforcement—is that drugs are illegal all the time. Artifacts may be illegal when they are dug up..."
Who owns the 2,400-year-old bowl from Italy? Not the Wall Street broker who paid $1.2 million, says U.S. Customs.

Giacomo Manganaro, a professor of ancient history in Sicily, and Vincenzo Cammarata, a Sicilian coin dealer, were part of a major looting and smuggling ring with ties to the Mafia. A raid by Italy’s art theft squad netted six alleged conspirators and 30,000 Phoenician, Greek and Roman artifacts, valued at $35 million.

Italian investigators say Manganaro, who was asked to authenticate the bowl in 1980, was told that it had been dug up near Caltavuturo, Sicily, by an electric utility crew. An inscription along the edge of the bowl elaborately decorated with concentric rings of acorns, beechnuts and honeybees is written in a dialect of Doric Greek spoken in the colonies of ancient Sicily.

But like most looted antiquities, the origins of the phiale—and clues about the people who used it—will probably always be a mystery. And that, archaeologists say, is a loss that transcends whatever monetary value the market assigns to it. The cumulative loss to history, however, must be multiplied by the thousands of illicit artifacts entering the market each year.

### The Phiale of Achyris

The golden drinking vessel, or phiale (pronounced fee-AH-lee), is inscribed with the name Achyris in an ancient Greek dialect.

**Origin:** Hellenistic Italy (in Sicily), fourth century B.C.

**Composition:** 99 percent pure gold.

**Weight:** 2.2 pounds.

**Diameter:** 9 inches.

**Decoration:**

- Three rings of 36 acorns and one ring of beechnuts.
- The outer ring is alternating acorns and bees, symbolizing the Earth’s “victual in plenty.” Large knob in the center represents the navel of the Earth.

**Use:** Ceremonial plate, used for offerings to the gods.
What is known is that Cammarata acquired the phiale from the local antique dealer, paying for it with $20,000 worth of artworks. Eventually, he showed a photo of it to Swiss art dealer William Veres. Veres brought the bowl to the attention of Robert Haber, an American art dealer. And Haber told Steinhardt it was for sale.

Steinhardt, with Haber as intermediary, offered $1.2 million for the bowl, plus Haber’s $162,000 commission. A one-page “terms of the sale” specified that Manganaro, the Sicilian professor, would provide a letter stating that he had seen the phiale 15 years earlier in Switzerland.

The first half of the payment was wired to Veres’ bank account on Dec. 6, 1991. From that point, things moved swiftly. Four days later, Haber flew from New York to Zurich, and then drove across the Alps to Lugano, Switzerland, near the Italian border. On Dec. 12, he took possession of the bowl from Veres, who by then had paid the Sicilians $90,000 for it.

With the phiale in his luggage, Haber retraced his route—Lugano to Zurich to New York. On arrival at Kennedy International Airport on Dec. 13, the phiale was declared as “one gold bowl... value $250,000.” Because the country of origin was listed as Switzerland, which does not bar the export of antiquities, he wasn’t challenged.

Steinhardt, who got the Metropolitan Museum of Art to authenticate the bowl, insists that he knew only that the seller was “a Sicilian coin dealer.”

“Steinhardt was eager to know as little as possible about the source of the phiale,” says Assistant U.S. Attorney Evan Barr, who prosecuted the case. “Steinhardt’s lack of interest in the particulars of the transaction is all the more disturbing in light of his sophistication in dealing with the art market, having purchased millions of dollars worth of antiquities, paintings and other works of art from Haber and other dealers.”

Until the Italian government learned about the phiale in the 1990s, apparently from Sicilian sources, it was displayed prominently in Steinhardt’s apartment. Then, in 1995, U.S. Customs agents seized it and took it to the New York Customs vault, where it has been ever since.

Aside from its compelling chronology, the Steinhardt case underscores several key aspects of the global antiquities market:

- Illicitly obtained antiquities are seldom detected entering the United States. “We only examine 10 percent of the passengers and cargo coming into New York,” says U.S. Customs Special Agent in Charge John Varrone. “Most of the material we seize is recovered only after it’s in this country, often when someone reports seeing something in a catalog or a display room.” Even though two-thirds of the art imported into the United States comes through New York, customs officials there usually report only two or three such seizures a year.

- Switzerland is to the antiquities trade what the Cayman Islands are to drug money. “It’s well-known that Switzerland is a hub for both the legal and illegal activity in the antiquities market,” says Andrea Rascher, deputy director of the Swiss Office for Culture, the agency that promotes and protects cultural heritage. “It’s like money laundering. Because we have no import or export restrictions, cultural goods are frequently brought to Switzerland and allowed to cool down for a few years in Geneva or Zurich. Storage in duty-free ports makes it easy to prevent their discovery. Then it’s off to New York, London or Japan.”

- When it comes to black market antiquities, rewards seldom accrue to the finder. Although Steinhardt paid $1.2 million for the phiale, the money trail began when it sold in Italy for a mere $20,000. “The simple truth of the illicit
Like the phiale, most of the ancient art in the world today was once someone’s booty. The Romans sacked Greece. The Spanish pillaged Mexico. The British plundered Nigeria.

The trade in antiquities is that there are large sums of money to be made, more than by legitimate trading, and that very little of the proceeds ever reaches the original funders,” says Neil Brodie of the University of Cambridge’s Illicit Antiquities Research Centre in England, which monitors the antiquities market.

As highly charged as the Steinhardt case has been, the storm of controversy over its implications for the global trade in antiquities is only beginning.

New York art dealers and the American Association of Museums, which entered the case on Steinhardt’s side, view Italy’s actions as a threat not only to the art market, but to the holdings of many major museums.

“We had no interest in helping Mr. Steinhardt,” says Edward Able, association president. “We abhor the looting and the illegal export of cultural material, but we didn’t want to see a precedent set that could permit the looting of material now held in American museums.” Able says Italy never proved that the phiale was stolen.

Although reputable collectors shun stolen art, the Steinhardt ruling tends to support the premise that, in countries where buried artifacts are considered the nation’s cultural property, anything dug up illegally can be considered stolen, too. Since 1939, the unauthorized export of Italian antiquities has been illegal. Greece, Turkey, Egypt and dozens of other countries have similar laws.

Because U.S. common law holds that no buyer can acquire valid title to stolen property, the Steinhardt case has shaken up the art world. Applied across the board, it could put many private collections at risk. Italy is considering legal action to recover a collection of Sicilian silver held by the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Given the high cost of suing—and the difficulty in proving that, say, a Greek bowl such as the phiale really did come from Italy—source countries aren’t likely to become wholesale raiders of the lost arts.

But the Archaeological Institute of America, the nation’s leading organization of professional archaeologists, which entered the Steinhardt case on the side of the U.S. and Italian governments, says the decision could help deter the epidemic of looting—spurred by market demand—that is destroying many archaeological sites before they can be studied.

At the moment, the dispute doesn’t leave much room for middle ground.

A Price-Driven International Market

Like the phiale, most of the ancient art in the world today was once someone’s booty. Looting was decried in an ancient Egyptian papyrus in 134 B.C. The Romans sacked Greece. The Spanish pillaged Mexico. The British plundered Nigeria.

Only in this century, however, have legions of collectors created a price-driven international market for such goods. And only recently have looted countries become concerned about the way in which their own cultures have been scattered across the globe.

“At times when some of the world’s important works of art were threatened, collectors have saved them so they could be appreciated by future generations,” says Fred Schultz, owner of a prominent New York gallery and president of the National Association of Dealers in Ancient, Oriental and Primitive Art. “All we are doing is rescuing the bits of a country’s culture that fall by the wayside.

“There is no doubt that looters are destroying the history of some countries, but collectors are not responsible for the looting. It is looters who are responsible. Countries that don’t
1. Sometime around 1980, utility crews working around an ancient Greek settlement near Catania, Sicily, are thought to have unearthed the 2,400-year-old gold bowl, which eventually found its way into the hands of a Sicilian coin dealer.

2. In 1991, the phiale was sold to a Swiss art dealer, who arranged to get it across the border to Lugano, Switzerland, where it was conveyed to a New York art dealer acting for U.S. financier Michael Steinhardt, who paid $1.2 million for it.

3. From Zurich, the bowl was flown to New York, authenticated by the Metropolitan Museum of Art and displayed in Steinhardt's Fifth Avenue apartment for several years until it was seized by U.S. Customs agents in 1995.

Maps: Elizabeth Landt, AJC Staff
enforce their own laws are responsible.”

But antiquities are also subject to the law of supply and demand. And because, in a world of 6 billion people, no one is making new antiquities, increased demand inevitably creates a need for more material.

“Auction houses are doing more business every year,” says DePaul University law professor Patty Gerstenblith, editor of the International Journal of Cultural Property, which reviews cultural law and policy issues. “If you accept that the number of existing collections is limited, you have to accept that much of what is being bought and sold on the market is new—and therefore illegal.”

Art dealers and archaeologists may differ about the cause of the problem, but the consequences are readily visible in the moonscapes of looters’ pits, ransacked tombs and defaced monuments in scores of countries. The United States, where entire Indian pueblos have been bulldozed to “harvest” artifacts, is no exception.

“The situation we face today is not unlike the effort to keep whales, elephants and the rhino from extinction,” says Manus Brinkman, secretary-general of the International Council of Museums in Paris, which is working to curb the trade in illicit antiquities. “History is being erased before our eyes.”

Many connoisseurs of antiquities would be appalled to think that their love for ancient art might be destroying evidence of the cultures that created it. In a number of cases, however, uncontrolled looting has done just that.

Archaeologists wish, for instance, that they knew more about the Olmec, the mother culture of Central America, which built sophisticated urban centers across western Mexico between 1500 B.C. and 400 B.C. Olmec culture was first widely recognized in the 1940s. Political problems in Mexico delayed scientific study, but not the looting. Olmec stone monuments and breathtaking jade masks, some selling for $100,000 or more, quickly became popular items in the art centers of the world.

“By the time archaeologists got around to studying the Olmec, many sites had been looted or destroyed,” says University of Alabama anthropologist Richard Diehl, an authority on Olmec art. “These people left no written history, so most of our knowledge of the culture is now based on objects that are scattered throughout the world without any record of where they came from or how they were found.”

A similar fate befell the Bronze Age settlements of the Aegean Sea. In the 1960s, the popularity of the abstractionist marble statues produced by the Cycladic culture triggered a wave of looting in the Aegean Islands. Today, archaeologists estimate that as many as 12,000 Cycladic graves—85 percent of those known—were destroyed in the frenzied looting. In the vacuum of knowledge, fakes abound.

“There are probably more Cycladic figures in New York today than anywhere else in the world,” says Christopher Chippindale, a curator of the University of Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. “But so few were ever recovered in an archaeological context, it’s virtually impossible to know which are genuine.”

Because most high-end items are sold privately, the market for ancient art can only be estimated. But if public sales at major auction houses like Sotheby’s and Christie’s are any measure, the demand is robust. The most recent antiquities auctions, in June, drew standing-room-only crowds at both firms. In two days, they sold $10 million worth of ancient art, topped by the sale of a 4.5-inch-high Elamite figure—a 3,000-year-old stone carving from Iran that sold at Sotheby’s for $800,000.

Because the diminutive figurine had been on loan to the Metropolitan Museum of Art since 1985, its recent history was a matter of record. But detailed pedigrees are the ex-
ception. Many items in auction catalogs carry only vague references to ownership—“property of an American private collection”—or sometimes nothing at all. The anonymity of seller as well as buyer is something all auction houses honor as a sacred trust.

Sometimes, the information is missing because the seller doesn’t know. Sometimes, like Steinhardt, neither the auction house nor its customers want to know too much. Reputable dealers routinely check law enforcement agencies and electronic databases of stolen art to help them avoid “hot” material. But looted items are not so easily identified.

“Our basic policy is that we won’t sell anything that we know has been illegally excavated,” says Rena Moulopoulos, the attorney who heads Sotheby’s compliance division, which is charged with ensuring the legitimacy of objects it offers for sale. “If a seller warrants that an object is legally and ethically acquired, then we treat it as legitimate and we can sell it. This is not a science and we are not detectives. We try to avoid anything that has been recently looted, but we’re not perfect.”

Critics say the presumption of legitimacy, in the absence of proof to the contrary, merely encourages the sale of illicitly obtained antiquities.

“My surveys of auction houses and independent collections show that about 80 percent of the items turn up without explanations of where they came from or how they got there,” says Chippindale. “The usual story is that they came from an old European collection, but there just aren’t that many old collections.”

Ethics, Treaties Used to Fight Illicit Trade

Interpol, the FBI, Scotland Yard and other institutions all keep detailed records of stolen objects. The largest database, maintained by the London-based Art Loss Register, lists more than 100,000 stolen items. Since 1991, the organization, funded largely by the insurance industry, has helped recover $75 million worth of stolen art.

Looted objects are another matter. No private owner has been wronged. No insurance company wants restitution. Most looted material is never reported missing, so there is no central listing or guidance, only the ethics of the buyer—and the law.

“I have stopped dealing in pre-Columbian material,” says Jerome Eisenberg, owner of the Royal-Athena Galleries on East 57th Street in New York. “Ninety percent of the material that has been brought out of South and Central America in recent years is illegal. It’s a shame. For anyone with a sense of ethics, it is hard to deal in pre-Columbian.”

But no country’s artifacts are above suspicion. Last year, Eisenberg returned a $30,000 Greek amphora after the original owner notified him it had been stolen from a French villa in 1981. Eisenberg was miffed. He had purchased the vase at a Christie’s of London auction just months before. And it had been sold before at Sotheby’s in 1985.

Accurate records of previous owners and an object’s movement across borders could help distinguish legal pieces, but dealers say a system of passports for antiquities would be futile. The falsified papers for the phiale are a case in point.

“It’s perfectly obvious that everything on the market isn’t coming from old collections,” says Schultz. “But having a piece of paper saying something is from an existing collection isn’t the answer. People make up collection histories. There are a lot of clever ways of doing it. It’s easy.”

Legal efforts to curb illicit traffic depend on a patchwork of international treaties and mismatched national laws that often pit antiquity-rich countries of the world against art-hungry consumers in the United States, Japan and Europe.
The 20-Year Odyssey of a Golden Greek Bowl

History undocumented in the modern world until 1980.

1980
Sicilian antique collector Vincenzo Pappalardo asks Giacamo Manganaro, a professor of Greek history, to authenticate a ceremonial gold bowl, a phiale. Pappalardo claims it was unearthed by workers digging up electrical lines near Catania, Sicily, on the site of an ancient Greek settlement.

Mid to late 1980s
Pappalardo trades the phiale to Vincenzo Cammarata, a Sicilian coin dealer, for artworks valued at $20,000. Cammarata shows the phiale to William Veres, a Zurich art dealer and specialist in antiquities.

November 1991
Veres brings the phiale to the attention of Robert Haber, an American art dealer. Haber travels to Sicily to examine the phiale. He informs Wall Street financier Michael Steinhardt that the phiale is for sale.

December 1991
Veres acquires the phiale from Cammarata for objects worth $90,000.

December 4, 1991
Steinhardt, with Haber acting as intermediary, agrees to pay Veres $1.2 million for the phiale.

December 10, 1991
Haber flies to Zurich and then travels to Lugano, Switzerland, on the Italian border to meet Veres.

December 12, 1991
Haber takes possession of the phiale from Veres and returns to Zurich.

December 15, 1991
Haber lands at JFK International Airport with the phiale in his luggage. The customs declaration puts its value as $250,000. It is identified as coming from a private collection in Lausanne.

January 6, 1991
Haber has the phiale authenticated by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which acquired a similar bowl from art dealer Robert Hecht in 1962. The Met declares Steinhardt’s phiale to be as authentic as its own.

1992
Steinhardt displays the phiale in the drawing room of his New York apartment.

1995
The Italian government asks the United States to help recover the phiale, which it deems, under the country’s national patrimony law, to have been stolen.

November 14, 1997
U.S. District Court in New York orders forfeiture of the phiale and its return to Italy. Steinhardt appeals.

December 1998
Italian authorities arrest six people in Sicily—including Manganaro and Cammarata—for alleged participation in an antiquities looting ring linked to the Mafia. Authorities confiscate more than 10,000 artifacts, valued at more than $35 million.

July 12, 1999
After hearing briefs from the American Association of Museums, on behalf of Steinhardt, and from the Archaeological Institute of America on behalf of the U.S. government, the U.S. Court of Appeals reaffirms the forfeiture.
The key treaty, the 1970 United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization’s convention on cultural property, has been signed by 89 countries, but it can’t be invoked in many countries that are destinations for looted antiquities. Key nations at the crossroads of the antiquities trade—including the United Kingdom, Germany, Switzerland and the Netherlands—haven’t signed it. The United States ratified the treaty in 1983 only after a bitter congressional debate.

“The law implementing the treaty in the United States was so weakened by opposition from art dealers and museums that individual agreements between the United States and each country seeking protection have been necessary to make it work,” says David Walden, chairman of UNESCO’s Committee for the Return of Cultural Property.

Since then, the United States has concluded pacts for the return of illegally exported artifacts with just seven countries. Two of those agreements—with Canada and Peru—are under challenge by the nation’s art dealers. In all, there have been fewer than a dozen U.S. seizures of stolen or looted property.

A second treaty designed to aid in the recovery of looted or stolen antiquities primarily in Europe, where property laws differ, has been ratified by only one-third of the 22 nations that signed it in 1996. The United States is not a signatory.

Impatient with the pace of international efforts, some countries have been taking matters into their own hands—seeking their own remedies in the U.S. courts, as Italy did with the golden phiale.

This summer, billionaire William Koch ended a decade-long legal battle with the government of Turkey over ownership of the Elmali Hoard—a $2 million collection of ancient silver coins that he acquired in the late 1980s. Koch, an avid coin collector as well as the skipper of the winning yacht in the 1992 America’s Cup, had acquired the 2,400-year-old coins at auction. Investigators showed that they had been unearthed by Turkish villagers in the mid-1980s and smuggled to the United States by way of Europe.

On the eve of the civil trial, Koch surrendered the coins in exchange for a medal from the Turkish government thanking him for “safeguarding” the coins for the past 10 years.

“Turkey will continue its vigorous efforts around the world, not only to recover the rest of the Elmali Hoard, but other stolen antiquities,” says Larry Kaye, a New York attorney who represents Turkish interests in cases involving disputed antiquities.

Kaye says the message should be clear to anyone buying ancient art. Like the game of hot potato, the last person caught holding illegally obtained goods—whether they were stolen or looted—may get burned.
A World of Trouble: Where Looting Is Rampant

Antarctica

It’s the coldest, driest, most remote continent. In Antarctica, human history is barely a century old. Yet for half that time, looters and souvenir hunters have been chipping away its meager cultural heritage—pilfering what was left by explorers who departed the frozen continent or died there. This year, British and New Zealand authorities rescued three items—a lantern, a dog harness and a coat hook—about to be auctioned at Christie’s in London. Taken more than 40 years ago, they were returned to the weather-beaten wooden hut at Cape Evans once occupied by British explorer Robert Falcon Scott.

“Over the years, hundreds, perhaps thousands of items have been taken from these sites,” says David Crerar, chairman of New Zealand’s Antarctic Heritage Trust. “We estimate that as many as 50 percent of the artifacts left by the early explorers are gone.”

Along the shores of the Ross Sea, dozens of old huts and supply depots stand in mute testimony to the dawn of Antarctic exploration in the early 1900s. Thanks to the cold, dry climate, many look as if the owners had just stepped away. At Cape Evans, the carcasses of sled dogs lie frozen. At Cape Royds, tins of biscuits and other ship’s stores still line the shelves once used by Ernest Shackleton’s crew.

As sites in Antarctica have been stripped, New Zealand, whose territory includes dozens of historic sites, has grown more protective. These days, the huts are locked—and the growing number of tour groups are allowed in the huts only under supervision. Only last year did the Antarctic Treaty Organization, which includes the U.S., make removal of such items illegal.

Until recently, “souveniring” was widely tolerated. The items about to be sold were collected this year before such activity became illegal. “The items weren’t so important by themselves,” says Crerar. “But we did not want to see a market established for such items.” If monetary values ever get assigned to Scott era items, the danger to these sites would be greatly increased.”

Crerar’s hopes suffered a setback on Friday, when Christie’s auctioned off $800,000 worth of Antarctic memorabilia. A few items, including the flag Scott flew at the pole, were purchased in advance by a British museum, but most of the items, owned by descendents of the explorers, were sold to the highest bidder.

Endangered:
Tools, supplies and artifacts left by the continent’s first explorers in the early 1900s.

The Threat:
“Souveniring” past and present; a budding market for artifacts.

Outlook:
The theft of artifacts is prohibited by treaty, with some items being returned.
China

China’s Three Gorges Dam—the largest hydroelectric project ever attempted—will allow ocean-going ships to travel 1,500 miles inland. It will also displace more than 1.5 million people and destroy 400 towns and villages, as well as obliterate 3,000 years of Chinese history in 1,000 archaeological sites along the river and its tributaries.

The central government has promised professional excavations to save the region’s most impressive sites, like the caves of Dazu, which hold a half-million stone sculptures from the 400-year span of time from the Tang to the Ming dynasties. But archaeologists say culturally important sites are still being lost—such as those of the Stone Age Ba people, who occupied the area before it was part of China.

China has declined help from archaeologists outside the country. In desperation, some Chinese archaeologists are borrowing money to finance their own digs.

China’s looters aren’t waiting. Grave robbers, black marketers and smugglers—some equipped with cellular phones and two-way radios—have descended on the region. Not all of the looting is so organized. At Fengjie, a county town on the Yangzi, dynamiting and bulldozing by construction crews exposed more than 1,000 tombs, touching off a frenzy of looting.

Archaeologists say poverty provides a powerful incentive for looters, but the demand for Chinese antiquities is also a major force.

“Art and artifact smuggling out of China is a major basis for western collections,” says Zou Heng, professor of archaeology at Peking University. “In some places, hundreds of looters work day and night. Dealers set up shop in nearby villages to buy artifacts, which were then smuggled into Hong Kong, and then into the international market—dispersed to Japan, Thailand and throughout the world.”

“What has passed through New York, London and Berlin in the last few years would fill a great museum,” says Jerome Eisenberg, owner of the Royal Athena Galley in New York. “I went to China in 1994 to produce guides to the country’s major archaeological sites. Now I’m seeing the same material showing up on the market.”

The most spectacular artifact to come out of China in recent years was a 4-foot bronze “spirit tree” candelabra from the Han Dynasty—sold for $2.5 million last year at the International Asian Art Fair in New York. Archaeologists say it may be the same piece reportedly unearthed in the Three Gorges region the year before and quickly sold on the black market for about $25,000.

