


ARTICLE

The Moral Maze: A Duty of Care in the Twenty-First Century

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Abstract

What does it mean to care for culture? How does an individual, a community, a government, a nongovernmental organization, or an international agency care for objects entangled in the legal and illegal antiquities trade, held in contentious museum collections, or at risk due to cultural or natural disasters? How do the various stewards of the past work across the unpredictable boundaries of private, public, and community ownership? Caring for culture involves a range of activities and commitments aimed at safeguarding tangible and intangible cultural representations and ensuring that they remain accessible to present and future generations while honoring the traditions, beliefs, and identities of the contemporary communities. This editorial introduction to this thematic issue of *Advances in Archaeological Practice* begins with an analysis of the duty of care for the Neo-Assyrian reliefs at the Virginia Theological Seminary, asking whether the decision to sell one of their fragments was caring for culture or a commodification of the past. The remaining contributions to this issue share the theme of caring for culture, acknowledging and building on the enduring scholarship of Neil J. Brodie and Patty Gerstenblith.

Resumen

¿Qué significa cuidar la cultura? ¿Cómo cuida un individuo, una comunidad, un gobierno, una organización no gubernamental o una agencia internacional de los objetos involucrados en el comercio legal e ilegal de antigüedades, en colecciones de museos controvertidas o en riesgo debido a desastres culturales o naturales? ¿Cómo trabajan los diversos guardianes del pasado a través de las impredecibles fronteras de la propiedad privada, pública y comunitaria? Cuidar la cultura implica una variedad de actividades y compromisos destinados a salvaguardar las representaciones culturales tangibles e intangibles, asegurando que permanezcan accesibles para las generaciones presentes y futuras mientras se honran las tradiciones, creencias e identidades de las comunidades contemporáneas. Esta introducción editorial a este número temático de *Advances in Archaeological Practice* comienza con un análisis del deber de cuidado para los relieves neosirios en el Seminario Teológico de Virginia, preguntando si la decisión de vender uno de sus fragmentos fue una forma de cuidar la cultura o una comercialización del pasado. Las contribuciones a este número comparten el tema de cuidar la cultura y reconocen y se basan en la perdurable erudición de Neil J. Brodie y Patty Gerstenblith.

Keywords: culture; duty of care; ethics; Heritage; Neo-Assyrian

Palabras clave: Patrimonio; cultura; deber de diligencia; ética; neosirio

This set of articles in this thematic issue of *Advances in Archaeological Practice* highlight a duty of care, all influenced by the inspiring body of scholarship and practice of Neil J. Brodie and Patty Gerstenblith. Brodie and Gerstenblith are two of the original disciplinary influencers in the fields of archaeology and law, cultural heritage at risk, protecting the past, and trafficking in antiquities in the United States and internationally. Their work is embedded in a duty of care for ancient objects and sites for the benefit of future generations. Although the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990 does not explicitly define “duty of care,” its provisions imply responsibilities for institutions

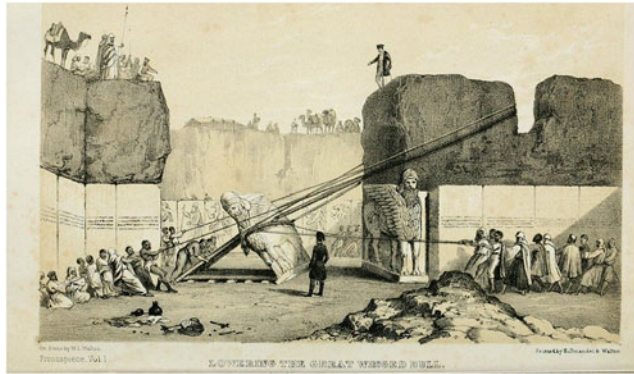


Figure 1. Layard “excavating” at Nimrud. Image by Alemazzi, CC BY-SA 4.0. <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>, via Wikimedia Commons.

and individuals regarding the handling, treatment, and repatriation of Native American cultural heritage (Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act 1990; US Department of the Interior, 2023). Its key elements include but are not limited to apologies, community engagement, prohibition of trafficking, preservation, respect, sensitivity, reparations and restitutions, consent, and collaboration. These responsibilities collectively form a framework for a *duty of care*, requiring institutions to act with diligence, respect, and legal compliance.

It is a massive undertaking for individuals, governments, museums, NGOs, and international institutions to care for collections in the twenty-first century. At times this duty of care and stewardship can be overwhelming and unsustainable, leading to a recognition that an item might be better placed somewhere else, where it could be cared for properly. At a minimum, caring for culture involves a range of activities and commitments aimed at safeguarding tangible and intangible cultural representations, ensuring that they remain accessible to present and future generations while honoring the traditions, beliefs, and identities of the contemporary communities (see Brodie 2006, 2020, 2025; Gerstenblith 2004, 2022, 2025). At its core, caring for culture maintains the dignity, integrity, and continuity of cultural expressions at the same time as fostering mutual respect, understanding, and cooperation between different cultural groups. It is often situational, responding to crises. At other times it involves preemptive planning aimed at long-term sustainability, including the physical safekeeping and conservation of objects. This editorial introduction begins with an examination of the duty of care for the Neo-Assyrian reliefs at the Virginia Theological Seminary, asking whether the decision to sell one of their fragments was caring for culture or a commodification of the past. This sets the stage for a series of articles that unpack some of the motivations of the many actors involved in the care of ancient objects and sites.

Caring for Iraqi Culture?

The moral maze of legal versus right provides a platform to examine how the Virginia Theological Seminary (VTS) cared for culture in the twenty-first century when it sold an architectural element from the Northwest Palace at Nimrud (ancient Kalhu) in modern Iraq. In the mid-1800s, British archaeologist Austen Henry Layard carried out “excavations” (and I use that term very loosely), unearthing a series of reliefs or wall panels from the palace of the great King Ashurnasirpal II who ruled from 884 to 859 BC (Figure 1). Layard’s work was privately sponsored by the British ambassador to Constantinople, Stratford Canning, with a mission of “retrieving Assyrian remains for the British Empire” (Sonik and Kertai 2023:109). Rivalry over artifacts from the region was fierce because Layard’s work was in direct competition with the French excavations at Khorsabad directed by Paul-Émile Botta (Kelly 2011:89). Both the French and British governments were interested in Assyrian artifacts as elements of their colonial, cultural, and political ambitions (Howard 2023:3).

Originally fixed to the walls of royal palaces, the reliefs formed continuous strips along the sides of large halls. According to John Russell (1997:20), “Taken as a whole, the relief decoration seems to be



Figure 2. Assyrian Relief at the British Museum, CC BY-SA 3.0. <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>, via Wikimedia Commons.

intended as a visual expression of the main elements of Ashurnasirpal's royal ideology." With the fall of Assyria in 612 BC, the palace fell into ruins and became covered with earth and overgrown with weeds—the same conditions that Layard first encountered at Nimrud. Archival documents indicate that Layard was troubled by the circumstances of the reliefs at Nimrud (Franck 1980). He worried that, if left in situ, the reliefs would be looted or destroyed by local populations. Layard's persistent concerns about the safety of the pieces resulted in the solicitation of Western institutions as places for safekeeping of the objects.

As a result of input and pressure from Stratford Canning, Layard's excavation sponsor, the Ottoman overseers granted permission to export the reliefs (see Albertson 2018). Labeling this as "orthostatic diplomacy," Robert Ousterhout (2023:33) makes direct reference to the architectural reliefs at Nimrud as ambassadors working on behalf of ancient Assyria. Reflecting on the distribution of reliefs, he stated, "Curiously, most of the destinations were small Protestant colleges and not major museums" (Ousterhout 2023:30). Not only was there competition between nations to receive the palace reliefs but archival accounts also document a friendly rivalry between the various American missionaries posted to Mosul (Franck 1980:42). It seems that missionaries and seminaries doing the work of God were considered best poised to care for culture and so should receive items with biblical associations supporting their missions. Between 1850 and 1860, American missionaries at Mosul and other influential individuals acquired at least 55 relief fragments from the Northwest Palace for their alma mater colleges in New England, as well as for other private institutions (Bourne and Knowles 2021; Franck 1980; Porter 1989; Stearns 1961). Reliefs are now located in Amherst College, the Hood Museum at Dartmouth College, Wellesley College, the Bowdoin College Museum of Art, and the Virginia Theological Seminary (see Russell [1997], with a contribution by Judith Mackenzie for a recounting of the itineraries of many of these artifacts).