Iraq

The fertile land between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers is the cradle of civilization, the home to ancient Sumeria, Assyria and Babylonia. Since the Persian Gulf War and the imposition of international sanctions, looters have been robbing the cradle—and its graves—with impunity.

“Illlicit digging for antiquities, especially in desert areas of Iraq, has increased dramatically,” says McGuire Gibson, a University of Chicago archaeologist who specializes in the Middle East. “Gangs of up to 100 people work some sites, using earthmoving equipment
Endangered:
Stone reliefs, artifacts from world’s oldest civilizations (2000–600 B.C.).

The Threat:
United Nations sanctions, post-war problems leave remote desert sites open to looters.

Outlook:
Internal control is improving, but remote borders are still open to smugglers.

Endangered:
Hundreds of temple sites built by the Khmer Empire (A.D. 500–1400).

The Threat:
Gangs of looters are stripping temples of stone sculptures.

Outlook:
Dismal. Cambodian government is unable to guard many sites.

Cambodia

Lost, found and lost again in the jungles of Southeast Asia, the ruins of Angkor Wat and other walled temples of the Khmer Empire have endured centuries of neglect, conflict and the horrors of Cambodia’s killing fields.

Peace has not been so kind. Cambodia’s ancient architecture is being dismembered to feed a growing market for Khmer art and artifacts. The crisis was highlighted this year when Thai police intercepted a truck bound for Bangkok with 117 sandstone carvings—estimated market value: $2 million—which had been hacked off the wall of a 12th-century temple in northwest Cambodia. Investigators say elements of the Cambodian army spent four weeks chiseling and cutting the sculptures from the wall. So many were removed that a 40-foot section of the inner wall collapsed.

Cambodian police this year also found 40 tons of ancient statues and carvings hidden near the jungle headquarters of former Khmer Rouge leader Ta Mok. “On a recent visit to Thailand, I had a dealer show me pictures of sandstone panels—still on the temple walls—that he said he could obtain for me,” says John Stubbs, vice president of the World Monuments Fund, which works to protect Cambodian sites. “He was, in effect, offering to loot them to order.”

In another big haul in July, Thai police seized eight tons of Cambodian artifacts—29 cases of Hindu and Buddhist sculptures—being smuggled in from Singapore. Later, they seized another 110 Cambodian artifacts on sale in a Bangkok shopping mall.

Cambodian authorities have vowed to crack down. Looters have been warned that they will be shot on sight. But with 400 police guarding Angkor Wat, the country’s most famous temple complex, the country doesn’t have the resources to protect its more than 1,000 temple sites.

to open up the ruins. Large groups of stone tablets and statues are being smuggled out along traditional smuggling routes to Iran, through Kurdish northern Iraq, and from there to Europe.”

United Nations sanctions have squeezed the country’s economy to the point that Iraq can’t halt looting internally, and it gets little help when stolen goods turn up elsewhere. A rare exception was Jordan’s seizure in July of more than 1,000 Iraqi artifacts—cuneiform tablets, cylinder seals and a Sumerian stone statue more than 4,000 years old—being smuggled out on a plane.

Pillage is nothing new in the Iraqi countryside. Nor is the Western world’s interest in the cultures that thrived there from the 4th millennium B.C. In 1994, one Assyrian wall panel sold at auction for $11.8 million—the highest price ever paid for any antiquity.

“Iraq’s rich and varied heritage has been coveted by the Western world since the 19th century heyday of imperial acquisition,” says John Malcolm Russell, archaeologist and art historian at the Massachusetts College of Art. “Back then, European governments descended on the palaces of Mesopotamia and sacked them to fill the halls of the British Museum, the Louvre and the Berlin Museum.”

But since the mid-1990s, the problem has been the illicit art market. At least 13 wall panels from the great Assyrian capital of Nineveh and the palace at Nimrud have appeared for sale in London, Brussels and other cities. So far no one has been arrested and none of the panels have been recovered.

“United Nations sanctions have finally finished the work begun by the ancient Medes and Babylonians, who sacked Nineveh in 612 B.C.” Russell says. “A lot of people say the Iraqis got what’s coming to them. But this is not merely Iraq’s problem. The people of ancient Iraq influenced the way we speak and write and do business today. This culture belongs to the whole world.”
As one of the world's leading Mayanists, Ian Graham has seen the most remote corners of the Central American jungle. But in his 40-year quest to document the Mayan equivalent of hieroglyphics, the 77-year-old archaeologist has made a discouraging number of his discoveries in museums and private collections in Fort Worth, San Diego, Cleveland, New York, Budapest and Stockholm.

"When I started working in Guatemala in the '60s, almost everything was intact. Now, virtually all of the sculpture is gone," says Graham, director of the Maya Corpus Program at Harvard University's Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology.

"Instead of being able to study these inscriptions intact, they have been cut into pieces and sold to people who only think of them as trophies or tax deductions," he says.

Victories are few, but sweet. In August, Graham learned that a collector was planning to sell part of a Mayan stone carving. He recognized the masked human figure as a piece stolen from northern Guatemala in the 1960s.

When U.S. Customs agents and attorneys for the Guatemalan government came calling, the collector agreed to surrender the piece.

Even armed guards and double-locked gates at archaeological sites have failed to deter the thefts.

"Looting and smuggling of artifacts is a major industry," says Richard Hansen, a California archaeologist who has worked extensively in Guatemala.

"In Peten, hundreds of sites have been totally overrun. It's like trying to ward off hordes of ants."

Hansen says soaring prices for Mayan pottery is fueling the frenzy. "A single polychrome Codex pot can bring a Guatemalan peasant $1,000," he says. "Get it to Guatemala City and it takes a dramatic jump. Smuggled to the United States or Japan, it can fetch $100,000 to $150,000."

**Endangered:**
Written records of classic Mayan civilization (A.D. 250–1500).

**The Threat:**
Looters have stripped stone monuments from more than 300 sites.

**Outlook:**
As large carvings are depleted, looters are taking smaller artifacts.
Georgia Theft Robs World of Unique Legacy

Georgia’s hot pots just keep popping up. A quarter-century after thieves cleaned out the little museum at Kolomoki Mounds State Park, near Blakely, the state’s most famous stolen pots are still showing up in out-of-the-way places. Each new sighting offers a fleeting glimpse of the black market in American antiquities and new hope that more of the 1,500-year-old pots will someday be found.

Although the missing Kolomoki artifacts never dazzled like pre-Columbian gold or Etruscan silver, the intricately shaped clay bowls and figurines are, even in absentia, among the most revered relics of ancient Georgia and its inhabitants.

“These were some of the most fantastic items created in Georgia’s prehistory,” says Frank Snell, archaeologist for the nearby Columbus Museum. “The loss of these objects is tragic. A photograph can’t begin to show what they are like. I’d give my eyeteeth to see them all returned.”

At the time, the crime was widely reported. Sometime between March 3 and March 7, 1974, someone broke into the park-operated museum housing the artifacts from Georgia’s oldest ceremonial mound complex—a cluster of flat-topped pyramid-like structures built more than 1,000 years ago. The thieves stole 129 items, including a dozen rare effigy vessels, a large collection of clay bowls, 20 stone axes and several dozen arrowheads.

The street value of the stolen artifacts was estimated at $400,000. The impact on the park museum was swift. With virtually nothing left to display, it closed.

The loss to history was far greater. The stolen artifacts represented a substantial share—a third or more—of the world’s known objects from the Weeden Island culture, which inhabited North Florida and South Georgia between A.D. 300 and 800. At Kolomoki, they built at least seven earthen mounds—the tallest 56 feet high—several centuries before the construction of Georgia’s better known prehistoric mound complexes at Etowah and Ocmulgee.

“The people of Kolomoki have no known living descendants,” says Larry Blakenship, former manager of the park. “So the only way we had to learn about these people is to study the artifacts they left behind.”

It is, ironically, the distinctive style of Kolomoki’s ancient artisans—complex patterns of stylistic incising and stippled cuts in clay, along with a penchant for elaborate animal effigies—that has made it harder for them to disappear than most stolen artifacts.

In 1978, Georgia and Florida law enforcement officials seized 12 of the pots at the home of an amateur archaeologist in North Miami. Unaware that they were stolen, the collector had acquired them at a Miami Beach rock and gem show in exchange for a collection of antique bottles. Police traced the seller as far as Tallahassee, but there the trail went cold.

The pots were returned to Kolomoki for safekeeping, but had to be stored in a cell at the Early County Jail until
Georgia could build a more secure museum.
There would be more. In 1979, Frank Morast, a collector in Columbus, identified a Kolomoki pot at an artifact show in Pennsylvania. He bought it and donated it to the park museum. No one ever learned how it got to Pennsylvania.

The most recent recoveries suggest that by now Kolomoki’s missing treasures have changed hands so many times that some of the current owners don’t have a clue about the cultural importance of the pots—and may not even suspect that they are part of the loot from Georgia’s most notorious antiquities theft.

Ann Cordell, staff archaeologist for the Florida Museum of Natural History in Gainesville, Fla., remembers her astonishment one day in 1996 when a local taxidermist showed her pictures of two pots—carefully crafted effigies of a wood duck and a quail in the Weeden Island style—that he was thinking about buying from a collector in St. Petersburg. The collector wanted $300 for the pair. The taxidermist wanted to know if Cordell thought they were worth it.

Cordell thought the pots—one buff-colored and the other a dull red—looked uncannily familiar. A trip to the reference shelf enabled her to make a positive ID. Pictures of the very pots which at that moment graced the living room mantle of Thomas Duddy of St. Petersburg were listed as vessel 2 and vessel 18 in the 1953 report *Excavations at Kolomoki* by archaeologist William H. Sears.

Cordell would eventually examine the pots herself.

“The mend marks—the seams where they were glued together—made it clear they were the exact same pots,” she says. “And when I shined a flashlight inside, I could see the ID numbers put there by the excavators nearly 50 years before.”

**No Reward for State’s Missing Treasures**

As the unsuspecting owner of stolen property, Duddy was more than happy to cooperate with authorities. He just wanted to be rid of the pots, which he had by this time owned for a number of years, unaware that they were anything but curiously “primitive.”

Duddy had been given the pots by his mother. Questioned by authorities, she recalled buying them for her son at a flea market in nearby Gulfport, Fla., in 1987. She paid $45 for the pair, which experts agree could have sold elsewhere for hundreds. And there, as it had so many times before, the trail of Kolomoki’s hot pots went cold again.

It didn’t take long for yet another pot to turn up. The Florida taxidermist who had been interested in buying Duddy’s pots checked his own collection and, to his sur-

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*The distinctive style of Kolomoki’s ancient artisans may be what saves the sparse relics of the Weeden Island culture.*

*Since 1974, when about 80 items were taken from Kolomoki Mounds State Park, several items have surfaced, some at flea markets.* (Celine Bufkin, AJC Staff)
Despite the cultural significance of the Kolomoki artifacts, Georgia has never made the recovery of Kolomoki's missing treasures a high priority.

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None of the missing pots has ever been seized in the state of Georgia. No reward has ever been offered for their return.

No one has ever been arrested for the theft. Given the time that has elapsed since the burglary, arrests are now unlikely.

"The black market in artifacts is really secretive," says Blakenship. "We still investigate one or two leads a year, but I think the pieces are probably well scattered, and by now the trail is pretty cold."

The Georgia Department of Natural Resources has never directly enlisted the public in tracing the stolen artifacts, despite suggestions by archaeologists that the state try to flush the missing pots into the open by publishing "wanted" posters or brochures.

"We're still thinking about it," says Townsend. "We hope we might get some of them printed this year yet."
Online Bidding:
A New Demand on Same Supply

New York

The mood is tense. Bidding on the gray-green Mayan jade mask is rising in $5,000 increments and auctioneer C. Hugh Hildesley is quick to move the bidding upward with sharp raps of his ivory gavel.

Only 200 people are on the auction floor of Sotheby’s for the firm’s semi-annual sale of pre-Columbian art. The handful bidding on Lot 165 signal with a nod or the muted wave of blue-and-white numbered paddles.

Bidders on the floor, however, are soon outclassed as the action shifts to Sotheby’s 12 phone lines, where company representatives are bidding for clients on three continents. Above the floor, a tote board flashes the escalating bids in dollars, francs, marks, pesos and pesetas. In less than three minutes, the board reads $325,000 and only two bidders remain.

A Sotheby’s specialist queries her client on the other end of the line in Spanish and nods. The bid is $330,000. Hildesley takes a sip of Evian and looks to the other phone. A long silence, then a shake of the head. The gavel seals the deal. The 2,100-year-old mask, previously owned by an anonymous New York collector, has just been sold to an equally anonymous bidder in Europe. Final price, including the buyer’s premium: $365,500.

So it has been at Sotheby’s since 1744, when London bookseller Samuel Baker founded what would become one of the world’s premier venues for the sale of art, antiquities and other collectibles—from rare baseball memorabilia to $78 million Renoirs.

Next month, Sotheby’s will launch a new venture that it hopes will revolutionize the auction business. Sotheby’s is moving into cyberspace—a move that has the art world buzzing and archaeologists uneasy about the impact that the millions of potential new buyers could have on the global demand for antiquities.

Sotheby’s first online sale—a follow-up to the Sept. 23-29 live auction of baseball memorabilia—isn’t expected until later this fall, but the firm has already lined up 3,200 dealers worldwide to provide material for future sales, a roster that will make it a global clearinghouse for collectibles of all kinds.

Despite its high visibility, Sotheby’s now draws only about 100,000 buyers and sellers a year to its auctions. Executive Vice President David Redden says Sothebys.com wants as many of the estimated 100 million Internet users as it can get.

“Many people are uncomfortable or shy about coming into the showroom and bidding at a live auction,” says Sotheby’s Executive Vice President David Redden. “But
But we don’t think they will feel shy about shopping in their bedroom slippers in the privacy of their own homes. They will be able to rummage through the world for things to buy. The potential for reaching huge numbers of people is enormous.”

Not everyone is enthusiastic about the prospect.

“The proliferation of online auctions and artifact sales is an unfortunate development,” says Ellen Herscher, chairman of the Archaeological Institute of America’s cultural property committee. “The demand for such things has always been a very specialized market. This broadens it in a way that can only create greater demand, at a time when there is already a big rise in demand for classical antiquities.”

Evidence of the burgeoning online market for artifacts—and the questions it poses—can be seen at two popular Internet auction sites: eBay, which recently bought the prestigious West Coast auction house, Butterfield and Butterfield, and Amazon.com, which has taken a $10 million stake in Sotheby’s. Amazon plans to share an auction site with Sotheby’s, but currently operates two auction sites of its own.

Together the two online giants lure 20 million visitors a month to their Web sites. Although items for sale range from used computers to old Pez dispensers, the number of artifacts, American as well as international, has been growing.

On one recent day, eBay offered a total of 1,338 items under the heading of “Native Americana, artifacts”—ranging from a 1,000-year-old Anasazi cameo bowl (minimum bid $500) from Arizona to a 3.25-inch arrowhead (minimum bid $70) which the owner “found last year in the Flint River a few miles above Albany, Ga.”

As a former federal prosecutor for the eastern district of Virginia, eBay’s associate general counsel, Robert Chestnut, is aware that people may be using the online auction site to buy and sell illegal artifacts.

“We have removed some things from the site already: Native American remains, burial goods and ritual objects,” Chestnut says. “But we have more than 300,000 items posted every day in over 1,000 categories from chintz china to Beanie Babies. We can’t review everything that is offered for sale.”

The items eBay sells are of the sort and price typical of flea markets and artifact shows. Because they are online, however, buyer and seller complete their transaction without ever meeting, or even knowing each other’s names.

“We don’t tolerate fraud, but . . .”

At Amazon.com’s auctions, the artifacts tend to be pricier and more international in flavor. In one recent sale, Web surfers could choose from a 1,650-year-old Roman jug from Lebanon (reserve price of $125), a pair of Mexican Nayarit figurines ($2,500) and a Peruvian head vessel with stirrup handle ($335).

Were the items legally exported from the country of origin? Amazon officials are frank about their inability to assure buyers that they were.

“We don’t tolerate fraud, but buying online is no different than buying anywhere else,” says Sharon Greenspan, spokeswoman for the company. “You still have to buy from a reputable dealer and you have to educate yourself. We encourage everybody to be smart shoppers.”

Hundreds of other Internet sites, however, offer direct, person-to-person sales of a wide variety of artifacts, ranging from Civil War belt buckles to Neanderthal skulls.

“We are investigating a growing number of Internet-related cases, a number of which involve the sale of human
body parts,” says John Fryar, criminal investigator for the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs in Santa Fe, N.M. “There is definitely increased interest, and at least the potential for a lot more illegal traffic.

“The Internet has made it easy to put stuff on the black market, but in some ways it has also made it easier for us to track it. Until recently no one was watching these auction sites. Now we have people who call us when they see something suspicious.”

Sotheby’s hopes its entry into the world of sales will bring a level of trust and integrity to the wild and woolly frontier of cyberspace. Although Redden says the firm intends to offer items for sale in “every collecting category,” he says plans for the sale of ancient art are proceeding with “some caution.”

“In addition to issues of authenticity and condition, we obviously have to be concerned about export laws,” he says. “We have to be careful.”

The firm has vowed to guarantee the condition and authenticity of all of the material it offers for sale online. But any assurance that artifacts have been legally removed from their countries of origin would likely continue to depend, as is the case at live auctions now, on the say-so of the owner.

In time, Sotheby’s officials believe, the prestige of the firm—and the thousands of dealers from which it will take consignments—will foster a thriving market in high-end art at price levels seen today only at live auctions.

“It’s still a little hard to imagine a major sale of impressionist paintings on the Net, but we don’t know what the upper limit will be,” says Redden. “I had once thought that $10,000 might be the upper limit, but now I’m not so sure. Even interactive bidders have certain gladiatorial instincts when it comes to bidding.”

Stolen Art Sites

- **Interpol’s Most Wanted Works of Art:**
  Pictures and descriptions of missing works of art.
  www.usdoj.gov/usncb/artwanted.htm

- **FBI’s National Stolen Art File:**
  Official notices of major art thefts.
  www.fbi.gov/majcases/arttheft/art.htm

- **The Art Loss Register:**
  Internet’s most comprehensive lost and found list, plus statistics.
  www.artloss.com
A Sample of Artifacts Being Auctioned Online

Sales of artifacts on the Internet have grown rapidly this year with the launch of major online auction sites. These are a few of the hundreds of items offered for sale at eBay and Amazon.com in the last few weeks.

eBay™

Peruvian vessel, A.D. 1400
“This 8½'' tall black-on-cream figural jar (TF 97.135) is from the Chancay culture of Peru, c. 1100–1400 A.D. The figure is said to depict a beggar due to the fact that he holds a small cup in his hands as though asking for a ‘donation.’ This wonderfully depicted figure wears a tufted shawl, displays a pair of impressive earspools, has a well-decorated headdress or crown, and exhibits what appears to be tattooing of the face with fish-like imagery around his eyes and a mask-like covering of his mouth and chin. In overall very good condition, there has been some minor repair on the chipped rim and a small amount of overpaint. Fully guaranteed to be authentic and as described. Shipping/packaging/insurance are all included in the price; however, appropriate taxes will be extra if mailed to a Colorado address (international buyer pays actual shipping cost). Thanks and good luck.”

Amazon.com

Ecuadorean figurine, 400–100 B.C.
“Found in Ecuador. Jamacoaque Cult. Dating: 400–100 BC. BIRDMAN with red tint, wings and nose chipped. Measures 3½'' tall. VERY NICE!! Lucite base for easy display. Comes with Cert. of authenticity. Buyer pays $5 S/H in US. Don’t miss this one!!”

Mexican ceramics, 500 B.C.
“Lovely, expressive ancient ceramic figures of two women preparing food, from the west coast of Mexico. Black painted on red slip is typical of Ixtlan, Nayarit. (In the nose of each figure is the face of a goat - they were made as funerary pulque vessels). An authority on Pre-Columbian art estimates this pair to be 2500 years old. They have been in our family for 50 years. Both figures show extensive restoration and have small pieces missing. Taller figure is about 9½'' high.”

Chinese figurine, A.D. 618–906
“Tang Dynasty (618–906). 15¼'' height.—This is a serious collector’s piece. It is rare to see a figure like it. We have the analysis report of Thermoluminescence test from Oxford Authentication, Ltd. If you want to see it before you buy, please contact us to make an appointment. The packing, shipping and insurance costs for it is $100. Please visit our web site for other products.”
Part 3
Coveting Thy Neighbor’s Past

The role museums play in the tug of war over artifacts and how museums, in striving to preserve the past, sometimes contribute to its destruction.

November 7, 1999
Stakes Are High in Tug of War over Artifacts

Amid the marbled elegance of the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art’s new Greek and Roman galleries, the waist-high display case holding a 15-piece set of Greek silver is easy for the casual visitor to overlook.

Museumgoers browsing the second-floor gallery would never know, from the terse but vague description of its “early Hellenistic” origins, that the 2,200-year-old silver setting cost the museum a tidy $2.7 million. Nor would they suspect that it lies at the epicenter of a highly charged dispute over the future of the Metropolitan and other museums as custodians of the world’s cultural treasures.

Italy claims that looters stole the Greek silver from an archaeological site in Sicily about 1980, only a few years before the Met bought it. The Met, which has displayed the silver prominently since 1984, insists that it has seen no evidence to support such charges. Italian authorities have not taken any direct legal action to recover the silver, but two government ministries are gathering evidence to make a case.

Once revered as the guardians of cultural heritage, the Met and other museums are increasingly being accused of hastening its destruction. Countries and cultures whose art and artifacts have stocked the world’s museums for centuries want their treasures back. And, in what museum officials see as alarming precedents, some are getting them.

Greece wants the British Museum to hand over the marbles that Lord Elgin stripped from the Parthenon 200 years ago. Egypt wants England to return the Rosetta stone.

Of the hundreds of museum visits in a lifetime, none moved me quite as much as the stops photographer David Tulis and I made in London and Athens for “The Past in Peril” series.

Even on a busy Sunday at the British Museum, there’s a reverent hush among the crowd in the Duveen Gallery, where the Parthenon marbles are exhibited. They are magnificent, but eerie-headless, limbless, disembodied torsos. They look a little lost.

In the early morning on the Acropolis, before the tourists arrive, there’s a different kind of quiet-punctuated by the chip-chip of marble workers sculpting the stone with which Greece hopes to partially restore the 2,500-year symbol of its Golden Age. You won’t find marble sculptures on the Parthenon, either. They’re in a nearby museum, looking a little lost.

After 200 years of sound and fury over who should have the marbles, two moments of silence a thousand miles apart open the door to this thought. The fuss over the marbles, like disputes over cultural property in other museums, is really an argument over custody. Ownership is another matter. The world’s cultural treasures really belong to humanity.
and a fragment of the Great Sphinx's beard. Nigeria wants its Benin bronzes, seized by a British expeditionary force in the 1800s.

The Greek island of Samothrace wants France to send home the statue of Winged Victory that stands at the top of the Louvre's main staircase. Turkey wants Germany to return the Trojan gold that archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann smuggled out of the country in 1873. But the Turks are standing in line for the privilege: Germany first has to get it back from the Russians, who took it from a German museum during World War II.

The rising clamor for the return of ancient art and artifacts reflects global changes in attitudes toward cultural property, and the laws that affect it.

Museums in the United States are returning human remains and sacred objects to Native Americans. Museums throughout the world are reviewing their collections to identify works that may have been taken from Holocaust victims by the Nazis. And since 1970, two major international treaties have created the legal framework for countries that want to recover stolen or looted cultural treasures.

Some Objects Were Looted

When it comes to objects of archaeological importance, however, museums are feeling the heat not only for what they have done, but also for what they continue to do. Some critics say museums are adding new material to their collections when an expanding international market for ancient art is spurring demand for new material—and, in turn, the pillage of archaeological sites and monuments.

"Acquisitions by museums just create a bigger market, and there is no doubt that some looted material is finding its way into museums," says Manus Brinkman, secretary general of the International Council of Museums in Paris, an affiliate of the United Nations Economic, Scientific and Cultural Organization, which encourages museums to learn more about the things it buys and receives as gifts before accepting them.

"Since we published a list of 100 objects stolen from Cambodia's temples in the 1980s, we have found missing pieces at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, at Sotheby's, with an art dealer in London, on the market in Hong Kong and at the Honolulu Academy of Arts."

Samuel Sidibe, director of the national museum in the West African nation of Mali, says museums contribute to the growing market for antiquities from his country. "Many of the rich collections of African cultural heritage now found in northern museums come from the pillage of archaeological sites," he says. "By buying these objects on the
market, museums are supporting the despoliation of the patrimony of African countries.”

Christopher Chippindale, a curator at the Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in Cambridge, England, agrees. “Museums assembling a collection these days are forced to take it from a small pool of private stuff that comes up for sale,” he says. “But that small pool is constantly being topped off with freshly looted and stolen material.”

As one of the world’s most acquisitive museums, the Met, with its familiar beaux arts facade on Fifth Avenue and 5 million visitors a year, is at the center of the storm. And the case of the Greek silver service promises to be one of the stormiest controversies yet.

One Sunday afternoon last month, the scholar whose research is destined to play a key role in the case strolled unnoticed among the crowds in the Met’s Greek and Roman galleries, pausing longer than most at the case containing the 2,200-year-old silver collection for a moment of reflection. University of Virginia archaeologist Malcolm Bell III, the Andrew Mellon professor of advanced studies at the National Gallery of Art, says the view of the silver under glass was a melancholy one.

“They don’t even tell you where it’s from,” he says. “It’s tragic to see objects like this languish in a museum case without context. The museum doesn’t want to know too much about it, so information gets suppressed. It’s a shame because I have been able to identify the house in Sicily where it was found. We know the name of the owner who buried it in the third century B.C. We even know the spot in the house where it was buried. I wish it were possible for other people to know these things, too.”

Bell’s involvement stems from archaeological excavations he once directed in Sicily—at Morgantina, a part of the Hellenistic kingdom of Syracuse, until it fell to the Romans in the third century B.C.

It was from Morgantina, police informants have told Italian authorities, that the Met’s silver collection—or one very much like it—was unearthed by local tomb robbers. One particular piece described by informants was a silver medallion depicting the sea monster Scylla, similar to the one in the Met’s collection.

In 1996, Italian authorities asked Bell to investigate the story on two fronts: through new digs in Italy and through a closer look at the Met’s silver. Bell completed his excavations in 1998, but it wasn’t until this year that the Met agreed to let him examine the silver.

He turned over his findings to an Italian magistrate in May. He won’t disclose the details, but he doesn’t mind summarizing his conclusions. “The uncertainty about the origins of these pieces is decreasing,” he says. “I am more convinced than ever that they came from Morgantina.”

Harold Holzer, the museum’s vice president for communications, says the Met is doing its own research on the collection. “Because this is an ongoing effort, we cannot discuss the case in further detail,” he says.

Museum officials have told U.S. Customs officials that the silver collection was purchased, in two installments, through European art dealer Robert Hecht Jr., who told them that it had been owned for decades by a Lebanese art dealer.

The story—right down to the Lebanese owners and Hecht as intermediary—echoes another controversial acquisition by the Met: the $1 million purchase in 1971 of a spectacular 2,500-year-old vase, a krater decorated by the Greek master painter, Euphronius. Italian police informants later reported that it had been looted from a site north of Rome and smuggled out of Italy.

Even former museum director Thomas Hoving, who once admitted “a near-sexual pleasure” from obtaining the Euphronius krater for the Met, has since acknowledged that the krater—forever known in New York art circles as the Met’s “hot pot”—probably was smuggled out of Italy.
Italy long ago barred Hecht from the country for his alleged role in the incident, but the Euphronius krater—with its red-painted figures depicting a scene from Homer of the dead warrior Sarpedon—remains on display.

“We have 2 million works of art,” says Holzer. “We’re not about to start returning things just because someone asks for them. But we are always willing to look at any evidence that is brought to our attention.”

The Met has voluntarily returned some contested objects in recent years. When curators discovered they had the missing heads of a 10th century Khmer temple sculpture being sought by the International Council of Museums, it was returned to Cambodia in 1996. It also sent a 10th-century stone Buddha back to India.

Expensive Legal Battle

The Met parted with another famous collection more reluctantly. In 1993, the museum ended a six-year dispute with Turkey over the Lydian Hoard, a 225-piece collection of sixth century B.C. gold, silver and bronze artifacts that the government claimed had been looted from sites near Sardis in the 1960s. The Met, which paid $1.5 million for the collection, argued that the statute of limitations had expired.

“We asked them to return the pieces, and they said no, so we hired a law firm in New York and sued them,” says Engin Ozgen, former director general of Turkey’s museums. “Eventually, they said they were willing to settle. They came to Turkey, and we bartered. It was like in the bazaar. They offered half and we said no. They offered three-quarters and we said no. Finally they gave in.”

The silver is now on display at a museum in western Turkey. “The legal costs to Turkey were about $2 million,” says Ozgen. “It was very expensive, but we wanted to send a message. We think we have it all now, but for all we know the Met may still have some of it in the basement.”

Although many disputes involve pieces purchased outright, museums are also discovering that donated items—even those from revered patrons and trustees—can be hot potatoes. The Boston Museum of Fine Arts found itself in the spotlight last year because Guatemala claimed that 25 pieces of Mayan pottery donated by trustee Landon Clay, were looted and illegally exported. Although the provenience—the place where the objects were originally found—is unknown, the pieces remain on display.

“Guatemala has offered no proof that they were removed from the country illegally,” says Brent Benjamin, deputy director for curatorial affairs for the museum. “Many of the objects we have are unprovenienced. That is often the case. You can’t run down the provenience of every item.”

The Denver Art Museum recently returned a 1,300-year-old carved Mayan lintel, part of an architectural door frame, to Guatemala when it was discovered to have been stolen from an archaeological site in the Petén region of Guatemala only a few years before being donated to the museum in 1973.

Most items in museums today were looted or stolen at some point. Romans looted Greek cities. The barbarians looted Rome. Over the centuries, many art treasures might have been lost forever had they not been saved in museums. Many others, however, might have never been dug up at all, if museums hadn’t been so determined to build their collections.

“Museums were founded in a time when knowledge was compiled encyclopedically, on the assumption that all knowledge was useful,” says Robert Anderson, director of the British Museum. “Our philosophy is to have the best of everything from all time.”

Although the London museum’s ongoing feud with Greece over the Parthenon marbles is the best-known dis-
Face in the crowd: An imposing granite head of King Ammenemes III, from about 1800 B.C., dwarfs visitors to the Egyptian exhibit at the British Museum, which is one of the most popular attractions in London. (David Tulis, AJC Staff)

The imposing granite head of King Ammenemes III, from about 1800 B.C., dwarfs visitors to the Egyptian exhibit at the British Museum, which is one of the most popular attractions in London. (David Tulis, AJC Staff)

“We get 20 or 30 requests a year for returns,” says Anderson. “There are strong feelings behind most requests. But they all receive a no in the most understandably possible way. We are not going to give up the world of objects we have assembled.”

Because museums differ so widely in size, mission, budget and behavior, generalizations about their stewardship of cultural history are all but impossible.

“The majority of the material in American museums is legally there,” says Edward Able, president of the American Association of Museums, which represents 3,100 institutions. “Our code of ethics makes it clear that objects should be legally acquired. But museums have a right to insist a claim of ownership be proved. In every instance where that has been established, museums have returned the property.”

Absent clear proof, museums have very different responses. “Many museums simply assume that all objects are innocent until proven guilty,” says Marion True, curator of antiquities for the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles. “They may make inquiries, but if an object has been illicitly excavated, no one will know it is missing.

“Any major acquisitions without established provenience are quite likely to have come from illicit excavations. There is simply not that much major material out there in old collections that is unknown.”

In an effort to clean up its own act, Getty trustees now require the museum to seek comment on new pieces from the country of origin and to refuse any that were not in an established collection before 1995.

To underscore its new attitude, the museum this year voluntarily sent three important pieces back to Italy. The returns included what True calls one of the museum’s “great vases” — a drinking cup by the Greek painter Euphronius, which the Getty bought from a European dealer in 1983, but later concluded must have been illegally excavated.
The new policy did not, to the dismay of some archaeologists, deter the Getty from accepting $80 million worth of classical antiquities from New York art collectors Barbara and Lawrence Fleischman in 1996. “Out of the 295 entries in the recent catalog of the Fleischman collection, not one had an archaeological provenience,” says Boston University archaeologist Ricardo Elia, a regular critic of the trade in illicit antiquities. “Unfortunately, that’s not uncommon. In the last few years I have looked at over 30 private and institutional collections. Overall, 85 to 90 percent of the objects give no indication of a previous owner.”

Mum’s Usually the Word

Because many museums keep their detailed information in private, so-called deep files, it is difficult for third parties to find out what the museum itself knows—or doesn’t—about its acquisitions. “The art world is famously discreet about how it conducts business,” says Anthony Hirschel, director of the Michael C. Carlos Museum at Emory University. “Some even say that it couldn’t function if there were more light cast on it. “We ask for documentation, but if we’re told it doesn’t exist, it becomes a judgment call. If it’s some minor pieces, it’s easy to have high principles. It is much harder to resist the temptation when you are presented with an object that might transform your collection or, in the case of the MFA, when it comes from one of your major benefactors.”

The Getty’s True says balancing museum interests against the worldwide loss of archaeological resources may require drastic measures. “We may need some kind of moratorium on the importation of works of art,” she says. “During that moratorium, pieces currently on the market should be inventoried and documented. After that, if there is no documentation, it should be clear that it is recently excavated material and probably illegal.”

Most museums, however, are discovering that there are major gaps in what they know about material they own. Spurred by the effort to track down looted Nazi art, the French government concluded that as many as 2,000 artworks in its national museums may have been looted from European Jews by the Nazis or sold under duress. Tens of thousands of pieces in museums throughout the world may be involved.

Similarly, the passage of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act required more than 1,000 U.S. museums to inventory their collections in preparation for returning human remains and sacred objects to Indian tribes. Many museums were surprised by what they found. Harvard’s Peabody Museum of Archaeology, one of the most reputable in the country, discovered that instead of the 7,000 Indian remains officials thought they had, the Peabody actually had 15,000. And although the museum thought it had 800,000 Native American artifacts, the survey turned up 8 million.

Museums have raised the specter that repatriations—whether to Indians or countries of origin—threaten to empty their display cases. Experience suggests otherwise. At the Smithsonian’s Museum of Natural History, only one of the 250,000 artifacts inventoried for possible return to the tribes was actually removed from public display. The rest were in storage or in the museum’s research collection.

“Most museums have 90 percent of their collections in storage,” says Maxwell Anderson, director of the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, and former director of Emory University’s Carlos Museum. “They don’t need to be going out into the market to buy material that encourages tomb robbers, forgers and smugglers.”

With so much in their basements, and so little certifi-
ably legal material on the open market, why do museums still vie for one more piece of culture for posterity?

"There is still a prevailing feeling in the museum world that museums need to make spectacular additions, no matter how much they already own," says Martin Sullivan, chairman of the U.S. State Department's Cultural Property Advisory Committee, which advises the government on actions to limit illicit trade in antiquities. "This is a very competitive industry and spectacular new things mean more visitors.

"But museums enjoy special benefits under the tax code, and they need to remember that they have special obligations to the public," he says.

"Too many museums are still thinking in terms of ownership, rather than custody and care of the objects they own. There has to be a realization that countries which have traditionally been the source of ancient art are losing their heritage and it is hurtful to them. Museums started out being institutions for the preservation of cultural heritage. We have to get back to that—and find some new ways to do it."

Where Have All the Marbles Gone?

Most of the Parthenon's greatest sculptures had been broken by the time it was sketched by French artists in the mid-1700s. Of the surviving sculptures:

- The British Museum has 56 portions of the frieze, 15 high-relief panels and 19 free-standing sculptures or partial sculptures from the pediments.
- The Acropolis Museum has 40 sections of the frieze, 48 high-relief panels and portions of nine pedimental sculptures.
- The Louvre in Paris has one panel of the frieze.
- Museums in Copenhagen, Vienna, Istanbul, Prague, and Munich have broken fragments of the marbles.
Greek Fights Britain for All of the Marbles

Athens

Greece wants its marbles back. All of them. And soon. Preferably in time to show them to the world when Athens hosts the Olympic Games in 2004.

Two hundred years after Scotland's Lord Elgin stripped most of the marble sculptures from the towering pediments of Athens' Parthenon, Greece is turning up the heat on one of the world's most enduring feuds over the rights to cultural property—hoping that a little public humiliation will accomplish what decades of dogged diplomacy have failed to do: bring the marbles home.

The Parthenon, built atop the highest point of the Acropolis, towers as imposingly over Athens today as it did 2,500 years ago. But for those who want to fully appreciate the artistic high point of Athenian democracy, the line forms not at the foot of Athens' sacred rock, but just off Great Russell Street in London.

It is there, at the British Museum, that most of the surviving marble sculptures—88 magnificent works of ancient art in all—have resided since the museum bought them from a cash-strapped Lord Elgin in 1816.

And it is there, says the head of the world's best-known museum, that they should stay.

"The marbles were acquired legally," says museum director Robert Anderson, mincing no words with diplomatic niceties. "They are our property. They have been an important part of British cultural life for two centuries. This is where they belong."

But not according to Greece, which contends that the marbles—interpretations of mythology by Phidias, ancient Athens' greatest and most prolific sculptor—have been a part of Greek cultural life for a lot more than two centuries.

"The marbles belong in Athens," says archaeologist Heleni Korka, secretary of Hellenic Committee for Restoration of Parthenon Marbles. "The marbles are not freestanding works of art. They are an integral part of the Parthenon. They belong together. And they belong here."

The relative positions of the parties have changed little since 1802 when Thomas Bruce, the seventh earl of Elgin and Britain's ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, took down the marble friezes, reliefs and sculptures and, with a little help from the British Navy, shipped them off to London for "safekeeping."
The 3 million visitors that tour the British Museum each year see what’s left of the marble sculptures from the east pediment of the Parthenon. The only identifiable sculptures are the horse’s head and a reclining Dionysus. The figures above can be seen on the Parthenon but they are mere concrete casts. Architects believe one of the missing figures is the goddess Athena. (David Tulis, AJC Staff)

But Elgin wasn’t planning to stock a museum. The headless Iris, the torso of Hermes, the breast of Athena and the other marbles that he took were intended to grace his home in Scotland. Even in those days it was an audacious example of cultural piracy—an act that prompted his fellow nobleman, Lord Byron, to publicly castigate him as “the last, the worst dull spoiler” of one of the world’s architectural wonders.

Neither Byron nor Elgin could have imagined that the dispute over what impartial observers now call “those marbles” would still be raging on the eve of the 21st century.

Nor could they have guessed that one of the world’s great museums—itself nearing its 250th anniversary—would now stand accused as the latest “dull spoiler” of Greece’s marble masterpieces. That charge was leveled last year after the museum’s disclosure of a long-suppressed report showing that the museum had “greatly damaged” the marbles during an ill-advised attempt to clean them in 1938.

“Any claim that the Elgin marbles have been well taken care of is a cynical sham,” says William St. Clair, a senior research fellow at Trinity College in Cambridge, who obtained the report after repeated requests for it under Britain’s open records laws.

“Up to 2 centimeters of the surface of some of the marbles has been scraped,” says St. Clair. “The natural patina has been removed. The Elgin marbles are physically very different now than when they were first brought to London.”

It was, museum officials now concede, a tragic error. After more than a century in London’s foul air, the sculptures had turned a dirty gray. So when Lord Duveen commissioned a new wing for the marbles—the simple, but elegant gallery in which the disembodied marbles stand today—the museum decided to spruce them up a little.

Museum workers scrubbed the marbles. They scoured them with wire brushes. And with blunt tools. And caustic chemicals. For 18 months they cleaned the marbles until they were white. In the process, they all but destroyed the stone’s natural honey-colored patina, scraped away the last
traces of the original paint that had once decorated the marbles and obliterated much of the fine detail on the surface.

Knowledgeable museum officials were so horrified when they saw what had happened that they fired the people responsible, erected a barrier to keep spectators from inspecting the marbles too closely, and kept the episode under wraps until St. Clair obtained the report 60 years later.

"British authorities went to tremendous lengths, first of all to pretend that nothing had happened, then to conceal the fact that anything had happened, and then to prevent anyone from discovering the truth by denying access to the records," St. Clair says.

Museum officials acknowledge that the report was initially suppressed out of embarrassment over the incident, but they say the damage to the marbles is not as severe as St. Clair claims.

Greek diplomats insist that the incident shows that the British have no moral authority to keep the marbles. Generations of Greeks have insisted they never did. Like any controversy that has festered for two centuries, however, morality is only part of the story.

The current round of the dispute began in 1982, when actress Melina Mercouri, the Greek minister of culture, formally asked the British to return the marbles. After her death in 1994, the campaign intensified, led by the Athens-based Mercouri Foundation, which is headed by her widower, filmmaker Jules Dassin.

"There is a clear moral justification for returning the marbles," says Dassin. As intense at the age of 88 as when he directed "Topkapi," in 1964, he seldom misses a chance to take a swipe at the British. "How could anyone think it was moral to take hacksaws, cut away these magnificent sculptures and cart them off to England? It is obscene to have the head of Athena here and the torso there, Poseidon's balls in one place and his other body parts somewhere else."

Some British leaders have been sympathetic to the Greek claims. In the mid-1980s, Labor Party leader Neil Kinnock compared the Parthenon without its marbles to a smile without a tooth. He vowed that if the Labor Party ever came to power the sculptures would be returned. When the party did in 1997, it took just 48 hours for Prime Minister Tony Blair to reverse course and announce that the marbles would stay in England.

While Greece claims the high moral ground, the English case is more legalistic. The British insist that their ownership of the marbles is entirely legal. Elgin, they point out, had written permission from the Ottoman Turks, who ruled Greece during his ambassadorship to take away "some pieces of stone with inscriptions or figures."

Greeks say Elgin, who plied Turkish officials with lavish gifts to gain their favor, liberally interpreted "some pieces" to include more than 150 linear yards of marble friezes, 15 high-relief sculptures, 19 free-standing sculptures and assorted portions of other Greek monuments on the Acropolis—several shiploads of sculpture in all. And Greek legal experts point out that even the Turks' agreement with Elgin specified that he do "no harm to the monuments."

Yet for all of its public protestations, Greece has never taken legal action to recover its treasures, and isn't likely to.

"Since the marbles are now in Britain, we would have to do it under British law," Korka explains. "We are reluctant to pursue legal action because any decision would be final. Instead, we are relying on public pressure."

UNESCO, the United Nations Economic, Scientific and Cultural Organization, has listened patiently to Greek pleas, but has no power to compel the return of the marbles, which were taken long before today's international agreements on rights to cultural property.

"Every few years since 1984, we have tried to broker some agreement between the two countries, so far without success," says David Walden of Canada, the chairman of
They are magnificent, but eerie-headless, limbless, disembodied torsos. They look a little lost.

— Mike Toner on the Parthenon marbles

The UNESCO’s cultural property committee. “We met with both countries in January 1999, but there was only a further hardening of positions.”

Legalities and politics aside, those on Britain’s side insist that the Parthenon marbles—even after the disastrous cleaning—have fared better in London during the past 200 years than they would have in Athens, where the last two centuries have witnessed revolution, earthquakes and some of the world’s worst air pollution.

Greece is clearly struggling with the upkeep of the Acropolis’ architectural treasures. Although there have been a number of restorations since 1834, all of the ancient structures—the Parthenon, as well as the temple of Athena Nike, the Propylaea and the Erechtheion—show evidence of damage from acid rain, soot from air pollution and the inevitable effects of aging. In some cases, restoration has done more harm than good.

“It only took Pericles eight years to build the Parthenon and another eight for the sculptures,” says Nikos Toganidis, the architect in charge of the current Acropolis restoration. “We started our current restoration in 1984 but we are far from finished.”

Standing beneath a giant construction crane that rises from the center of the Parthenon while the chip-chip of marble workers’ hammers rings in the air, he shakes his head sadly at the thought the task is unlikely to be completed in his lifetime. “We don’t have enough marble workers to go any faster. And we don’t have enough money.”

High on the eastern pediment, the head of a horse and a reclining Dionysus provide a tantalizing hint of what the Parthenon’s decorative marbles may once have looked like at the height of its glory. Even the hint is illusory.

In recognition of the caustic nature of Athens air, the Greek Ministry of Culture moved its own marbles—the ones that Elgin left behind—into a nearby museum in 1992. Officials acknowledge that even if the rest of the marbles are returned they will not be reattached to the facade of the Parthenon—merely housed on a new, grander museum, now under construction at the foot of the Acropolis.

“We know we need a proper museum to display the marbles properly,” says Sotiris Mousouris, president of the Organization for the Construction of the New Acropolis Museum. “The existing museum on the rock is much too small.”

The new museum, however, has encountered its own problems. Selection of the architect, Nicollete Passorini, consumed two years of Greek political squabbling. Then, no sooner had workers broken ground for the new structure than they discovered it lay atop a 2,300-year-old Roman neighborhood. The required archaeological excavations are expected to delay the start of construction at least until the year 2000.