Increased curiosity in these reliefs is attributed to a variety of factors. Antiquarian interest in the Ancient Near East was piqued by the decipherment of cuneiform and the translations of texts like the *Gilgamesh* epic in the 1800s (Sonik and Kertai 2023). The advent of biblical archaeology and the desire for explicit connections between material manifestations and biblical passages created heightened attention. Old Testament scriptural (Isaiah 10:5–34; Nahum 1–3) accounts of God's wrath and the destruction of the people and places of Assyria were supported by news reports of discoveries of monumental sculptures and sensational finds confirming biblical descriptions (Howard 2023; Ousterhout 2023; Sonik and Kertai 2023:110). Once the relief fragments arrived at the British Museum (Figure 2) and the Louvre, they were afforded the academic prestige and cachet that then transferred to smaller religious institutions that were also successful in securing a fragment of the past (Bourne and Knowles 2021:254). Assyriomania gripped the West and, more specifically, the United States (Ousterhout 2023).

Table 1. Insurance Evaluations of the VTS Neo-Assyrian Reliefs.

Year	Evaluator	VTS 58	VTS 59	Total Appraisal
1995	Christie's Auction House	\$3.5 million	\$1 million	\$4.5 million
1996	Sotheby's Auction House	\$7.7 million	\$750,000	\$7.7 million
2006	Christie's Auction House	\$8 million	\$1.5 million	\$9.5 million
2017	Pall Mall Art Advisors			\$55 million

In 1859, Dr. Henri Byron Haskell, class of 1855 Bowdoin's Medical School of Maine, was working as a physician and missionary in Nimrud when Layard approached him with a request: to rescue the ornate palatial panels from an uncertain political situation in the Middle East. Haskell agreed to have two carvings from excavations sent to the VTS in Alexandria, Virginia, for the purposes of protection and educational display (Bourne and Knowles 2021; Howard 2023; Porter 1989; Stearns 1961). VTS 58 depicts a human-headed figure facing right, carrying a cone and a situla, and fertilizing a sacred tree (Ross 1976). VTS 59, cut in half for easier shipping, depicts two hawk-headed Winged Genii (Bourne and Knowles 2021:253).

There is no specific rationale for the VTS acquisitions, although in their comprehensive account of the reliefs, Amanda Bourne and Melody Knowles (2021:253–254) speculate that the seminary may have been interested in accessing both the “remote past” and in “confirm[ing] the historical truth” of the Old Testament. Securing reliefs also added to the seminary's academic reputation. James Ross (1976:10) suggests that it is “likely that Virginia wanted some reliefs because everybody else had them.” And so VTS 58 and VTS 59 became part of the VTS collection, exhibited in the seminary library.

Just a year after arriving on campus, the reliefs were packed up with the rest of the library collection at the outbreak of the Civil War (Bourne and Knowles 2021:255). Very little is known about where the reliefs were between 1865 and 1956, when they were moved into a new library building and cemented into a wall in the lower level between two bathrooms. Over the years the reliefs were studied, translated, and used in educational programming at VTS. Since the mid-1990s, appraisers from various auction houses provided valuations of the reliefs for insurance purposes (see Table 1). Each new appraisal increased insurance premiums, sparking debate about the rising costs of insurance, conservation, and a growing concern over their security on campus.