In the end, of course, the debate is about more than marbles—even more than a debate about magnificent, 2,500-year-old marbles from the birthplace of democracy. In the end it is about who owns culture—and how, in a world of so many diverse cultures, it should be preserved and appreciated, and by whom.

“The British say more people will see the marbles in London because the British Museum has more than 3 million people a year and the Parthenon only has a little over a million visitors,” Dassin says. “But the marbles belong in Greece. If all the number of people who saw them were all that mattered, we would send them to Disney World.”

Those who would keep the marbles in London, however, see another issue looming on the horizon. Since its founding in 1754, the British Museum, like most of the world’s great museums, has assiduously gathered art and artifacts from the far corners of the world. Many of the 7 million objects in the museum collection might have been lost, forgotten or destroyed had they not been curated at the sprawling museum on Great Russell Street, now in the midst of its own $150 million reconstruction project.
Yet now, with increasing frequency, countries from which some objects came are asking—even demanding—they be returned.

"I will not recommend to Parliament that the marbles be returned," museum director Anderson says adamantly.

"We have some very important material from all over the world. If we return the marbles, it only encourage more requests like this, and I am not going to be known as the director of the British Museum who started disassembling the collections."

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**Parthenon Marbles at the Center of 2,500 Years of Turmoil**

- **447 B.C.** In the Golden Age of ancient Greece, Pericles starts construction of a marble temple of Athena atop Athens' Acropolis.

- **432 B.C.** Work on the Parthenon and its sculptures is completed.

- **A.D. 560** Under Byzantine rule, a Christian church is erected amid the marble columns.

- **1458** Athens is taken by Turks, the church is razed and the Parthenon converted to a mosque.

- **1678** Venetian bombardment of the Acropolis destroys the center and two sides of the Parthenon.

- **1766** Turks build a new mosque amid the ruins of the Parthenon.

- **1801** Turkey authorizes Lord Elgin to "remove some stones with inscriptions" from the Parthenon.

- **1802** Elgin's workers strip the sculptures and ship them to England.

- **1811** Lord Byron, among others, attacks Elgin for "wanton destruction" of the Parthenon.

- **1816** Elgin's collection of marbles is sold to the British Museum for 35,000 pounds.

- **1829** Greece becomes an independent nation.

- **1837** The British Museum damages the marbles while cleaning them for exhibition in new gallery.

- **1937** The British Museum damages the marbles while cleaning them for exhibition in new gallery.

- **1972** Greek culture minister Melina Mercouri requests the return of the marbles.

- **1985** The British Labor Party vows to return the marbles if it ever comes to power.

- **1996** Greece breaks ground for the new Parthenon museum.

- **1997** Newly elected Labor Party Prime Minister Tony Blair says the marbles won't be returned.

- **1998** European Parliament endorses Greece's claim to the marbles.

- **Nov. 1999** Experts to convene on the 30th in London to assess the damage to the marbles.
Numbered marble blocks await their place in a restored Parthenon. Scaffolding and a giant crane attest to the fact that the work, begun in 1984, is far from finished. Lack of money and skilled workers make a completion date uncertain.

(David Tulis, AJC Staff)
Carlos Museum Tempers Desire to Acquire

Atlanta

Like many museums these days, the Michael C. Carlos Museum at Emory University in Atlanta is taking a closer look at its holdings. Unlike many museums, it is being disarmingly open about what it knows—and what it doesn't know—about its collections.

"Every museum has skeletons in its closets," says museum director Anthony Hirschel. "We have them too, but we are trying hard to find them and do the right thing when we do."

The Mayan cylinder vase the museum once called "the finest piece in our meso-American holdings," for instance, has finally been returned to its display case after six months of rehabilitation by a New York conservator.

The 9-inch high polychrome vase is now minus most of the familiar spear-wielding warrior god that museumgoers saw during the eight years it was previously on exhibit.

The vase dated from about A.D. 650, in the Peten region of Guatemala. The painted warrior, unfortunately, dated from the 1960s, probably from somewhere in Miami.

"We discovered, on close examination, that the side of the vase we were exhibiting had been rather creatively imagined by some fellow who overpainted it in modern times," Hirschel says. "The things he added are gone now. That side is now mostly just a patch of brown. We turned it around so that people can now see the side that we now know to be genuine."

The forged portion of the Mayan cylinder vase was discovered in the course of the museum’s effort to publish its massive collection of ancient American artifacts—the first comprehensive catalog of its holdings the museum has ever conducted.

For an institution that started out in 1876 as a few dusty display cases in the library of Emory’s old Oxford, Ga., campus, the Carlos—now housed on Emory’s quadrangle in a modern, neo-Florentine building designed by architect Michael Graves—has come a long way. Many of the 16,000 items it owns, including Georgia’s oldest Maytag washer, have been relegated to storage to make room for its growing collection of pre-Columbian, Egyptian, Greek, Roman and African materials.

With a budget of only $2.5 million a year, the Carlos is spared the temptation of trying to compete head-to-head for new material with the country’s major museums, which sometimes pay that much to add a single piece to their permanent collections.

But its reputation as an innovative, up-and-coming university-affiliated art and archaeology museum keeps its staff wary of any new material—purchased or donated—whose recent history can’t be documented sufficiently to assure that it has not been stolen or looted.

The museum’s largest purchase, the $2 million Egyptian mummy collection, acquired from the Niagara Falls Museum this year, was possible not only because of a community fund-raising effort, but also because the Carlos was sure that the mummies met the museum’s acquisition guidelines.

"We felt comfortable with it because it had been assembled by a group of people in the 1860s," says Hirschel. "Abe Lincoln went to see it. So did Jules Verne and Teddy
Prized acquisition: Carlos Museum director Anthony Hirschel displays a kylix, a Greek drinking cup bought last year in Europe. Other pieces the museum would like to own haven’t met the institution’s standards for new acquisitions. (David Tulis, AJC Staff)

Roosevelt. It was legally exported a long time ago—one of many such collections that people in Egypt acquired for interested parties in Europe and America.”

The collection greatly expands the museum’s existing mummy collection, begun by Emory theology professor William Shelton, who mounted an expedition to the Near East in 1920 with financial support from Atlanta cotton merchant John Manget.

At one point Shelton and his staff traveled in an armoured Rolls Royce as they collected more than 250 artifacts, mostly Egyptian and Babylonian, for the museum. These days, such activity is outlawed in most of the countries Shelton visited.

As concern grows that museums’ acquisitive nature contributes to the trade in stolen and looted antiquities, Carlos officials have grown increasingly suspicious of new materials whose recent ownership can’t be easily tracked.

“We are very careful about material from Latin America,” says Rebecca Stone-Miller, the museum’s curator of ancient American arts. “We’re suspicious of anything that has come through Europe, which is the main conduit for illicit objects. If it looks like it has been laundered through Europe, we won’t buy it.”

Even for a museum determined to “do the right thing,” the decision can be agonizing.

“One on one buying trip to Europe last year, I encountered a Swiss dealer who had a very beautiful Greek antiquity: a statue of Aphrodite,” Hirschel says. “Because we don’t have a nude female in our collection of Greek and Roman antiquities, it would have made a perfect addition. It was early second century, 4 feet high, broken at knees and neck. It was very beautiful and at $100,000 it seemed reasonably priced.

“I would have bought it on the spot, but the dealer didn’t have any documentation. He said it had been in a mysterious old French collection, but because the owner didn’t want to disclose that for tax reasons, he couldn’t prove it. So I had to let it go. When I asked later about the fate of my lost love, I was told she had been sold.”

Even so, the museum does occasionally indulge its passion for possession.

Hirschel, formerly director of the University of Virginia’s Bayley Museum, is especially proud of a red and black Greek drinking cup, a kylix, which the museum bought from a Swiss dealer last year for a sum reputed to be in the $100,000 range. The piece now occupies a small alcove in the museum’s Greek and Roman gallery.

“We know that an awful lot of art passes through Switzerland to erase any problems it may have, but in this case we knew it came from the highly regarded Studen collection in Lugano, Switzerland, so we felt comfortable with it,” he says.

Like most museums, most of the Carlos’ holdings are a result of others’ generosity. Over the past 10 years, the
museum has received more than $3 million worth of pre-Columbian materials from the private collection of Carol and William Thibadeau, who founded the Atlanta real estate company that bears his name.

As a teenager, Thibadeau collected arrowheads along Peachtree Creek. Later in life, the collecting bug bit with a vengeance and he began buying pre-Columbian material from dealers in Central America. “Sometimes they would come to Atlanta,” he says. “And sometimes they would just send us things. Prices were much lower then. A piece you could buy for $5 or $6 then, now costs 20 or 30 times that.

“We used to go to the airport and pick up huge crates of artifacts. It went through Customs with no trouble. We’d buy what we wanted and store the rest of it in our garage until they were ready to sell it.”

Thibadeau, 79, still recalls the details of many of the 1,300 pieces he donated to the museum: the matched pair of 2,000-year-old clay figures, Ixtan del Rio style, that he got from Costa Rican art dealer Enrique Vargas in exchange for a used Oldsmobile, the Mayan polychrome vase—now known to have been overpainted by forgers—that he paid $1,800 for at a show at Duke University.

Thibadeau, who continues to collect, says it was his wife’s insistence that he “clean out” the basement that prompted the series of gifts to the Carlos—which he chose, in part, because of frequent visits to the old Emory museum.

Because any undocumented piece has the potential to tarnish its reputation, however, the museum is careful, even about generous gifts.

“We have turned down some gifts because the owners didn’t know where they came from,” Hirschel says. “If it doesn’t have proper paperwork, we can’t have it.”

Outright ownership, however, is not the only way for a museum to offer quality art and archaeology to the public. The Carlos’ former director, Maxwell Anderson, who now heads the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, inaugurated an ambitious program of inter-museum loans that many experts believe should be the future standard for museums that don’t want to encourage illicit traffic in antiques.

“Loans can give museums like the Carlos access to materials that they could never afford—from places like the Louvre and institutions of that caliber,” Anderson says. “It also provides a sensible alternative to the rapacious acquisition that has contributed to the worldwide market in ancient art.”

Hirschel agrees. “It provides a way for people who come to the museum to see the cultural heritage of other parts of the world without them having to fear that those treasures are being spirited away,” he says.

“We try to do our best. But regardless of what we do, we will never be able to eliminate illegal exploitation of archaeological sites. And we are never going to suppress the urge to collect. It is basic to human nature.”

Favorite things: William and Carol Thibadeau, here surrounded by their private collection of pre-Columbian artifacts, have donated more than $3 million worth of art and artifacts to the Carlos Museum. (David Tulis, AJC Staff)
Details Behind the Objects

In what for many museums is rare candor, Emory University's Michael C. Carlos Museum opened its files to reveal what it knows—and doesn't know—about several objects selected by The Atlanta Journal-Constitution.

Each of the 16,000 objects in the museum has its own story, but for many—like most pieces in most museums—the history of their recent travels and previous ownership is thinly documented.

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Light Tan Storage Jar with Double Handle
~ Israel, Middle Bronze Age, 1800-1550 B.C.

One of many pieces excavated from Tomb J42 in Jericho by Dame Kathleen Kenyon of the British School of Archaeology in 1955. Financial backing for the dig by Emory assured the museum a portion of the artifacts recovered.

Linen-Shrouded Mummy of a Middle-Aged Man
~ Egypt, probably 167-30 B.C.

One of 250 objects collected by William Arthur Shelton of Emory's divinity school during a 1920 expedition to Egypt and the Near East. Financing for the expedition by Atlanta cotton merchant John Manget included use of an armor-plated Rolls Royce mounted with a machine gun to ward off bandits.

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Matched Pair of Clay Figures
~ Juxtan del Rio Style, Nayarit, western Mexico, 200 B.C. to A.D. 200

One of 299 pre-Columbian artifacts donated to the museum in 1990 by William and Carol Thibadeau of Atlanta. The deed of gift says the pair of seated figurines are thought to have been "imported into the United States prior to 1983." Thibadeau got them in barter for a used Oldsmobile from Enrique Vargas, a Costa Rican artifact dealer who claimed they had been sold off by the Denver Art Museum.

Mayan Polychrome Cylinder Vessel with Underworld Scene ~ Petén Region, Guatemala, Late Classic Period, A.D. 670-750

Described by the museum as "the finest piece of our meso-American holdings." Donated in 1990 by William and Carol Thibadeau, who paid $1,800 for it at an artifact show at Duke University in the mid-1980s. Thought to have been imported before 1983. Removed from display for several months after curators determined that a portion of the design was a forgery. The overpainted portion has been stripped off and the vase is back on display.
Headless Marble Torso of Roman Citizen in Toga
~ Roman or Greek Jonian, A.D. First Century

Purchased for $175,000 from London art dealer Bruce McAlpine. Reported to have been part of an unidentified Austrian collection for two generations. Warranted by McAlpine that it complies with all U.S. import laws and the export law of the country of origin, although the country of origin is undetermined.

Marble Head of Aphrodite
~ Possibly Greek, First Century B.C.

Purchased from Acanthus Gallery in New York in 1992. Price undisclosed. Previously owned by a duke in Northern Ireland who, as a condition of sale, insisted that he “be not in any way approached or contacted” by anyone wanting to know more about the piece. Not reported stolen, according to International Foundation for Art Research database.

Marble Funerary Urn of Gaius Pompeius Ireneus
~ Roman, Flavian Period, First Century

Donated by William and Carol Thibadeau in 1997. They bought it for an undisclosed sum in 1990 from Laurence Witten, who shipped it to them via United Parcel Service with a cautionary note to “avoid hernia when lifting it about.” Witten purchased it in the 1960s from Carlebach Galleries in New York.

Left: Headless Marble Torso of Roman Citizen in Toga.
Right: Marble Head of Aphrodite.
Left: Mayan polychrome cylinder vessel with underworld scene.
Below: Marble funerary urn of Gaius Pompeius Ireneus.

Right: Linen-shrouded mummy of a middle-aged man.

Photos: David Tulis, AJC Staff
Going Home: Some Artifacts That Have and Some That May

Priam’s Treasure

Who has it: Pushkin State Fine Arts Museum in Moscow
Who wants it: Germany, Turkey and private parties
Status: Still in Moscow

German archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann spent years excavating ancient Troy in western Turkey. But when he smuggled King Priam’s gold hoard out of the country in his wife’s petticoats in 1873, he started a fuss that’s tarnished his achievements. Until World War II, Priam’s gold—incorrectly named for the Homeric king who supposedly owned it—was on display in Berlin. In 1945, it was seized by the invading Russian army and taken to Moscow. Now, despite President Boris Yeltsin’s promise to return seized German art, Russia’s Constitutional Court has held that the treasure should remain in Russia. Germany is pressing its case. Turkey is planning to pursue its own claims to the treasure, and the heirs of British archaeologist Frank Calvert say it belongs to them because he owned half of Turkey’s Hisarlik mound, where Schliemann found it.

Ghost Shirt from Wounded Knee

Who had it: Kelvingrove Museum, Glasgow, Scotland
Who got it: Lakota Sioux Tribe
Status: Buried on the Pine Ridge Reservation, S.D.

A member of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show donated the bloodstained, fringed tunic to the Glasgow museum during a visit in 1892, two years after the Army killed more than 200 Sioux men, women and children at Wounded Knee. John Earl, a Woodstock, Ga., attorney and Cherokee Indian, noticed the shirt—worn by “Ghost Dance” warriors who believed it would make them immune to the white man’s weapons—in the Scottish museum in 1992. He notified the Lakota’s Wounded Knee Survivors Association and, after hearing a series of pleas from the Lakota, the Glasgow City Council voluntarily agreed to its return. The shirt was laid to rest in a cemetery near the site of the Wounded Knee massacre.
Head of Diadoumenos by Polykleitos

Who had it: J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles
Who wanted it: No claims made
Status: Returned to the Italian government

The Getty received the second century marble head as part of the $80 million Fleischman collection, which was donated to the museum in 1996—and learned later from a specialist in Polykleitan sculpture that it had been reported missing from an excavation storeroom in southern Italy. The museum voluntarily returned it to the Italian government.

Euphronioius Krater

Who has it: Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
Who wants it: The Italian government
Status: Currently on display at the Met

Former Met director Thomas Hoving suspected that the 2,500-year-old Greek vase, one of only a handful attributed to Greek master painter Euphronioius, might be "sublime" when he paid a European art dealer $1 million for it in 1971. Later, after Italian police informants reported that it had been looted from a site north of Rome, it became known as the Met's "hot pot." By the time he had left the museum, even Hoving was convinced that it probably had been looted. Despite its suspicions, the Italian government has never taken legal action to recover the vase.

Torso of the God Mithra

Who had it: J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles
Who wanted it: No claims made
Status: Returned to the Italian government

The Getty acquired the marble torso of the Persian god Mithra in 1982, with later additions of the arms and head. In the course of its own research, the Getty discovered that the pieces had been stolen from a private collection in Italy. It was turned over to the Italian government for eventual return to the owner.

Wooden Lintel from Guatemala

Who had it: Denver Art Museum
Who got it: Guatemalan Institute of Anthropology
Status: On display at the National Museum of Archaeology in Guatemala City

The 5-foot-wide wooden lintel, a decorative portion of a 1,300-year-old door frame, disappeared from an archaeological site in the Peten region of Guatemala in the 1960s. The Denver Art Museum acquired it through donation in 1973 and only recently concluded, from photographs showing it in place at the Mayan ruins of El Zotz, that it should be returned to Guatemala. Although only a dozen such pieces are known to exist, museum officials concede they weren't giving up much. "It was not on display at the time," says pre-Columbian Curator Margaret Young-Sanchez. "It was a wonderful piece, but it was not in good condition. Its limited benefit to visitors was one of the reasons we decided to return it."
The world's most famous slab of black basalt was discovered near Alexandria, Egypt, in 1799, as Napoleon's forces were constructing a fort. The British took control of the stone two years later when the French in Egypt surrendered to them. Inscriptions on the stone contain a homage to King Ptolemy Epiphanes in three languages: Greek, an ancient Egyptian language called demotic and hieroglyphics. Because Western scholars understood Greek, they were able to decipher the secrets of the hieroglyphic symbols, providing a firm foundation for modern Egyptology. Egypt isn't happy that this year's 200th anniversary of the discovery of the stone is being celebrated at the British Museum. The Cairo Museum has a copy of it.

Winged Victory

French consul and archaeologist Charles Champoiseau found pieces of the headless statue of Nike, the goddess of victory, scattered across a lonely hillside on the Aegean island of Samothrace in 1863. The head was never found, but the other 118 pieces were reassembled at the Louvre, which has had it on display ever since. Several years ago, the Greek government actually sent the Louvre one of the statue's missing fingers so that it could be reattached. But now, Giorgos Hanos, mayor of Samothrace, says the people of the island want the 2,200-year-old statue returned. The Louvre has refused. "The world would be awfully sad if all archaeological pieces had to be exhibited in their country of origin," says Louvre spokesman Christophe Monin.

Who has it: The British Museum
Who wants it: Egypt's Supreme Council of Antiquities
Status: On display at the British Museum

Who has it: The Louvre in Paris
Who wants it: The Greek island of Samothrace
Status: Still standing at the top of the Louvre's main staircase
Part 4

America the Looted

The causes and consequences of the country's vanishing archaeological resources and how, at thousands of locations, looters are erasing the yet-to-be recorded nation's history.

February 13, 2000
Civil War Relics at Heart of Battle

The cost of war has never been cheap, but Union and Confederate quartermasters would be astonished to see what is happening these days to the price of Civil War provisions:

- One Sharps carbine bullet, $3.
- One 30-pound artillery shell, used in the Siege of Vicksburg, Miss., $185.
- One Leech & Rigdon revolver, made in Georgia, $60,000.
- One Confederate States of America belt buckle, $10,000.
- Half a handful of blackened hardtack, as unpalatable as the day it was made, $10.

Six score and 15 years after Robert E. Lee’s surrender at Appomattox, Va., the market for relics of the nation’s bloodiest war is exploding—spurred by forces as diverse as Ken Burns’ documentary “The Civil War” to the legions of re-enactors in blue and gray who now regularly refight every battle from Bull Run to Gettysburg.

History has its price. And it’s going up fast.

Prices for Civil War relics have been rising ever since the war’s centennial in the 1960s, but lately they have been going through the roof,” says George Juno, who appraises Civil War material for TV’s “Antiques Roadshow” and whose American Soldier store in Allentown, Pa., buys and sells high-end military collectibles.

“High-quality, authentic material is harder and harder to come by, and demand is growing so fast that the prices just keep going up,” says John Sexton, the owner of Stone Mountain Relics, Atlanta’s largest dealer in Civil War relics and artifacts. As Sexton talks from behind his table at a relic show in Nashville, he pulls a Confederate presentation sword and scabbard from an express mail pouch and examines it. He paid a widow in Washington, Ga., $7,500 for the family heirloom a few days earlier. Within minutes, it has sold for $9,500.

“Items that cost $100 ten years ago now sell for several thousand,” Juno says. “In 1993, an Army of Northern Virginia battle flag sold for $73,000. Today it would easily bring $200,000. With some Civil War belt buckles going for $20,000 to $35,000, it’s a real incentive for some people to go get a metal detector and start digging things up.”

Most Civil War relics have honorable origins—acquired as government surplus, handed down through generations, passed on from collector to collector. Even many so-called “dug” relics, those excavated from the battlefields, are legitimate if they were taken from private land with the permission of the owners.

Over the years, however, the mother lode of Civil War relics available on private land has dwindled. Demand has not.
“There is such a gold rush mentality itch in Civil War artifacts that virtually every battlefield in the country has been heavily scavenged,” says Patrick Garrow of TRC Garrow Associates, Georgia’s largest contract archaeology firm. “We did a survey of one site in Charles County, Va., that was being considered for a landfill. It was the scene of an unnamed battle between a full division of Union cavalry and a light division of Confederate cavalry in 1864. As many as 20,000 people were involved on both sides. When we surveyed it recently, it was almost barren of artifacts.”

As privately owned portions of the battlefields have been picked or paved over, some relic hunters have found the lure of public lands irresistible. “Some of these people are fine folks who are genuinely interested in the Civil War,” says Mike Greenfield, supervisory ranger for Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania County Battlefields Memorial National Military Park in Virginia. “But some have such a desire to own artifacts they don’t care whether they find them on private property or a national park.”

Two Richmond area men, Jeffrey S. Blevins and John H. Walker, were recently convicted of repeatedly looting Petersburg National Battlefield in Virginia, the scene of six major Union and Confederate clashes and more than 70,000 casualties. Over 18 months, Blevins and Walker sneaked into the park as often as three nights a week. National Park Service officials said the pair dug more than 240 holes and stole more than 2,000 artifacts.

“They were very organized in the way they went at it,” says Richard Waldbauer, who tracks archaeological crimes for the National Park Service. “They operated like a business as they systematically looted more than nine acres. They had lookouts and exotic ways to get in and out of the park. They dressed in camouflage. Their metal detectors were wrapped in black tape so they could work at night. They often worked on holidays when they knew there would be less law enforcement.”

The two men pleaded guilty and were fined more than $25,000 each and sentenced to several months in federal prison. In meting out the heaviest penalties ever imposed for archaeological crimes in the eastern United States, federal Judge Richard Williams noted that “Civil War buffs are a cult all their own” and said he hoped the sentences would temper others’ “craving for artifacts” from the parks.

Despite the risks, dozens of arrests and convictions are proof that battlefield parks and public lands are a tempting target for looters. Consider:

- Two armed men were caught with an intact artillery shell they had found with a metal detector at the Spotsylvania battlefield. In 1998, they were put on probation, and barred from national parks, for two years.
Three visitors to Vicksburg National Military Park in Mississippi were caught digging in a remote area of the battlefield. All three pleaded guilty, were fined a total of $8,900 and forfeited their artifacts, four metal detectors and a Ford Bronco.

Two northern Virginia men were arrested for dredging thousands of Civil War artifacts from Herring Creek, a state-owned tributary of the James River. They pleaded guilty and got suspended jail sentences.

At Kennesaw Mountain National Battlefield Park in Cobb County, Ga., park rangers augment their regular patrols with radio-controlled remote sensing devices and trip wires that can detect intrusions by would-be looters.

“We have 11.5 miles of Union and Confederate lines to protect,” says Kennesaw Superintendent John Cissel. “There are hundreds of ways a person can enter the park. We can’t watch them all.”

Cissel says the precautions seem to have reduced looting at Kennesaw in recent years, but he says his rangers are
powerless to do anything about active relic hunting occurring on private property that surrounds the park.

To protect artifacts that are still in the ground, national parks have banned the use of metal detectors, which are now sensitive enough to distinguish a bullet from a brass button up to a foot below the surface. At some parks, visitors are warned that even if they are just driving through, their metal detectors must be treated like guns—disassembled and carried in the trunks of their cars.

"Metal detecting is very popular, but unfortunately there are a few bad apples," says Andy Sabisch, a relic hunter and metal detector enthusiast from Canton, Ga., who says reputable hobbyists are appalled by the abuse of the technology in parks. "With the explosion of prices for relics, some people just find it too tempting to sneak into a battlefield on a rainy night dressed in camo fatigues. They need to realize that if they get caught, they're going to jail. There is nothing in a national park that is worth a felony conviction."

The problem for authorities is that most Civil War parks, such as the Kennesaw and Chicamauga battlefields in Georgia, are an irregular checkerboard of private and public lands, making it all but impossible to pinpoint the origin of some artifacts.

"A lot of collectors actually prefer dug relics because they can be tied to a particular battle and a particular location," says Charles Nash of Stone Mountain Relics. "But once it's dug, there's no way to tell whether it came from private or public land."

Sometimes, however, authorities can directly tie looted material to the burgeoning market for relics.

At Virginia's Colonial National Historical Park, a park ranger acting on a tip from nearby residents caught three North Carolina men with metal detectors who had stopped off to loot the park on their way to a Civil War show in Richmond.

The men, including a schoolteacher and a certified public accountant, had plotted the location of each of their finds on a map of the park. They explained that they had planned to spend two days digging in the park to supplement their collections with fresh material. As part of the sentence they received for their crimes, the three were required to make a videotape warning other relic hunters to stay out of the national parks.

"There are groups of career relic hunters who travel what we call the 'Cannonball Circuit,' going from park to park," says Sam Weddle, chief ranger at Chickamauga and Chattanooga National Military Park. "Some are highly educated about the areas they loot."
Linda Vizi, special agent at the FBI’s Philadelphia office, which has made several recent arrests for artifact thefts, says the real problem is the skyrocketing value of Civil War relics, especially Confederate material. “As prices increase, more people are seeing the opportunity to make money,” she says.

It was a Civil War show in Richmond that put FBI agents on the trail of two Pennsylvania men who stole $3 million worth of artifacts from the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. A dealer in antique weapons told agents of his suspicions about 10 antique swords that a Pennsylvania Civil War collector had offered to sell him.

Before the investigation was over, federal agents had arrested the collector and a museum custodian who had been stealing objects from a museum storeroom for 10 years. In all, 200 items were recovered, including a lock of George Washington’s hair and the flintlock rifle that abolitionist John Brown used at the siege of Harper’s Ferry, W. Va. Both men were sentenced to four years in prison and three years’ probation.

Acting on a tip from another Civil War relics dealer, FBI undercover agents last year recovered a rare regimental battle flag, the silk standard of the 12th Regiment Corps d’Afrique, one of the Union Army’s first units with black soldiers.

The flag, stolen from the Army’s collection at Fort Jackson, S.C., more than 20 years ago, was seized by undercover agents when Charles Wilhite of Overland, Kan., offered to sell it to them for $28,000, according to the agents. Experts say the rare flag, now in a trophy display at FBI headquarters, could have netted more than $100,000. If convicted, Wilhite faces up to 10 years in prison and a $500,000 fine.

“It’s sad,” Weddle says. “Many collectors don’t realize that this kind of criminal activity is going on. A lot of them would be horrified to know that something they just bought or traded came from a battlefield park. But some of it does.”
**Shovels, Backhoes Destroy Irreplaceable Clues at Sites**

It only took one night for the looters of Cactus Hill to scramble 15,000 years of history. In their hurried search for a few hundred dollars’ worth of artifacts buried in the ancient Virginia sand dune, they scattered traces of prehistoric charcoal that might have helped rewrite the story of the first Americans.

Archaeologist Mike Johnson left his diggings along Virginia’s Nottaway River at dusk on a Saturday evening. When he returned on Sunday morning, he found his equipment scattered and his excavation—intended to carefully plot and date minute bits of organic matter in the soil—a shambles.

“They were just lying in the woods waiting for us to leave,” Johnson says. “They got in and got out fast. They even used our equipment to dig. And they did devastating, irreparable damage to one of the rarest sites in North America.”

For Johnson, an archaeologist for Virginia’s Fairfax County, it was a tragically familiar setback in his efforts to document the presence of humans in the eastern United States more than 15,000 years ago—a time when, until recently, America was thought to have been uninhabited.

“We’ve been looted at least four times since we started,” he says. “They sneak in from the river. They sneak in overland. We can’t stop them.

“To get accurate radiocarbon dates, we needed to plot and date every little piece of charcoal we could find. Cactus Hill was one of those sites that comes along once in a century. Undisturbed, it might have answered an unbelievable number of questions about the peopling of the Americas. The damage these people have done is forever.”

At thousands of locations across the United States, from prehistoric Indian pueblos in New Mexico to Civil War battlefields in Tennessee, legions of looters are erasing the yet-to-be-recorded pages of America’s history—a muted legacy of stones, pot shards and faint traces of charcoal that modern archaeologists have only begun to read.

In an Indiana Jones world where looters routinely ransack Cambodian temples, Roman tombs and Peruvian pyramids to supply a booming international market for ancient art and artifacts, the theft of America’s Indian, Colonial and Civil War heritage from public lands goes little noticed and often unchecked.

No one is sure just how big the problem is, but it clearly is widespread.

“We know that all of our national parks have had incidents of looting,” says George Smith, director of Investigations and Evaluation at the National Park Service’s Southeast Archeological Center. “In any given year, from 800 to 1,600 incidents of looting are reported just on federal land, but that’s only a fraction of what we think is occurring.”

Archaeologists are less concerned about the disappearance of individual artifacts than looters’ destruction of a site’s archaeological context—the relationship of seemingly
insignificant objects like animal bones, stone chips and seeds that can help tell the story of who lived there and what they did. In the aggregate, such losses can be staggering.

"In Utah’s San Juan County, in the Four Corners region, we have at least 20,000 known archaeological sites on Bureau of Land Management land," says Marty Phillips, the agency’s investigator for the region. "We estimate that 90 percent of them have been disturbed by looters."

The scale of the problem may be uncertain, but not the cause. "The demand for American artifacts is soaring," says Martin McAllister, the head of the Montana-based Archaeological Resource Investigations, which advises law enforcement officials on archaeological crime. "In major markets like New York and Los Angeles—and in overseas markets—some items are selling for $200,000 or more."

The National Park Service’s "loot file," a steadily growing chronicle of convictions for archaeological violations on the 740 million acres of federal and Indian lands, shows the emerging new face of what might be called "time crime" in the last several years:
William Stevens, owner of a natural history shop in New York's Soho district, was busted for possession and sale, at prices ranging from $200 to $1,400, of at least 20 Native American skulls and bones that were taken from Seminole and Peoria Indian graves in Florida and Missouri.

Brian Krantz, caretaker of a hunting camp and ranch, and two other hunting guides were convicted for illegally excavating more than 1,000 Chumash Indian artifacts from Channel Islands National Park in California. The three were arrested by more than 20 heavily armed park rangers and deputies who stormed the ranch in helicopters.

Rodney Tidwell, an Arizona art dealer, was convicted of trafficking in sacred Hopi and Acoma Indian artifacts, which he tried to sell to an undercover agent for $3,000. A co-conspirator committed suicide a week after the arrests.

John Walker and Jeffrey Blevins of Petersburg, Va., were arrested for mounting scores of nighttime raids over a period of 18 months, during which they dug more than 240 holes in the Petersburg National Battlefield and looted more than 2,000 Civil War relics ranging from belt buckles to artillery shells.

Earl K. Shumway, 42, a Utah pot hunter, was convicted after he boasted that he started looting as a child and had ransacked "thousands" of sites in southern Utah, including several Anasazi ruins in Canyonlands National Park. His six-year prison term was a record for archaeological crime.

Artifact collecting is a well-established tradition in America. Early settlers plundered Indian mounds as a matter of course. Boy Scout troops hunted artifacts for the fun of it. As a boy, Jimmy Carter enjoyed hunting arrowheads in freshly plowed fields around Plains. As president, he saw to it that the Archaeological Resources Protection Act of 1979, passed during his term of office, exempted "surface collecting" of arrowheads and other objects.

"Whether you collect ancient Chinese cloisonné, Egyptian tomb pieces or projectile points, there is a particular satisfaction in holding in your hand an object that was made by someone thousands of years ago," says Robert Overstreet, whose catalogs have become the bible of arrowhead collecting in the United States.

"I didn't see anything wrong with what I was doing," says Bret Cooper, of Santa Fe, N.M., who was arrested at gunpoint by federal agents, while digging for prehistoric Indian artifacts in nearby Bandelier National Monument. "As a kid I used to dig around in the ruins all the time. I took spear points to school for show and tell. When I started again in 1996, I took my kids with me. A lot of people are doing worse. I just got caught."

Some of these people use the most sophisticated technology they can get— from helicopters to ground-penetrating radar.

~ Wayne Dance
Assistant U.S. Attorney
We came across a looter digging in an Indian burial mound... He stopped when we told him to, but when we came back a few weeks later the entire mound was gone.... Someone told us that he had used a front-end loader to load the whole mound into his truck and take it home with him so he could sift it in his leisure.

~ John Ehrenhard
Director, SEAC
National Park Service

For his efforts, Cooper, son of a former nuclear physicist at Los Alamos National Laboratory, was convicted on seven felony counts and got five years of probation. He was, federal investigators concede, a small fish in the world of archaeological looting.

"Americans have been collecting and selling Indian artifacts since the 1840s, but times have changed," McAllister says. "We're seeing commercial looters who know where the best sites are, how to loot them and what will bring top dollar."

Shoebox collections of arrowheads and flea market artifacts are a far cry from some of the items that make their way into today's market. At Sotheby's most recent auction of high-end native Americana, a 200-year-old Navajo blanket brought $76,750. Thousand-year-old Mimbres pots from southwest Arizona can fetch $100,000 and scarce, 10,000-year-old Folsom spear points sometimes change hands for $20,000.

"The Society for American Archaeology believes that any commercial trade in artifacts, legal or otherwise, sustains a market that stimulates looting," says Keith Kintigh, president of the 6,600-member organization dedicated to the study and protection of archaeology in the Americas. "We do not condone private collecting or the undocumented excavation that often generates these collections."

Assistant U.S. Attorney Wayne Dance, whose Salt Lake City office leads the country in prosecuting archaeological crime, says some of today's looters are a different breed from the shovel-wielding artifact hunters of earlier times.

"Some of these people use the most sophisticated technology they can get—from helicopters to ground-penetrating radar," he says. "They use airplanes to scout their targets and satellite navigation systems to pinpoint the sites. They use night-vision gear to work at night. And some of them even use heavy equipment for their excavations."

John Ehrenhard, director of the National Park Service's Southeast Archeological Center in Tallahassee, says some looters go to great lengths to achieve their goals. "We had a case in the Big Cypress Swamp a few years ago where we came across a looter digging in an Indian burial mound at the north end of the park," he says. "He stopped when we told him to, but when we came back a few weeks later the entire mound was gone. We never found him, but someone told us that he had used a front-end loader to load the whole mound into his truck and take it home with him so he could sift it in his leisure."

In another case, park service officials were horrified to discover that a seasonal ranger at the Custer Battlefield National Monument had been systematically looting relics from the site of Custer's last stand—and selling them by mail to military relic collectors.

Before he was arrested for trying to sell $40,000 worth of artifacts to an undercover agent, George Scott, a retired schoolteacher and part-time park ranger from Billings, Mont., confided that he slipped into the park at night "when no one was looking" and collected the bullets, buttons and other relics using a flashlight and a metal detector.

"Many looters start out as collectors," says Phil Young, special agent for the National Park Service's Intermountain Region. "Then they start thinking they can net thousands of dollars for a few hours' work, and greed takes over."

A Worrisome New Dimension

Authorities now routinely review auction catalogs and the merchandise of established dealers for suspect material, but they say the proliferation of artifact sales on the Internet is adding a worrisome new dimension to the market.
“The market has always been there, but the Internet has brought it to everybody’s living room,” Young says.

The rapid growth of artifact sales on the Internet—and the speed at which the Net can get artifacts into the market—has raised new concerns and made illegal sales even harder to police.

“We’re investigating a site in Arizona where people went in and bulldozed a site and took what they wanted,” says John Fryar, a criminal investigator for the Bureau of Indian Affairs. “Within days, some of it was up for sale on the Internet.”

Authorities say there is little doubt, given that the government owns one-third of the land in the United States, that many of the artifacts for sale have been looted from public lands.

“The Mimbres culture of southern New Mexico produced some of the most highly prized pieces in the market today,” park service agent Young says. “Ninety-eight percent of the known Mimbres sites are on public land and 98 percent of them have been looted or vandalized. And yet 99 percent of the time we ask anyone about the origin of a Mimbres pot, he will say it came from private land.”

In rare cases, investigators have used soil samples to link artifacts to specific sites. DNA samples have also allowed authorities to link particular people to looted sites. But in most cases, officials have to catch looters in the act.

“Our conviction rate is 95 percent on the 150 or so cases we bring every year, but that’s only 10 percent of the cases we find out about,” says Richard Waldbauer, a specialist on archaeological crime for the National Park Service. “We have only six rangers to guard 125,000 acres, and they know our chances of catching them are remote.”

“We caught two fellows recently who had climbed down a very steep slope and spent all day Saturday and Sunday looting a rock shelter. They were very systematic about it. They sifted the dirt out in front of the cave and by the time we got them they had messed up a pristine site that contained all the details of prehistoric life spanning a period from about 9,000 years ago to 1,200 years ago.”

At Big South Fork and other parks, officials are turning to modern technology to help defend the prehistoric past. DesJean says several caves have been equipped with radio-relayed infrared heat sensors, metal detectors and motion sensors to alert rangers when looters show up.

Removing Temptation from Maps

The scale of looting is severe enough that the U.S. Geological Survey has begun erasing archaeological site locations on new versions of its topographical maps. “We’re concerned about protecting these sites,” says Mike Young, a cartographer at the survey’s Rocky Mountain mapping center. “So far we have deleted about a thousand archaeo-
As America joins the list of countries hemorrhaging antiquities, the dichotomy in prices between the Old World’s ancient art and the New World’s native craftsmanship is shrinking too.

Logical sites, but it is going to take a long time to get them all removed.”

Looting of archaeological sites, however, requires a lot of effort. Some would-be looters have opted to skip the hard labor and steal their artifacts from people who already own them—or from small museums, where security is lax.

Within the past six years, such thefts included: more than 70 valuable Indian baskets, taken from the Native American-operated Sierra Mono Museum in North Fork, Calif.; an estimated $18,000 worth of arrowheads, bones and gunflints stolen from the Bushwhacker Museum in Nevada, Mo.; and $225,000 worth of Indian artifacts burglarized from several homes in Jackson, Wyo., by an Idaho man who was later caught trying to sell a stolen Navajo blanket to a local rug dealer. Sometimes, there are happy endings to such incidents. Last year three intricately woven Washoe Indian baskets that had been stolen from the Nevada Historical Society in 1978 were turned over to the FBI by a Tucson art dealer, who recognized them as stolen. The baskets, valued at several hundred thousand dollars each, will soon be back on display in the society’s Reno museum.

The baskets were identifiable only because of the uniquely intricate craftsmanship of Washoe basket maker Dat So La Lee, who made only about 120 such baskets in her lifetime. Most stolen and looted artifacts are not so easily traceable, and quickly vanish into a nebulous network of middlemen, dealers and collectors.

“It’s like the drug problem,” McAllister says. “Looters sell to dealers in a regional artifact market like Albuquerque or Durango. From there it goes to a major center like New York or Los Angeles and may eventually be sold in the international market. The object the looters get $2,000 for may eventually sell in London for $200,000. We’re catching and prosecuting the grunts, but we’re not getting the big dealers.”

In recent years, the growth of international interest in high-end Native American artifacts has stirred new concerns—and driven prices for high-end artifacts even higher.

“More North American artifacts are appearing in the auction houses and art markets in Europe,” says Veletta Canouts, deputy manager of the park service’s archaeology program. “We have had no success in stopping material going to other countries.”

Some surveys suggest that German and Japanese collectors alone buy more than $20 million worth of Indian artifacts a year. But if overseas interest in American artifacts in Europe mirrors the rising U.S. demand for classical antiquities from Europe and the Middle East, there is a key difference. Unlike antiquities-rich countries, the United States has no way to control, or even monitor, the outflow of American artifacts.

“We have no export controls on these items,” says Frank McManamon, chief archaeologist for the National Park Service. “The Customs Service doesn’t check things going out of the country.”

As America joins the list of countries hemorrhaging antiquities, the dichotomy in prices between the Old World’s ancient art and the New World’s native craftsmanship is shrinking too. Six-figure prices are no longer unique to Roman busts and Greek bowls. In January, a display of Native American art, widely regarded as the largest show of its kind, opened in Paris. The stunning collection of artifacts—assembled in the 1980s by retired New York art dealers Eugene and Clare Thaw—includes another of Dat So La Lee’s intricate crafted baskets, which reportedly took her more than a year to make.

Although the basket, currently owned by Fenimore Art Museum in Cooperstown, N.Y., is not for sale, experts say if it were ever offered at auction, it would be snapped up in a heartbeat—and would easily net more than $1 million.
A few miles upriver from Augusta, Ga., a small wooded island marks the scene of an epic turning point in American prehistory. Stallings Island is the cradle of an innovation that has been as vital to human progress as fire, stone tools and the wheel.

Nearly 4,000 years ago, the people of this island in the Savannah River learned to make pottery. The idea caught on. And North America was never the same. With bowls and jars and jugs, people could store food. They settled down, raised crops, waged war and built communities.

“Stallings is home to the oldest known pottery in North America,” University of Florida archaeologist Ken Sassaman says. “For reasons we don’t understand, these people appear to have been the first to forsake hunter-gatherer societies and settle in one place. The emergence of pottery was a watershed in civilization. Stallings Island is a world renowned archaeological site.”

For 60 years, it also has been a looter’s paradise—a popular spot for artifact hunters and collectors who, to the dismay of archaeologists, have carted off the remnants of Stallings culture, pot shard by stolen pot shard.

Although portions of the island were excavated by Harvard archaeologists in the 1930s, experts still have only a hazy idea of why these people developed their skills and then vanished, leaving a technology that outlived them by 3,000 years. The destruction wrought by generations of looters makes the questions even harder to answer.

“Stallings Island was looted openly for many years,” says Alan Gruber, southeastern director for the Archaeological Conservancy, which acquired the island by donation in 1997. “Boy Scouts used to go out on Sunday afternoon and hunt for artifacts. Over the years, it has been so heavily looted that parts of it look like a World War II battlefield.”

Augusta attorney Wyck Knox, the island’s former owner, says the raids were almost impossible to control. “We’d try to run looters off, but as the word got out, it got worse,” he says. “Some people were doing it out of ignorance, but a lot of them were motivated by the almighty buck.”

In the artifact market, elaborately carved pins like those the Stallings people fashioned from antler and bone might fetch $1,000. But Gruber says the destruction of archaeological context is a far greater loss. To protect the site and preserve what remains for future study, Knox has deeded the land to the Archaeological Conservancy, which plans to erect fences and post a guard. “We now control 100 percent of the island,” Gruber says. “And we will prosecute anyone we find there.”

Ownership Is the Best Protection

Since 1980, the conservancy has acquired more than 150 archaeological sites in 29 states. The not-for-profit organization has learned through bitter experience that the best way to protect rare sites is to own them.

From the bits of Stallings culture remaining, archaeologists may yet gain new insights into the time of America’s first pot makers. Elsewhere in the South, ancient sites and their secrets are being lost every day. Some are bulldozed
Ancient sites and their secrets are being lost every day. Some are bulldozed for highways and shopping malls. Some are drowned by man-made reservoirs. But some are dismembered slowly, hauled away a piece at a time by artifact hunters and curiosity seekers.

Georgia’s earthen Indian mounds, built between 800 and 1300 A.D. by various cultures, have been looted repeatedly. Major mound complexes, like Etowah, north of Atlanta, and Ocmulgee, near Macon, are protected by public ownership. But looters still dig illegally at mounds on the Oconee River, on the Flint River and even at Kolomoki Mounds State Park on the Chattahoochee River.

“We haven’t had any looting in our park for years, but there is a lot of it going on just outside the boundaries—on land that was originally intended to be included in the park,” says James David, superintendent of Ocmulgee National Monument.

The looted area, known as the Ocmulgee Old Fields, was continuously inhabited by the Creek nation and their ancestors for a thousand years. “Almost any place you sink a shovel out there, you’ll find something,” David says. “You can just walk in and see the potholes, but we can’t do anything about it because it’s private land.”

Georgia’s state archaeologist, David Crass, says the problem is getting worse. “Looting of archaeological sites and burials is a critical problem in some areas,” he says. “Artifacts taken in Georgia are being offered on the antiquities market, and Web-based auction houses such as eBay display artifacts with Georgia telephone numbers.”

On a recent day, at least eight sellers on eBay’s Web site were offering Georgia artifacts, among them a 4,000-year-old Early Archaic arrowhead that the seller—a Fortson collector identifying himself as “relikhunter”—said was found “recently” on the Ogeechee River. The asking price: $179.50. How it was collected was not disclosed.

In Georgia, as in most states, artifacts usually are legal if they did not come from public lands, were collected on the private property with the permission of the landowner, and did not disturb a burial site. Items acquired before enactment of state archaeological protection laws—1995 in Georgia—are legitimate. The law is straightforward. Enforcement is not.

“We don’t have a concerted statewide effort on archaeological crime,” says Capt. Dan Parrish, who heads the special investigations unit of the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, the lead agency for enforcement of such laws. “We’ve got laws on the books, but nobody is doing anything about them.

“We’ve begun teaching a course on archaeological law enforcement to new recruits, but we’re spread too thin to do much of anything. In general, the department’s attitude has been that if it’s not hooks and bullets, you’re wasting your time.”
Because most violations of state law are misdemeanors, the penalties do little to deter looting. “Traffic in Indian grave goods has gone from a cottage trade to a major industry, and the Southeast is a major conduit for looted goods,” says Gary White Deer, a member of the Choctaw tribe and vice president of Keepers of the Treasures, a national tribal coalition dedicated to cultural preservation. “The greatest problem is not the lack of laws, it’s the lack of enforcement.”

Unless authorities were on the scene when an artifact was dug, they have no way of knowing whether it was collected legally or not. It’s a fact of life that makes it possible for illegally obtained artifacts to be bought and sold with ease, right alongside those that were obtained legally.

U.S. Forest Service officials say looting of Indian sites is continuing in Georgia’s Chattahoochee National Forest, despite seven convictions for archaeological crimes in the last year—including a 10-month federal prison sentence for Johnny Mire Searcy, of Blue Ridge. In the most serious case, looters in the Rich Mountain Wilderness worked under cover of rain and darkness, stripping more than a third of an acre and digging holes up to 20 feet in diameter before they were arrested. The group, all residents of nearby Gilmer and Fannin counties, were digging for Morrow Mountain points—teardrop-shaped arrowheads that can bring up to $1,000 each on the open market.

“These were not amateur archaeologists,” Forest Service archaeologist Jack Wynn says. “They were mining the site, taking the prettiest points and throwing the rest away. They did tens of thousands of dollars of damage, but the loss to archaeology is priceless. This was probably an archaic period site, a workshop, inhabited between 3000 and 5000 B.C., but we’ll never know much more, because it’s gone forever.”

In some areas, looting of graves for artifacts has been so destructive that Native American groups have taken matters into their own hands.

On weekends, members of the Native American Reserve Force living in the Chattanooga area take turns patrolling a traditional Cherokee and Creek burial ground that lies in the broad curve of the Tennessee River at the foot of Lookout Mountain.

“Moccasin Bend is one of the largest Native American burial sites in the Southeast,” says Hamilton County, Tenn., Deputy Lynn Triplett. “Artifact hunters were just destroying it. It looked like a war zone, but since we started patrols and made a few arrests, I think we have pretty much stopped the gravedigging.”

Good Laws, Bad Enforcement

Cracking down on looting, however, is a little like guerrilla warfare. Georgia alone has 34,000 documented archaeo-
Even the Army has trouble defending its turf. Officials at Fort Benning, Georgia... were horrified a few years ago to discover that looters had been making repeated visits to a remote section of the base to dig more than 800 holes on the site of a 200-year-old Yuchi Indian town, which had been excavated earlier by the Smithsonian Institution.

The area south of Fort Benning is also a hotbed of artifact activity—legal and illegal. The broad river valleys there have been continuously inhabited for thousands of years. And because much of the area is still untouched by development, it remains rich in archaeological resources.

“The three-state area of South Georgia, northern Florida and southern Alabama is the mecca of artifact collecting in the country today,” says Kevin Dowdy, whose Flint River Trading Post in Fowlstown, Ga., buys and sells artifacts from the region. “The artifacts you buy in the Midwest today have had five or six owners. Here, most of the material has come out of the ground only in the last few years.”

Dowdy says he tries to avoid handling looted artifacts by dealing only with collectors and dealers that are reputable.

But because most looting goes undetected, it is difficult to get a clear picture of how much of the material being bought and sold today was legally obtained. The experience of Florida, which has been more aggressive than neighboring states in dealing with such problems, suggests that looting may be more widespread than most law enforcement officials think.

A favorite target for Florida artifact hunters is the Aucilla Wildlife Management Area, east of Tallahassee, where hundreds of Indian mounds and encampments—some dating back 10,000 years—have been frequently and repeatedly struck by looters. Florida archaeologists estimate that 80 percent to 90 percent of the sites in the preserve have been damaged or destroyed—and they hope to have the area des-
ignated as a national archaeological zone to protect what remains.

“Over the years what had been a hobby for a few people has become a large and highly organized effort,” says Jim Miller, the state archaeologist for Florida. “We don’t have a good idea of what is happening on private land, but we know from the people who manage public lands in the state that the damage is frequent and ongoing.”

So organized is the effort in Florida that one group of artifact hunters, which calls itself the Coonbottom Artifact Militia, has taken to leaving its calling cards nailed to nearby trees after looting a site. Fliers left by the group decry “overzealous, misguided, Mickey Mouse law enforcement” efforts to curb their activity. The group’s diatribes are aimed, in part, at Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission agent Robert Daniels, who personally has arrested more than 100 looters in the Aucilla preserve in the last six years.

“Their philosophy is that they have the right to do what they do and nobody is going to stop them,” Daniels says. “We’re not sure how many members the militia has, but it probably consists of 25 to 30 people in Florida and Georgia.”

Daniels, who has received at least three telephoned death threats for his efforts, takes particular delight in stalking looters at night—often arresting them in the hole they are digging with shovels in hand.

“Some of these people are better at finding sites than the archaeologists,” he says. “Some of them find these places by looking them up in the state’s official site files, which under Florida’s Sunshine Law are open to the public. Not everybody who collects artifacts is a looter. But for these thieves of time, the prices they can get in the market outweigh the risks. It’s like gold fever. If someone puts a dollar figure on them, someone will take the risk and dig.”

Not everybody who collects artifacts is a looter. But for these thieves of time, the prices they can get in the market outweigh the risks. It’s like gold fever.

— Robert Daniels
Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission
Georgia’s Major Civil War Sites

1. Chickamauga and Chattanooga National Military Park: site of battles setting stage for Union’s 1864 invasion of Georgia

2. Dug Gap Battle Park: saw action in February and May 1864 during Atlanta campaign

3. Pickett’s Mill State Historic Site: during Atlanta campaign, site of a Union defeat that Gen. William T. Sherman tried to forget

4. Gilgal Church Battle Site: part of Atlanta campaign

5. Kennesaw Mountain National Battlefield Park: site of a key battle leading to capture of Atlanta

6. Resaca Battle Site: part of Atlanta campaign

7. Fort Tyler: site of Battle of West Point, the last battle of the Civil War, fought nine days after the South’s surrender

8. Fort Jackson: oldest standing fort in Georgia and headquarters for Confederate river defense

9. Fort Pulaski National Monument: where rifled cannons ended the era of brick forts

10. Fort McAllister State Historic Site: fort’s capture resulted in the fall of Savannah

11. Ringgold’s Western & Atlantic Railroad Depot: an original station related to the “Great Locomotive Chase”

12. Tunnel Hill & Clisby Austin House: 1850 railroad tunnel, an engineering masterpiece and scene of many skirmishes during Atlanta campaign

13. Kennesaw House: hotel where Andrews’ Raiders stayed before the “Great Locomotive Chase”

14. New Manchester Mill Ruins in Sweetwater Creek State Park: textile mill destroyed by Union cavalry during Atlanta campaign

15. Old Cannonball House and Confederate Museum: antebellum home hit by Union artillery during Atlanta campaign

16. Confederate Powderworks at the Augusta Canal: production site for 2.7 million pounds of top-quality gunpowder

17. U.S. Arsenal: seized by state troops just days after Georgia seceded; it now is Augusta College’s administration building

18. Green-Meldrim House at St. John’s Church: Sherman’s headquarters during Union occupation of Savannah

19. Andersonville National Historic Site: largest site where Union prisoners were held

Source: Georgia Civil War Commission (Dale E. Dodson, AJC Staff)
The Loot File: Archaeological Crimes, Solved and Unsolved

Copper Gorget

Location: Coosawattee River, northwest Georgia
Looted: One copper gorget, countless other artifacts
Looters: Never prosecuted

One of the most significant artifacts ever found in Georgia—an ornamental copper gorget incised with Aztec designs—was almost lost to history when it was found by looters who were interested only in its monetary value. The gorget, a medallion worn around the neck, was clutched in the hand of an Indian child buried along the Coosawattee River 450 years earlier. The presence of an Aztec/Christian artifact in an Indian grave—one of hundreds looted by local artifact collectors—established the presence of Spanish explorers in the valley in the 1500s. When he learned of the discovery, archaeologist Jim Langford set out to retrieve it for study. “The pot hunters didn’t have a clue what they had,” Langford says. “They sold it to a collector in South Carolina. I tracked down the collector, who mailed it back to me. We had it studied by laboratories and museums in a dozen states. The gorget now resides with the original landowner…but at least what we learned from it is available to the public.”

Inuit Figurines

Location: Isaacs Inuit Art Gallery, Toronto, Canada
Looted: Two 1,000-year-old Inuit carvings
Looters: Never caught; carvings now at Canadian Museum of Civilization

Av Isaacs was appalled when authorities notified him last year that two 1,000-year-old Thule Eskimo carvings featured on the cover of his Toronto art gallery’s promotional brochure had been stolen from the Canadian Museum of Civilization in the 1970s. The museum’s staff was embarrassed, too. No one there knew the carvings were missing. The stolen pieces were spotted in the gallery’s catalog by archaeologist Doug Stenton, director of the Inuit Heritage Trust, who matched the pictures with figurines excavated near Pond Inlet in northern Canada that were supposed to be part of a collection of several hundred items in storage at the Canadian museum. Isaacs, who unwittingly bought the stolen pieces at auction several years earlier, had been planning to resell them for $4,000. “It never entered my mind that they were stolen,” he says. The pieces are back at the museum.
Federal agents got involved when a pawnshop in Moab reported that one of the gang was using 500 artifacts and human remains from the cave as collateral for bail in a drug arrest.

For six years, a group of looters and artifact collectors from eastern Utah dug and sifted the dirt on the floor of Polar Mesa Cave, churning their way through layers of artifacts that spanned 8,000 years of human occupation. Federal agents got involved when a pawnshop in Moab reported that one of the gang was using 500 artifacts and human remains from the cave as collateral for bail in a drug arrest. In the course of a two-year investigation, U.S. Forest Service investigator David Griffel matched soil samples on the pawned artifacts with those from the cave. He also matched the suspects’ DNA with saliva residue on cigarette butts and dust masks left in the cave and seized photographs the gang took of one another while they were looting the site. In removing an estimated 20 pickup loads of soil from the cave, the looters did an estimated $500,000 damage to the cave and destroyed what Griffel says was a “veritable museum of archaeological treasures.”

James Monroe Home

Location: James Monroe Museum, Fredericksburg, Virginia

Looted: One Confederate cannonball

Looters: Never apprehended

Tour guides at the former law office of the United States’ fifth president were fond of pointing out the cannonball lodged in the brick wall of the building where it had remained for 136 years, a graphic reminder of the fierce exchanges between Union and Confederate forces in northern Virginia. “It was a standard Civil War issue cannonball,” museum director John Pierce says. “There are quite a few of them in buildings all over town, but one day ours was there and the next day it was gone. Sometime during the night someone chiseled it out of the wall, which is a pretty daring thing to do considering that our building is right on the street.” Pierce says police investigated and were “pretty well satisfied” that the thief sold the rusty cannonball to a dealer in Civil War relics in Fredericksburg the next day, who in turn sold it to an out-of-state collector for $80. In the absence of hard evidence, no arrests were ever made.
Boll Weevil Plantation

Location: Boll Weevil Plantation, Burke County, Georgia

Looted: Two 4,000-year-old arrowheads

Looters: Two Thompson men, caught in the act

Despite widespread theft of artifacts from private land in Georgia, the Department of Natural Resources has arrested only a handful of looters. But it doesn’t hurt when the looting occurs on land owned by one of the department’s board members. After repeated looting at the Boll Weevil Plantation near Waynesboro, Ben Seay Jr., who manages the property owned by his father, the DNR board’s Ben Seay, caught two looters in the act—at midnight a few days before Christmas—and held them until they could be arrested by Georgia game warden Glenn Whitaker. The two men, who had made repeated visits to the site from nearby Thompson, were each fined $287.50 for each of the two arrowheads in their possession. “Brier Creek has a huge concentration of artifacts, so we get a lot of activity here,” Whitaker says. “We have a saying down here that once the deer season goes out, it’s arrowhead season. And once these people decide to go into an area, they are like kids with an Easter basket, looking for the prize egg. They don’t care whose property they’re digging on.”

Missions and Icons

Location: California, various sites

Looted: Religious icons and Indian artifacts

Looters: Still at large, missing objects never recovered

California’s missions, sanctuaries in times of trouble for four centuries, are being looted by thieves who see the missions’ open-door policies as an invitation to help themselves to artifacts and religious icons. Mission San Miguel, near Monterey, has been hit by thieves three times in the past three years. In 1997, they took a 17th century wooden tabernacle door. In 1998, they took the head of an 18th century gilded Madonna. In 1999, they stole an 18th century painting of St. Anthony, which was apparently cut from its frame in broad daylight, rolled up and smuggled out. At Mission Santa Barbara, thieves scaled a fence and stole a display of Chumash Indian baskets, believed to be worth thousands of dollars. “At mission San Antonio, they snatched the statue of a baby right out of St. Anthony’s arms,” says Robert Hoover, of the California Mission Studies Association. “They’d probably have taken St. Anthony too, but the statue was too big.” So far none of the stolen objects has been recovered, but police have provided California antique dealers with pictures of the missing items. In the meantime, Hoover says the missions may have to resort to video surveillance of their grounds to prevent additional thefts.
Caught in the Act:
Tales of Self-Inflicted Stings

Shiloh National Military Park, Tennessee

The relic hunter from Jackson, Miss., was fastidious as he hunted for artifacts in broad daylight at the scene of one of the Civil War’s bloodiest battles. He filled in all his holes, pocketing the Minie balls and sword tips as he went. Problem was, he was paying so much attention to the electronic warbling of his metal detector’s headphones that he didn’t notice park ranger Dennis Turnbow jogging by on his lunch hour. Turnbow cited him for a misdemeanor and confiscated the artifacts.

Chattahoochee National Forest, Georgia

The U.S. Forest Service used a hidden camera to videotape eight residents of Gilmer and Fannin counties digging artifacts, building a fire and smoking marijuana one night in northeast Georgia’s Rich Mountain Wilderness. On a subsequent visit to the site, the looters spotted the camera and destroyed the tape, but took the government’s Sony camcorder home—where it was later spotted by arresting agents. Seven people were convicted, including Johnny Mire Searcy, of Blue Ridge, who got 10 months in federal prison.

Denver, Colorado

A New Mexico couple made a mistake of offering to sell the savvy manager of Denver’s David Cook Fine American Art Gallery $100,000 worth of stolen Indian artifacts—including burial moccasins and a Navajo chief’s blanket—for a mere $29,000. Suspicious of the bargain, the gallery called police. When Ricky and Pauline Whitted returned to consummate the deal, they were arrested for possession of items reported stolen from Indian art galleries in Santa Fe and Taos, N.M.

Mammoth Cave National Park, Kentucky

Earthwatch, which coordinates volunteers for archaeological projects throughout the world, was understandably upset when an Adena Indian hammerstone vanished from a dig in the cave, where some of the team’s volunteers had been working. An Earthwatch volunteer suspected of taking the artifact at first denied the theft—then later admitted it when it turned up along a trail in a gray-patterned sock. The sock perfectly matched a single sock in her luggage. She was fined $500.
Montezuma Creek Canyon, Utah

Sotero Oviedo made his first mistake when he decided to vandalize a panel of prehistoric pictographs on a canyon wall near Monticello—a collection of several hundred colored images more than 2,500 years old. His second mistake was his choice of graffiti. With his name scrawled in big block letters, federal agents had no trouble identifying him. Oviedo got a year’s probation. The survey company he worked for paid the Bureau of Land Management $7,800 for his handiwork.

Ocmulgee National Monument
Macon, Georgia

It wasn’t the kind of loot that park rangers expected to discover when they went to check out an illegally parked Chevy Blazer one evening and found Buffalo, New York, telemarketer Douglas Krotzer digging a hole in an isolated area of the park. Krotzer, later convicted of trying to hide $1.6 million in cash and precious coins from a bankruptcy court, said he wanted to bury it in the park because he thought it would be safe there.

U.S. Agencies Fail in Custodian Role

Sometimes, even the caretakers of the nation’s archaeological treasures don’t take good care of them.

Archaeologists look upon looters as thieves of time. But two recent federal surveys show that millions of the artifacts excavated over the past half-century at public expense have been lost, damaged or rendered virtually useless because of improper storage, shoddy paperwork and neglect.

By law, all federally financed construction projects are subject to archaeological mitigation measures. Usually, that means hiring private and academic archaeologists to excavate a site before it is destroyed by bulldozers. By law, the material they dig up—and their reports on it—are supposed to be cared for under “the best conditions” possible.

“As a result of all the dams and military construction it has done, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers probably has the largest archaeological collections in the country,” says Michael Trimble, director of the Corps’ Center for Expertise for Curation and Management in St. Louis. “We have some pretty fabulous stuff—about 70,000 cubic feet of it, enough to build a 6-foot-high wall of filing boxes two miles long.”

For six years, it has been Trimble’s job to find out what happened to all the stuff. Of the 18,000 boxes of artifacts he tracked down in 450 locations, more than one-third were stored without temperature or humidity controls. Up to 70 percent had not been regularly cleaned. And 75 percent had been damaged because they were stored in something, such as acidic boxes, that accelerated the rate of deterioration.
Archaeologists love to dig. Historically, the emphasis has been on getting stuff out of the ground and analyzing it. But the big dig days are over.

~ Michael Trimble
Director
Center for Expertise for Curation and Management
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, St. Louis

"It is just a travesty," Trimble says. "We have not been taking care of material that we spent serious money to get out of the ground."

At the China Lake Naval Weapons Center in California, he found artifacts in shipping containers in the parking lot. "During the winter, the pottery would take on moisture. On the first hot day, when temperatures inside the containers might reach 160 degrees, these 1,000-year-old ceramics would literally explode and spill out of the boxes. It looked like someone had walked through with a pump shotgun."

The $4.5 million assessment of archaeological collections, which were stored in small museums, musty basements and other facilities across the country, won't be completed until June. Details of what Trimble has found won't be disclosed until then, but he says the overall picture is clear.

Half of the Corps' collections have never been cataloged and 20 percent has never even been labeled. "Without context, artifacts are just curios," Trimble says. "Over the years, a lot of the material was parcelled out to specialists for study—animal bones to Michigan State, botanical stuff to Harvard. As it was dispersed, we lost track of it."

Having located the missing material, the corps faces an even bigger task—complying with a congressional mandate for proper curation. Preliminary estimates for rehabilitating and safeguarding the neglected artifacts suggest that the task could take decades and cost more than $50 million.

"There aren't any really bad guys here. It's just the result of years of neglect," Trimble says. "Archaeologists love to dig. Historically, the emphasis has been on getting stuff out of the ground and analyzing it. But the big dig days are over. We've got enough material in storage to keep any army of archaeologists busy."

The crisis in curation is not unique to the Army engineers. The National Park Service maintains its vast archaeological collections in state-of-the-art facilities, but of the 30 million archaeological objects and 34 million archaeological records in park service repositories, less than half are cataloged.

Even bigger problems face the Bureau of Land Management. As the nation's largest landowner, it is supposed to be responsible for archaeological resources on 264 million acres of federal land, most of it in the West.

A recent audit by the Interior Department's inspector general found that although the bureau had parcelled out an estimated 20 million artifacts from federal lands to 89 museums, universities and historical societies for safekeeping, it doesn't have a clue about where most of the material is or its condition.

Although it is the federal government's largest landholder, the bureau spends less on archaeology than the National Park Service and the U.S. Forest Service. "With limited funds, the bureau's first priority is to preserve and protect archaeological, historical and paleontological sites in place," BLM Assistant Secretary Sylvia Baca explains.

But the federal audit says the bureau doesn't even know what archaeological resources it has to protect on more than 90 percent of its land. Although the 1979 Archaeological Resources Protection Act required the agency to survey federal lands for archaeological sites, the bureau has barely begun the task. In 30 years, it has surveyed only 6 percent of its total land area.

Based on the 220,809 archaeological sites found on surveyed land, the numbers suggest that there may be 3.8 million archaeological sites on BLM land yet to be discovered.
Part 5
Tourism Takes Its Toll

How neglect and overuse are eroding some of the world’s best-known ruins. Describing the ancient ruins in different parts of the world with a focus on Italy.

April 2, 2000
Tourism Takes Its Toll

Pompeii, Italy

In 62 A.D. it was devastated by an earthquake. In 79 A.D., it was buried in an avalanche of hot ash from Mount Vesuvius. Now, 2,000 years later, Pompeii is being destroyed again—a victim of its own popularity, creeping neglect and generations of archaeologists more interested in digging up the past than preserving it.

Twenty centuries after the city died, its cobblestone streets are still furrowed by the tracks of Roman chariots. The House of Amorini Doriati and the open shops and public baths along the Via dell’Abbondaza look eerily like the people of Pompeii just stepped out for a few minutes and never came back.

Red painted signs on the shop walls advertise an upcoming gladiatorial contest at the amphitheater—alongside the political slogans for an election that was never held. Murals of undraped women in the brothel on the Vico del Lupanare still bear the graffiti of lovers—“Victor with Athena” among them—who used its rooms in Roman times.

Walking the streets of Pompeii in early morning, before the tour buses disgorge their streams of humanity, leaves one with an uneasy feeling, more akin to an invasion of privacy than a visit to one of the world’s best-known archaeological sites.

As a time capsule of everyday life at the height of the Roman Empire, Pompeii is unique. But its problems are tragically similar to those that plague hundreds of archaeological sites around the world, from the tombs in Egypt’s Valley of the Kings to the prehistoric Anasazi pueblos of the Western United States.

As the oldest archaeological site in the world, Pompeii provides an unsettling glimpse of what can happen when the past is unearthed with no plan for the future.

Since the ruins were discovered in 1748, more than two-thirds of the 163 acres within the city’s walls have been unearthed. Block by block, Italian, French, British and American archaeologists have peeled away the 30-foot-deep layer of volcanic ash, leaving a city virtually unchanged from that August day in 79 A.D. when it was buried.

Preservation Would Be Costly

Today, more than 1,500 of Pompeii’s buildings and 215,000 square feet of frescoed walls, resplendent with everything from a Venus in a seashell to portraits of the city’s rich and famous, stand exposed. To the sun. To the rain. To fast-growing vines. And to 2 million visitors whose fascination with the ruins is hastening their destruction.

“Pompeii is headed for an unprecedented crisis,” says Pietro Giovanni Guzzo, the superintendent of archaeology for Pompeii. “The rate of deterioration of ancient structures is increasing. And there is no reason to assume that this deterioration can be slowed.”

Guzzo estimates that saving Pompeii from further ruin and correcting the centuries of neglect could cost $300 million. Fading frescoes need to be covered. Walls need to be
shored up. Leaky roofs need to be replaced. Last year, the Italian government finally agreed to let the local authority that manages the ruins site keep the revenue its collects from visitors. But because turnstile receipts—about $9 million a year—must also pay for salaries, advertising and other expenses, the move is more of a Band-Aid than a cure.

“There are acres and acres of Pompeii excavated in the 18th and 19th century that are already beyond rescue,” says Andrew Wallace-Hadrill of the British School in Rome, which is working to determine what can be salvaged. “It is deteriorating rapidly. Whole buildings are overgrown. No paint is left on many of the walls and an alarming number of the walls themselves are on the verge of collapse.”

The problem has been compounded by well-intentioned but inept restoration efforts. Throughout the city, the modern concrete used to shore up Roman walls is crumbling faster than the originals. Steel beams used to support sagging ceilings are rusting through. And scores of tile mosaics restored in the 1970s have been destroyed by leaking water.

More visitors would yield more revenue for restoration. But the hordes of visitors who troop through the streets and homes of Pompeii—chipping off pieces of Roman mosaics for souvenirs, scraping away the fragile frescoes, and carving their initials atop 2,000-year-old graffiti—are a part of the problem too.

“Look there. It is happening right before our eyes,” says an agitated Matia Bourgiono, a conservator for Pompeii’s Superintendenza, which manages the site, as he shows off the brilliantly colored frescoes adorning the house of Aulus Vettius Restitutus, one of Pompeii’s wealthiest residents at the time of Vesuvius’ eruption.

Wagging a finger, Bourgiono chides a teenager for leaning up against an aging fresco with her backpack. Sheepishly, she moves on. Within moments, she has been replaced by two boys who can’t resist running their hands over the mural.

“We are trying to find new ways to protect Pompeii from this barbarian invasion—more guards, infrared detectors

**Tourism’s Negative Impact Multiplied**

As the ruins have deteriorated, officials have roped off whole blocks of the city. Only 14 houses—and less than 25 percent of the ruins—are now open to the public. But as ever-increasing numbers of visitors have been herded into an ever-smaller space, their impact has been multiplied.
Evidence of decay: Excavated but unprotected, Pompeii's painted frescoes are cracked, worn and increasingly disfigured by modern graffiti. (David Tulis, AJC Staff)

coupled to alarms,” Bourgiono explains. “But we have so much to defend, we can’t stop it all. It’s hopeless.”

At a growing number of the world’s ancient monuments, authorities echo similar feelings of helplessness—caught between a rising tide of international tourism and a desire to preserve ruins of the past for future generations.

“Archaeological tourism is wonderful, but like tourism in general, it is growing more rapidly than we ever thought it would,” says Kent Weeks, director of archaeology at the American University in Cairo, who has been watching an unfolding crisis in Egypt’s Valley of the Kings. “We weren’t ready for it. Now it is desperation time.”

Each day tour buses deliver 3,000 to 4,000 visitors to the valley, home to the tombs of Tutankhamen, Ramses the Great and other pharaohs of Egypt’s New Kingdom, which dates from the 15th to the 10th centuries B.C. On days when the cruise ships are in, that number of visitors may swell to 8,000.

“Most of these tombs have narrow corridors and limited space,” says Weeks. “The plaster and paintings have been worn completely off in some places from touching and tapping. After being sealed and dry for thousands of years, just the presence of so many people breathing in such a confined space is accelerating the deterioration.”

In 1995, as Egyptian authorities were planning to sacrifice one of the valley’s lesser-known tombs to make room for a parking lot, Weeks and his team decided to map it before it was destroyed. In the process, they discovered the “lost tomb” built for the sons of Ramses II, a sprawling 100-room complex that is now one of the valley’s most important sites.

Egypt Looks To Ease the Crush

Each new discovery, however, brings more people. To ease congestion, authorities are planning an access control system—complete with red, green and yellow lights—that will steer visitors to less visited tombs. With such improvements, the government hopes to triple the tourism, to 25,000 people a day over the next decade.

“It’s going to be like trying to hold a New Year’s Eve party for 1,000 people in a one-bedroom apartment,” says Weeks. “Doing it without doing major damage is going to require some careful and creative planning.”

Other Egyptian sites are under pressure, too. This year’s Paris-to-Dakar road rally left such a mountain of trash at the Great Pyramids near Cairo that the government filed a formal complaint against the race’s sponsors. Only last year, the government banned camel rides from the pyramids because they were polluting the trails.

No ancient ruins are entirely immune to the pressures.

• The monuments of ancient Greece, architectural masterpieces that have endured 2,500 years of war and looting, now face more insidious forces. Until recently, visi-
tors to the Acropolis could wander through the Parthenon and other temples atop the sacred rock of Athens. Today, thanks to years of vandalism, structural problems and seemingly endless restoration efforts, they can only stroll outside of the marble monuments. The bedrock is worn smooth from the feet of more than 1 million visitors a year.

“The dark stains on the marble are from air pollution,” says Nikos Toganidis, the architect in charge of restoring the Parthenon. “We can coat the marble with a solution of asbestos, but it will only last for a few years before it needs to be redone.”

In England, visitors are now barred from the interior of Stonehenge, the enigmatic circle of stones that has stood in the Wiltshire countryside for 5,000 years. The massive stone monument, whose origins are uncertain, now lies 100 yards from a major highway and is surrounded by parking lots, gift shops and ice cream stands. In an effort to restore at least some of Stonehenge’s magic, the British government has pledged itself to an eight-year, $200 million program to reroute the highway and clear the surrounding landscape of 20th century development.

Even China’s 2,000-year-old terra-cotta army—the life-sized statues of Qin dynasty soldiers that were unearthed in 1974—are victims of their own popularity. The soldiers, which once guarded an underground mausoleum, are being defaced with nine different kinds of mold that authorities blame on too many people crowding into the building that now houses them.

In Peru, the government wants to double the number of tourists who visit the ruins of Machu Picchu by building a cable car to replace the 25-minute drive on a dirt road. It’s not a popular plan. “Machu Picchu should not be reduced to a place where thousands of people rush through, spending 15 minutes to capture something on their camcorders,” says Patricia Uribe, the Peruvian director for the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, which lists the Inca ruins as one of the world’s leading heritage sites. “It’s like taking a fine restaurant and serving fast food inside it.”

Not all of the problems confronting ancient monuments, however, can be pinned on tourists and the governments that want to attract them.

Like Hiram Bingham, the explorer who put Machu Picchu on the map the minute he christened it “the lost city of the Incas,” discoverers themselves are sometimes part of the problem. Archaeologists keep finding interesting new things. And digging them up.

Despite Pompeii’s obvious and critical problems, for instance, the Italian Ministry of Culture this year will sponsor new excavation there and at nearby Herculaneum, a smaller city buried by Vesuvius’ eruption.

“There is a kind of Indiana Jones attitude about archaeology in this country,” says Wallace-Hadrill. “Everybody knows there’s a lot of civilization waiting to be discovered and they can’t wait to dig it up. But until we catch up with what is already exposed, we shouldn’t be spending so much on new excavation.”

Rick Elia, Boston University archaeologist and vice president for professional responsibility for the Archaeological Institute of America, says it’s an all-too-familiar problem. “In archaeology, it’s easy to get grants to dig things up. It’s glamorous. It’s adventurous.”
For endangered archaeological sites, reburial is definitely a technique whose time has come.

— Martha Dimas
Getty Conservation Institute

he says. “Trying to save something that’s already been dug up just doesn’t have the same cachet. Any place you expose ancient architecture, it begins to melt away, but until recently, we have failed to educate archaeologists about the need to manage sites after they’re gone.”

Some Sites Being Covered Up Again

In recent years, archaeologists seeking to excavate in Greece, the Middle East and some Latin American countries have been required to set aside a portion of their budgets to care for the site once they are finished. At some newly excavated sites, drastic measures are sometimes needed. Archaeologists are simply covering them up again.

In central China, government archaeologists last year unearthed the oldest known altar used for state religion. The 1,500-year-old, 26-foot-high circular structure is thought to have been used by at least 17 Chinese emperors. But because they had no money to support a public display of the discovery, scientists studied the site carefully and then—only 30 days after it was discovered—covered it up again to protect it.

“For endangered archaeological sites, reburial is definitely a technique whose time has come,” says Martha Dimas, an archaeologist at the Getty Conservation Institute in Malibu, Calif., which is working to save archaeological sites in dozens of countries. “In some cases, it is the only way to save these sites for the future.”

The deterioration of exposed archaeological sites is a major problem in the United States, too. At dozens of national parks in the West, prehistoric ruins are crumbling for many of the same reasons that Pompeii is falling apart.

“A lot of the major ruins were excavated early in this century,” says Al Remley, an archaeologist with the National Park Service in Flagstaff, Ariz. “They were opened up to the public in the 1920s and 1930s, but visitation didn’t really explode until the 1960s. Now they are deteriorating rapidly and we don’t have the money to keep them up.”

To address the problem, the park service has begun its Vanishing Treasure Program, which has so far committed $4 million to restoration and conservation of ruins in a total of 40 Western parks. It’s a start, but Remley says at the current rate of funding, it will take 15 years to finish what
had been intended to take 10 years and cost $60 million. In
the meantime, in some parks the government is resorting to
what some officials say may be the only way to save some
ruins. They’re being covered up again.

At Chaco Canyon, N.M., one of the largest 1,000-year-
old Anasazi pueblos, the 600-room complex called Chetro
Ketl, has been partially reburied for its own protection.

Sometimes, the ruination of ruins goes virtually unno-
ticed. The 1,100-year-old Indian mounds of Ocmulgee Na-
tional Monument in Macon, Georgia, for instance, are the
region’s most popular tourist attraction, but the park’s most
interesting feature—the only surviving spiral mound in
North America—has been neglected for decades because
the park has no money to maintain it.

“If I doubt if 1,000 people who visit the park a year ever
see it,” says Ocmulgee Superintendent James David. “To
got to it you have to hike a mile and a half and wade across
a stream. There used to be a bridge, but it’s gone now. Once
you get there, it’s hard even to see it because it’s so over-
grown with trees and brush.”

As neglect and overuse erode traces of the past—from
the ancestral Creek culture of middle Georgia to the glory
that was Rome—archaeologists acknowledge that their own
profession has sometimes failed in what many consider its
most sacred obligation.

“Just shoveling away is not what archaeology is about,”
says Wallace-Hadrill. “Archaeology is the process of interro-
gating the past, interpreting the remains and telling others
what has been found. Whole blocks of Pompeii have been
evacuated without any effort to report what was found. Now
the physical evidence is gone, and the information is lost.”

Boston University archaeologist Phillip King is trying
to do something about it. As the director of the White-Levy
Program for Archaeological Publications, King is helping
to resurrect the records of “dead digs”—research that was
never published.

With $2 million in grants from New York art patrons
Shelby White and Leon Levy, King has helped interested
researchers reopen the books on at least 45 lost excava-
tions that have languished in archaeological limbo for a
half-century or more.

“Archaeologists like to dig,” says King. “Some of them
do not like to publish.”

Among the program’s achievements was the publica-
tion of 60-year-old records from a site in Israel called
Megiddo, which Christians believe is Armageddon, the
place described in the Bible as the scene of the climactic
battle between good and evil on Judgment Day.

The site was excavated by the University of Chicago in
the 1930s, but it was only last year that a missing collec-
tion of records revealed that what scholars had assumed
was a period of quiet in Megiddo’s turbulent history—
around 1,000 B.C.—was wracked by violent upheaval.

The new evidence isn’t likely to unravel the long-held
notions about Armageddon, but archaeologists say it un-
derscores the need for the profession to publish what it has
unearthed.

“It is cases like that that show why we have a moral
obligation to publish,” says King. “Once an archaeologist
moves a stone, he destroys any information it might im-
port. If people don’t know what you’ve found, it might as
well be buried in your basement.”
Other Sites Under Pressure

The Parthenon, Greece
A million tourists a year now visit Athens’ Acropolis (right), but they can no longer enter the Parthenon or other monuments there. (David Tulis, AJC Staff)

Stonehenge, England
The interior of Stonehenge (above), Britain’s mysterious stone circle, is off limits to the public—and authorities want to reroute nearby highways to restore its tranquility. (David Tulis, AJC Staff)

Machu Picchu, Peru
To handle the growing number of visitors, Peru wants to build an aerial tram to whisk visitors more quickly to the Inca ruins (right). (David Tulis, AJC Staff)
Part 6
Developing Conflicts

The tension between development and preservation of our heritage, focusing on historical sites from America to the Middle East.

April 23, 2000
Heritage Lost:
Growth Erases State's Cultural History

Calhoun, Georgia

For at least 10,000 years, since people first spread throughout the Americas, the Coosawattee River valley has been a stage for human history.

In 1540, Hernando de Soto’s Spanish soldiers encountered a powerful native chiefdom here that ruled a vast area of what is now Georgia, Tennessee and Alabama. In 1838, the Trail of Tears—the forced removal of the Cherokee from Georgia—began just down the road at New Echota. In 1864, in the verdant hills of Resaca, the North and South fought the first major battle in Gen. William T. Sherman’s drive on Atlanta.

The people who made that history are gone. But the proof of their passing—the corroded Confederate bullets at Resaca, the post holes of the stockade where the Cherokee were held, the broken swords discarded by de Soto’s conquistadores—still lies beneath the green fields and farms of Gordon County.

Jim Langford wants it to stay that way.

Several years ago, he left an executive job in Atlanta and returned to Calhoun—population 10,000—where his family has lived since the 1850s. He wanted to help save something that 20th century Georgia has had trouble holding onto lately: its past.

“Our archaeological heritage is disappearing,” says Langford, a Harvard-educated former director of the Society for Georgia Archaeology. “I watched it vanish in Atlanta—paved over with subdivisions, bulldozed for highways or flooded by man-made reservoirs. I helped draft Georgia’s archaeological protection laws, but in many cases the laws were too little or too late.”

The chronicle of Georgia’s disappearing past is a dismal one. Soapstone Ridge, a world-class prehistoric quarry south of Atlanta, was largely erased by suburbs and landfills. The great earthen mounds of Coosa were drowned by the Cartersville Dam. Ocmulgee Old Fields, a plain near Macon inhabited by the Creeks and their ancestors for 1,000 years, is threatened by a $150 million freeway extension. There are dozens more examples.

Frustrated by the state’s inability to halt such destruction, Langford founded the Coosawattee Foundation to promote archaeological preservation in northwest Georgia. Funded in large part by the Educational Foundation of America, his group set up its headquarters outside Calhoun in a two-story farmhouse built in the 1830s by Crane Eater, a Cherokee reputed to be buried on the property.

“The only chance we have of saving what’s left is to get out here on the frontier of development, where urban sprawl hasn’t altered the landscape yet,” Langford says.

Gordon County has a single dominant industry—carpet manufacturing—and the lowest prices for raw Georgia land
on the I-75 corridor. Langford sees the county of 40,000 as a window of opportunity for preservation—one that may soon close.

“This is the only county between Chattanooga and Atlanta that isn’t yet part of one metropolitan area or the other,” he says. “We don’t know who’ll get us first, but things won’t stay this way for long.”

Early skirmishes over preservation mirror Gordon County’s turbulent past. Some were won. Some were lost. Some are still too close to call.

At Resaca, the state of Georgia just won one, but paid dearly for it.

Substantial portions of the Civil War battlefield—where outnumbered Confederate forces lost but bought valuable time for the defense of Atlanta—have already been destroyed by I-75, a highway interchange and the Flying J truck stop.

The Department of Natural Resources agreed to pay $2.36 million for a 505-acre, largely undisturbed portion of the battlefield, considered one of the most important unprotected battlefields in the country. The deal, which will give the state title to all of the site’s Confederate trenches and protect most of the Union earthworks with easements, was a bittersweet victory. Two years ago, state officials lost out on a deal that would have preserved a tract more than twice the size of what they got.

At New Echota, the former capital of the Cherokee Nation, preservationists lost one. Despite Langford’s appeals, the county rezoned a parcel of land next door to the cluster of historic buildings and cleared the way for commercial development.

Langford is still campaigning to save a second tract abutting the park that is believed to be the site of the stockade where the Cherokee were held before their forced march to Oklahoma.

As difficult as these battles have been, saving what’s left of the area’s prehistoric cultures poses an even greater challenge. Georgia’s distant past is not as familiar to most residents as the Trail of Tears and the Civil War. It is rich and varied, but poorly understood.

**Unwritten History**

Nearly five centuries ago, Coosa, the highly organized chiefdom that the Spanish encountered, supported tens of thousands of people. But within 30 years, the systems of towns and villages collapsed and disappeared before their history could be recorded. What’s left of that culture now lies buried along the banks of the Coosawattee River.

The river valley, which meanders through 23 miles of Gordon County, contains hundreds of archaeological sites,
Jim Longford is spearheading an effort to protect native American, Colonial and Civil War sites in the Coosawattee River Valley through the Coosa-wattee Foundation. (Rich Addicks, AJC Staff)

ranging from the 10,000-year-old camps of prehistoric hunters to 200-year-old farmsteads of the Cherokee.

“The reason there are so many sites is that this valley was a veritable cradle of civilization for more than 10,000 years,” Langford says. “The rich, level land and the agriculture it supported were the reasons that the prehistoric chiefdoms here became so powerful. The same things drew the Cherokee and the white settlers who followed them.”

Most of the land is now farmed. And while farming has roiled the surface, much of the archaeological record still lies intact beneath the 10-inch deep plow zone. More intensive development would destroy it. And Georgia has no legal machinery to prevent the destruction of archaeological sites on private property, unless the work disturbs human remains or requires federal permits.

As a result, preservation is largely a function of ownership. Langford estimates that saving the river valley’s major archaeological sites and the unspoiled landscape that surrounds them will require buying 10,000 acres of land, worth more than $30 million at current prices. And the price will only go up with time.

So far, the private foundations Langford has approached for help have listened sympathetically but have made no commitments. So Langford has been committing his own money—snatching key parcels off the market as they come up for sale—and urging other landowners to accept conservation easements on their property in exchange for tax breaks.

At times his efforts have put him squarely in the face of one of Georgia’s largest landowners. When the Georgia Board of Regents sold surplus land to the Gordon County Development Authority without a thorough archaeological survey, Langford, the Society for Georgia Archaeology and the Georgia Council of Professional Archaeologists filed suit. The regents eventually won the case on appeal, but the dispute prompted the agency to agree to be more attentive to archaeological concerns on the site of its 653-acre Redbud agriculture experiment station, which archaeologists say contains a large Indian mound with as many as 2,000 burials.

Langford’s effort to build archaeological awareness isn’t limited to the courts. The foundation educates area schoolchildren about the pieces of their history that get short shrift in textbooks. In the past 18 months, the foundation has presented classroom programs to more than 5,000 students in northwest Georgia and enabled hundreds of them to dig, under the supervision of trained archaeologists, for artifacts on one of the Coosawattee sites the foundation owns.

“Archaeology is hard to see,” Langford says. “We want to build awareness of the cultures that used to be here. We start with students. But the students will grow up and vote. And eventually maybe Georgia’s political leaders will see it, too.”
A few miles up the Coosawattee from Calhoun, the Carters Lake Dam serves as a grim reminder of how the loss of archaeological sites can leave a hole in history. A man-made reservoir now covers what once was called Little Egypt, a cluster of three large earthen mounds used for ceremonial events and burials that historians now believe were part of the mighty chiefdom of Coosa described in the journals of de Soto’s expedition.

“Archaeologists did excavate the site before they filled the reservoir, but back then it was considered just another one of Georgia’s mound sites,” says John Worth, who heads the Coosawattee Foundation’s educational programs. “No one knew then that it was the capital of the most powerful chiefdom in the Southeast or even suspected that an army of 600 Spaniards had camped there for more than a month. Who knows what we might have learned if we had suspected then what we know now?”

The Carters Dam is a microcosm of a statewide dilemma. Each of Georgia’s 159 counties has its own story buried in the earth. Prehistoric people lived throughout the state. And in a state with so much development, so fast, information about who they were is being lost.

“Of the 34,000 archaeological sites known in Georgia, at least one-third have been totally obliterated and another one-third are probably ruined for future study,” says University of Georgia archaeologist Mark Williams, who maintains the state’s official site list. “Every one of these sites could have taught us something about the people who lived in Georgia, but the resource is dwindling every day.”

Some aren’t going so quietly. Outside Macon, a simmering 10-year battle is pitting the future of Georgia’s most visited archaeological sites against a proposed 1.5-mile-long freeway.

Macon development interests want the state to build an extension of the Eisenhower Parkway that would link Georgia’s Fall-Line Freeway with I-75. Most of the routes under consideration by the state Department of Transportation would bisect the two units of the National Park Service’s Ocmulgee National Monument and cross the Ocmulgee Old Fields, an area between the park’s prehistoric mounds that was inhabited for centuries by the Muscogee Creek Indians.

The park service and local preservationists say the Old Fields area is both archaeologically and culturally significant. It is the birthplace of the Muscogee Creek Confederacy and one of the last places in Georgia the Indians lived before they were removed to Oklahoma in the 1820s.

The National Register of Historic Places has designated several square miles between the mounds as traditional cultural property of the Muscogee Nation—deserving the same kind of recognition that downtown Macon’s historic district now has. The Muscogee want an even bigger tract recognized—and no highway.

“We have a spiritual connection to this land,” Alan Cook, former histo-
Tom Wheaton, director of a local contract archaeology firm, shows the telltale signs of a bowl carved out of stone by artisans of Soapstone Ridge 3,000 years ago. There also was evidence of recent bulldozing. (David Tulis, AJC Staff)

rian for Muscogee Nation, says. "The tribes may have surrendered title to the land, but they can never surrender their cultural and intellectual ties to it."

With so much at stake, the 10-year dispute is certain to continue for years to come.

Atlanta's Ancient Quarry

Sometimes, Georgia’s past slips away unnoticed. On Atlanta’s southern flank, suburbia has gradually erased one of the state’s most important archaeological sites.

Many commuters these days scarcely notice Soapstone Ridge as they head north on I-675 and descend the steep hill that provides a sweeping view of downtown Atlanta. For the past 20 years, builders in Fulton and DeKalb counties have, one by one, bulldozed the outcrops of soft stone that gave the ridge its name.

“Soapstone Ridge had the potential to be a world-class archaeological site,” University of Florida archaeologist Ken Sassaman says.

“Between 3,200 and 2,800 years ago, this ridge was the equivalent of the jade mines of the Maya. Because soapstone was easily shaped into bowls and other wares, it was a valuable commodity.

“This was the biggest quarry of its kind in the Southeast, perhaps in North America. Until recently, on these outcrops of rock, you could still see the chisel marks, and the mushroom-shaped turnouts for bowls that were made thousands of years ago.”

Once considered too rugged to develop, Soapstone Ridge has recently felt the brunt of the southward push of Atlanta’s suburbs. One major site was destroyed by the expansion of the Live Oak landfill in south Fulton County.

“A survey in the 1970s documented 67 archaeological sites,” says Tom Wheaton, director of New South Associates, one of the state’s largest contract archaeology firms.

“When we revisited the area in the mid-'90s, only 24 were intact. In five to 10 years it will all be gone. It isn’t ill will on the part of developers. It’s ignorance. Even people living next to these sites don’t know they exist.”

To help save a little of the quarry that was Atlanta’s first industry, three of the most important sites on Soapstone Ridge—representative vestiges of sites once spread out over 25 square miles—were named to the National Register of Historic Places, a designation that is supposed to alert state officials to an impending development.

But it hasn’t worked that way. In 1996, DeKalb County officials were horrified to discover one of the registered sites—not far from the intersection of Panthersville Road and River Road—being bulldozed. By the time work could be halted, most of it had been destroyed. The developer of the Broad River Point subdivision eventually agreed to sell a few undisturbed lots to the Archaeological Conservancy
Most archaeological sites, in fact, never even show up on the system’s radar. The state’s 34,000 known sites are only a fraction of the total. Less than 10 percent of the state’s land has been surveyed for its archaeological potential. And until this year, there wasn’t even a systematic survey program for state-owned lands.

“Most of the archaeology in Georgia is done by the federal government or by private contractors,” state archaeologist David Crass says. “And most of what we know about archaeology in Georgia is driven by development pressure.”

Until Crass’ appointment in 1998, the state did not even have a full-time archaeologist. Crass now has a staff of six. But that pales in comparison to a state like South Carolina, whose archaeology institute employs 45 people.

“The state has had other priorities,” Crass says. “Historically in Georgia, archaeology has not received the kind of support or funding that it has in other states. We have a lot of catching up to do.”

For preservation, but the incident graphically demonstrated how ineffective state and local governments are in protecting archaeological sites.

Because the DeKalb project required federal permitting, it was subject to review by the Georgia Department of Natural Resources’ Historical Preservation Division. But somewhere in the review process—no one is sure where—someone missed it.

“Soapstone Ridge was on the list of known archaeological sites,” division director Ray Luce says. “It was significant and sufficiently well-known. And it is clear that in this case, the system broke down completely.”
Civil War Sites Fall to Growth

They're fighting at Gettysburg again. And Chancellorsville. And Resaca. On the battlefields where Union and Confederate troops once died to gain a few feet of battle-scarred turf, a new and not-so-civil war is raging.

This time the hallowed ground itself is under attack. The enemy comes in various guises—strip malls, highway interchanges, subdivisions and office parks.

None will die in the current conflict, but the cost of defeat is still dear. Without speedy action within the next decade, preservationists say, the nation will lose two-thirds of its Civil War battlefields. Forever. “We are losing an acre of battlefield to development every 10 minutes,” says James Lighthizer, president of the 40,000-member Civil War Preservation Trust. “We are paving over our history. We are obliterating it.”

- In Ohio’s Meigs County, a gravel company has won state approval to mine 400 acres of the state’s only Civil War battlefield, located at Buffington Island on the Ohio River. As many as 900 Confederate soldiers are thought to be buried there.

- Near Murfreesboro, Tenn., a proposed new expressway threatens to bisect the Stones River National Battlefield—scene of the decisive battle that set the stage for Gen. William Sherman’s march to the sea—and trigger industrial development on portions of the battlefield outside the park.

- At Manassas National Battlefield Park in Virginia, traffic has grown so hazardous in the park that the state is widening portions of U.S. 29 to ease congestion—and spending $2 million to study ways to bypass the park entirely.

Nationwide, the National Park Service’s Civil War Sites Advisory Commission has identified a total of 384 sites in 26 states—including 28 in Georgia—that are threatened by development.

Preservationists have hailed Georgia’s plans to purchase 550 acres of the Resaca battlefield—one of the most pristine major battlefields in the country—as a step in the right direction. But Kennesaw State University history professor Philip Secrist, a member of the Georgia Civil War Commission, says other battlefields in the state, especially those in Paulding County, are not faring so well.

“The area around New Hope Church, which was one of the significant battles of the Atlanta campaign, is being developed very rapidly,” says Secrist. “And three miles to the west, the site of the Battle of Dallas is being overrun by development. As far as sites in Atlanta itself go, most of those are paved over and gone.”

Nationwide, only 4 percent of the major Civil War battlefields are entirely owned by federal, state or local governments. More than 40 percent are entirely in private hands. Ownership of the rest is mixed. Although not all are facing immediate development pressures, Lighthizer says at least
100,000 acres are in need of imminent protection, primarily by acquisition.

"Development is not only destroying battlefields outright, it is driving up the price of land and making it difficult to protect those that we still have a chance to save," Lighthizer says. "If we have to pay $50,000 an acre, which is what land is going for in some areas, the amount we can acquire goes down dramatically."

The goal of the Civil War Preservation Trust, which holds its annual meeting in Marietta starting on Thursday, is to raise $16 million—to be matched with an additional $8 million in federal funds—for battlefield acquisition and preservation.

Outright ownership, however, is not always enough to assure the integrity of the battlefield's landscape or the tranquility befitting memorials to the War Between the States. Even the 30 battlefields that are currently protected as units of the National Park system continue to face threats from the outside.

The Kennesaw Mountain National Battlefield Park in Marietta, for instance, has 3,000 acres within its boundaries. But thousands of acres of the original battlefield still lie unprotected outside the park. With five roads bisecting the park and new subdivisions crowding in from every side, Superintendent John Cissel isn't optimistic about the future.

"When the park was created in the 1930s, the land for it cost $155,000. Today, a three-quarter-acre lot on the park boundary sells for that much," he says. "Eventually what is going to happen is that there will be so much development, noise and encroachment that it will erode the natural experience that the park now offers."
Archaeology Underfoot and in the Way

Nazca Lines

Location: Nazca, Peru
Threatened: Nazca Lines

The 1,500-year-old stylized figures etched into the Nazca Plain of southern Peru were unknown to the world until 1939. How and why they were created is still a mystery, but the chances of finding out are dwindling. One-fifth of the enigmatic, fragile lines, which stretch for miles across the desert floor, have already been destroyed. Most of those that remain—including geometric figures, a nine-fingered monkey, a bird with a wing span of a half-mile, a whale and a flower—have been bisected by illegal roads or damaged by the tracks of off-road vehicles. The Pan American Highway cuts directly across the giant figure of a lizard. Mudslides triggered by recent rains have brought a new threat. Within the last year, six of the 16 most distinctive figures have been smudged by erosion. The government is building a network of drainage ditches to try to prevent further damage.

Miami Circle

Location: Miami, Florida
Threat: High-rise building boom

When Florida developer Michael Baumann began clearing land at the mouth of the Miami River, for a high-rise apartment complex two years ago, no one expected him to uncover one of the oldest archaeological sites in South Florida—a 38-foot circle inscribed in the limestone bedrock. Archaeologists concluded that the Miami Circle was probably the foundation of a council house built by Tequesta Indians in the 1st century. News of America’s “Stonehenge” spread like wildfire. Local preservationists created a Miami Circle website, complete with 24-hour video feeds. New Age talk show host Art Bell took up the cause. Schools organized field trips to the site.

“It’s a testimonial to the power of the Internet that the people who wanted to save it could mobilize so much feeling so swiftly,” says Florida state archaeologist James Miller. “I received letters from all over the world demanding that we save the circle. In the end the only choice we had was to acquire it or lose it.”

State and county governments have agreed to pay the developer $26.7 million for the 2.2-acre parcel of land containing the circle. “It is the largest commitment Florida has ever made to preserve an archaeological site,” says Miller. “But it was important. This was obviously prime real estate for the prehistoric people of South Florida too.”
Troy

Location: Tastep, Turkey
Threatened: Ruins of Troy

On Turkey’s Aegean Coast, a new bridge across the Straits of Canakkale will soon link Turkey’s European and Asian shores, making the site of ancient Troy and the surrounding countryside easily accessible to Istanbul’s 12 million residents. A wave of development is expected to wash over a landscape that has changed little in the 2,000 years since the Iliad first spun the tale of the Trojan Horse.

Turkey has just made Troy itself a national park. But 80 nearby sites remain unprotected, including the spectacular ruins of Alexandra Troas, a city virtually untouched since the Romans departed. “Development is going to be a very big problem there,” says archaeologist Manfred Korfmann, of Tuebingen University in Germany, who has directed excavations at Troy since 1988. “At least three roads will cross the new park. A dam is planned. Agriculture is increasing. The park already gets 400,000 visitors a year and that will increase.”

Yangzi Settlements

Location: Yangzi River, China
Threatened: Three Gorges Dam

In China’s Yangzi Valley, at least 1,000 archaeological sites may soon be lost when engineers begin filling the reservoir of the $24.5 billion Three Gorges Dam, the world’s largest hydroelectric project.

The threat echoes the situation 35 years ago, when Egypt’s Aswan High Dam threatened to flood the stone temple of Abu Simbel. An international fund drive raised $36 million to move the entire temple—complete with its 60-foot statues of Ramses II—to higher ground. Hundreds of other lesser archaeological sites were lost forever beneath the rising waters of Lake Nasser. China will conserve some of the region’s best known cultural resources—the Qu Yuan Temple and the Han Watchtower. But construction associated with the project has already destroyed many lesser known sites.
Saving Mankind's First Footprints

Footprints are among the rarest and most revealing traces of man’s ancestors. Two near tragedies in recent years attest that they are also among the most fragile.

Three footprints of an African “Eve”—a woman who lived about the time the first anatomically modern humans emerged—survived, unnoticed, for 117,000 years in the weathered sandstone of South Africa’s Langebaan Lagoon. It took less than a year for curiosity-seekers to threaten their very existence.

Cape Town geologist David Roberts reported their discovery in 1997, drawing hordes of visitors to South Africa’s West Coast National Park. Many were determined to plant their own feet squarely in the fragile size 7.5s from the dawn of humankind. Visitors picnicked beside the ancient footprints. They carved graffiti on the nearby rocks. Park officials didn’t have the manpower to protect the site.

In desperation, authorities in 1998 cut the footprints from the surrounding rock and airlifted them to Cape Town, where they are now on display in the South African Museum. “I hated to see them moved,” says Roberts. “Langebaan is a spectacular setting—a beautiful lagoon surrounded by granite hills. Seeing them in a musty old museum just isn’t the same.”

Roberts has since discovered several more footprints in the same set of tracks along the lagoon, but he’s taking no chances with these. They’ve been capped with concrete until authorities can figure out a way to let the public see them without destroying them.

In Tanzania, a professional miscalculation nearly destroyed an even more precious set of footprints—a 90-foot-long trail of two hominids, male and female, that dated back more than 3.5 million years, to the time when man’s ancestors first began to walk upright. Famed archaeologist Mary Leaky found the prints, at a place called Laetoli, in 1976, studied them and then covered them up for safekeeping.

But what nature had preserved for the ages in hardened volcanic ash was nearly undone in a decade. In the late 1980s, archaeologists discovered to their horror that wild, fast-growing acacia trees had colonized the fresh soil Leaky had used to rebury the footprints, putting down roots that threatened to obliterate them.

Emergency measures directed by the Getty Conservation Institute re-excavated the footprints and then buried them again under a carefully engineered 6-foot-berm of sifted sand, synthetic fabrics and herbicide-impregnated barriers to roots. As a precaution, the site is inspected once a month to make sure that the footprints remain safe.

“Reburial is like long-term storage,” says the Getty’s Martha Demas, who directed the project. “If there is some major question that needs to be answered in the future, we can reopen the site. What we can’t afford to do is lose it.”
Beirut, Lebanon

In building its future, battle-scarred Beirut discovered a past it never knew. As the Middle East’s most cosmopolitan city has labored to repair the ravages of a 16-year civil war, it has also been salvaging remnants of the city it was thousands of years before warring militias turned it into an urban battlefield.

Today’s Beirut exudes the air of a city on the rebound. New freeways swarm with traffic. In the souks, the traditional meeting place for Lebanese, trendy shops and Internet cafes have replaced the market stalls of yesteryear. Along Rue el Maarad, construction cranes and new office buildings rise from what were once the ruins of the Lebanese capital.

But in Beirut, there are ruins upon ruins. At the foot of the new high-rise buildings in the city center, in a zone where the infamous Green Line divided Christian East Beirut from Muslim West Beirut, a gaping hole sprawls across four city blocks of prime real estate. At the bottom of the massive pit, archaeologists are working to save a 5,000-year-old tapestry of history as richly varied as that of Athens or Rome.

History has always been underfoot in the world’s major cities as each new age has rebuilt itself on the remains of the past. With the advent of basements, underground parking garages, subway tunnels and other innovations of urban engineering, however, development has become an inadvertent tool of discovery. And of destruction.

Beneath today’s Beirut, a few feet below the old downtown cinema, archaeologists found the walls of a stone fort built by invading Christian crusaders in the 12th century. Below that they found the ruins of a 6th century Byzantine city. And below that: the cobbled streets and broken marble columns of Roman and Hellenistic cities from the 3rd century B.C.

Still deeper, they found the ruins of a previously undocumented Phoenician city, built around 1200 B.C. And below that—21 feet below today’s street level—they uncovered the outlines of a Bronze Age Canaanite city, circa 3000 B.C.

“The whole underground of Beirut is an archaeological site,” says Leila Badr, an archaeologist at the American University of Beirut. Researchers have uncovered a Bronze Age Canaanite city dating back to 3000 B.C. (David Tulis, AJC Staff)
Scars of war: Workers repair the pockmarked minaret and dome of Beirut's Syriah Mosque, damaged by blasts during the years of Lebanon's civil war. (David Tulis, AJC Staff)

the rim of the massive crater. “Anywhere you dig, you find something.”

Waving toward a massive, sloping stone glissade that once deterred invading armies, she says, “This wall is the earliest evidence of Beirut. It was slated to be paved over by a multilane highway. Before we started digging, the earliest evidence of Beirut was from the 3rd century B.C. We have pushed the city’s history back almost 3,000 years.”

Preservation vs. Progress

The sweeping view of so much history isn’t destined to last forever. A small portion of the downtown archaeological site may be set aside as a park. Most of the rest will soon be paved and covered with more new buildings.

Like London, Paris, Atlanta and other cities that have risen upon the ruins of an earlier time, Beirut and its 1.5 million residents don’t intend to let the past put the future on hold. But unlike most cities, Beirut has been trying to save what it can.

Since postwar reconstruction began in 1993, the city, the Arab financiers bankrolling the redevelopment and the United Nation’s Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization have spent $9 million on more than 130 downtown archaeological excavations. By the time the work is finished later this year, more than 500 archaeologists and workers will have excavated an area the size of 45 football fields—and amassed more than 5 million artifacts for future study.

“Buried treasure: Beirut is building its future. In the process, it’s finding its past. In the center of Beirut, researchers uncover evidence of the many civilizations, from stone forts built by 12th century Christian crusaders to the cobbled streets of Roman and Hellenistic cities. (David Tulis, AJC Staff)

The civil war ruined Beirut, but it also created an unusual opportunity,” says Hans Curvers, a Dutch archaeologist working for Solidere, the Lebanese corporation in charge of redevelopment. “We are fortunate that reconstruction is occurring in an era when people care about things like this. Otherwise it might have been lost forever.”

Balancing the needs of past and future has not been an easy task in postwar Beirut. Developers chafed that the archaeologists always seemed to find new things to excavate in the path of progress. Impatient construction crews destroyed a portion of Badr’s 3,000-year-old wall before they could be stopped. At Nijmeh Square, Roman ruins that had been earmarked for preservation were filled and covered by a clock tower.
Hareth Boustany, the man who decides what stays and what goes, acknowledges that compromises have been made. As the former director of Lebanon’s National Museum—reopened last year for the first time since 1976—he hid the country’s most precious antiquities in the museum basement to protect them during the war. As the head of Solidere’s archaeology department, he bristles at charges that Beirut has run roughshod over its past. “We have saved the evidence that Beirut was an important city from the time of the Canaanites, some 5,000 years ago,” he says. “It would have been nice to do more, but how many cities in the world have done even this much?”

The question underscores the dilemma facing urban and rural landscapes far from Beirut’s gleaming new mosques and bank buildings. As cities expand, highways multiply and massive power, water and other engineering projects proliferate, they inevitably encounter the hidden chapters of history that lie beneath the landscape.

Under the streets of Athens, Greece, the huge tunneling machines boring routes for the city’s $2 billion subway system have encountered ancient roads, cisterns, graves and public baths more than 2,000 years old. Construction of the Acropolis subway station has been delayed for two years while archaeologists excavate a previously unknown Roman village from the 3rd century.

In Vatican City, workers excavating a $45 million, six-story underground parking garage last year destroyed a tomb containing the graves of Christian martyrs and unearthed the painted walls and foundations of a 2nd century villa, believed to have belonged to the mother of the emperor Caligula. Archaeologists found out about it only after 1,800-year-old artifacts began showing up in a waste heap at the site. The remaining walls were moved to make way for the garage.

**Ignorance Leads to Loss**

The World Monuments Fund, a private organization devoted to saving the world’s most important archaeological and cultural sites annually lists 100 sites endangered by neglect or development. Many more are included in the 630 sites listed as world heritage sites by the United Nations Economic, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

“We need to treat all of these sites as if they were endangered species,” says Bonnie Burnham, president of the World Monuments Fund. “If we don’t monitor them closely and change the way we are doing things, we are going to lose some of them.”

Even in the United States, so much has been lost in some areas that most people don’t know it was ever there.

To white settlers pushing into the Ohio and Mississippi valleys in the 1800s, the scattered earthen mounds they encountered didn’t look like much. Without fanfare, the mounds were leveled for farming, used for road fill or swallowed by cities. In southwestern Illinois, more than 100 earthen mounds mark the remains of Cahokia, an urban center of 30,000 people that, at the height of its power, covered more than five square miles. A similar prehistoric city, just across the Mississippi River, has been consumed by metropolitan St. Louis.

“As the evidence of these cultures has disappeared, we have lost the record of the sophisticated astronomy, engineering and architecture that these people practiced,” says Roger Kennedy, former director of the National Park Service. “In the process, we have steadily shrunk our notion of ‘history’ to the point that, for many Americans it is now only a small slice of time in the 19th and 20th centuries. And we are all the poorer for it.”
Postscript

Since The Past in Peril was first published in the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, the destruction of archaeological sites and traffic in illicit antiquities has continued unabated. There are some hopeful developments—and dismal ones as well.

The golden phiale (Part 2), the 2,400-year-old Greek bowl that was smuggled out of Italy is back home—returned after a 20-year absence by U.S. Customs. Both countries plan to work more closely in the future to curb the estimated $50 million of illicit Mediterranean antiquities sold here every year.

Egypt has become more assertive in seeking the return of the cultural material that has stocked Western museums and auction houses for centuries. A missing bust of the pharaoh Amenhotep III is back in Egypt after a New York art dealer was sentenced to 33 months in prison for smuggling it into the United States. In a gesture of good-will that Egypt hopes will be contagious, Atlanta’s Michael C. Carlos Museum plans to return the mummified remains of Ramses II, smuggled out of the country by tomb robbers more than a century ago. And Egypt has asked other museums to return the Rosetta Stone, the head of Queen Nefertiti and other objects spirited out of the country.

Peru’s famous Gold Museum (Part 1) has been disgraced by the discovery that at least a third of its pre-Columbian artifacts were fakes. Authorities suspect that the museum itself may have secretly sold thousands of legitimate necklaces, statues, and mummies—and replaced them with fakes.

With the approach of the 2004 Olympic Games in Greece, controversy is flaring anew over the fate of the Parthenon marbles (Part 3), dozens of sculptures and reliefs that Britain’s Lord Elgin carted off more than two centuries ago. Greece wants the current owner, the British Museum to return them. In hopes of shaming the British to return them, Greece is building a $100-million museum to house the marbles in Athens.

There will be no reprieve, however, for the towering Buddhas of Bamiyan, deliberately destroyed in 2001 by Afghanistan’s former Taliban rulers to enforce Islamic bans on such icons. Dynamite and howitzers made short work of the magnificent sculptures, which had withstood the elements for more than 15 centuries. Thousands of other Afghan antiquities, including most of the contents of the national museum in Kabul, have been looted or destroyed in the last decade.

The United States has not been immune to those who would erase history, whether for profit or perversity. Although such news seldom makes headlines, it is an almost daily occurrence. At Wupatki National Monument in Arizona, the National Park Service had to close the remnants of a twelfth-century Anasazi village after vandals smashed stone walls and 800-year-old graineries. Despite stiffer penalties, looting still occurs at dozens of the nation’s Civil War battlefields. In Philadelphia, a vandal even took a sledgehammer to the Liberty Bell and managed to chip its surface before he was tackled by a park ranger.

Nor does the tug of war over cultural heritage end at the water’s edge, either. Legal disagreement this year over the ownership of artifacts recovered from the Titanic have thrown the future fate of that historic wreck into disarray. The new International Convention on Underwater Cultural Heritage marks the first concerted effort to ban underwater treasure hunting, but the dispute, which could ultimately affect three million underwater shipwrecks, only defines the skirmish lines for coming battles over the future of the past.

~ Mike Toner
Atlanta, Georgia
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