In 2011, Roger Ferlo, then associate dean at VTS, was commissioned to assess the feasibility of deaccessioning (the process of removing an object from a museum's permanent collection) the reliefs. In 2021, I sat down with Professor Ferlo to discuss all things Assyrian reliefs and VTS. In our conversation and in his report to the VTS dean and president, he recommended that if VTS were to deaccession, it should adhere to American Alliance of Museums (AAM) and Association of Art Museum Directors (AAMD) guidance, which in 2011 included a provision about using proceeds from a sale *only* for the acquisition of other works of art (Ferlo 2011:11; emphasis added). Ferlo found that the current state of the reliefs was unacceptable “despite the valiant efforts of the Head Librarian and her dedicated staff to maintain, showcase, and publicize the reliefs. . . . *The Seminary has failed in its fiduciary responsibility to care adequately for these extraordinary works of ancient art*” (emphasis added). This report suggested that VTS was not caring for culture in its current configuration and that it had to do something to protect the past. Ferlo offered three scenarios for the VTS reliefs: to raise funds to restore and rehouse the reliefs, to sell the smaller relief to pay for restoration and renovation of the larger one, or to loan them to a Washington, DC, area museum. Ferlo's report languished until the 2017 insurance appraisal.

That appraisal reflected a steady increase in valuation of the artifacts, in line with general trends in the antiquities market (Table 1; Baugh 2007; Carter 2017). The 2017 insurance audit at VTS, carried out by Pall Mall Art Advisors, estimated that the value of the reliefs had risen dramatically—almost six times higher than the 2006 appraisal (Bourne and Knowles 2021; Modisett 2018). The 2017 assessment came in the aftermath of the circulation of videos showing the intentional destruction of Assyrian reliefs and the bulldozing of the site of Nimrud by the terrorist group Daesh (also known as ISIL, Islamic State, or ISIS). Global awareness of the damage increased interest in the Assyrian past, which was reflected in

market demand and higher prices for artifacts from the region (Greenland et al. 2019; Topçuoğlu and Vorderstrasse 2019).

Given that the VTS reliefs were accessible in their library setting, their 2017 reassessed value meant that security would have to be increased and insurance payments would rise to \$70,000 annually (Modisett 2018). The concerns about conservation and security, in tandem with Ferlo's 2011 report and the upcoming building construction and renovations as part of VTS's 2023 bicentennial celebration, prompted it to act in what it considered to be the best interests of the ancient artifacts (Modisett 2018). Drawing from Ferlo's initial findings and recommendations, VTS produced three position papers (Bourne and Knowles 2021; Ferlo 2011):

1. To keep: The first paper set out the case to keep both reliefs and argued that retaining the reliefs would allow VTS to highlight its commitment to scholarship, both in the church and in the wider community (Ferlo 2011: 12).
2. To loan: A loan to a museum "offers much potential for honoring the posterity of both the artifacts and the seminary's reputation as an institution seeking to foster serious scholarship and engagement with ecclesial heritage." Although this paper notes that this option offered little opportunity for substantive revenue, it "may perhaps offer more political expediency than a decision to sell . . . outright." Avoiding a public sale would also prevent the seminary from increasing the valuation of other significant antiquities and promoting the sale of antiquities (Bourne and Knowles 2021: 262–263).
3. To sell: The final option concerned selling one or both reliefs. Because the reliefs had been in the United States since the 1850s, there was no legal barrier to the sale of the reliefs. The funds generated from a sale could endow professorships and scholarships, perhaps even providing free tuition for students, allowing VTS to fulfill its commitment "to its students as primary beneficiaries of institutional resources". (Bourne and Knowles 2021: 262).

After circulating the position papers, faculty, staff, and students were polled. In considering a loan or a gift of a relief to a museum, the ideal situation was to find an interested and reputable institution in the Washington, DC, area, which would allow for an institutional connection and ongoing access for VTS students and faculty. Unfortunately, the Smithsonian Institution expressed no interest. The recently opened Museum of the Bible (MOTB), also in Washington, DC, offered \$1/year to house both reliefs on a long-term loan. VTS did not pursue this option, perhaps due to the negative press associated with the 2017 seizure of Iraqi artifacts from the Hobby Lobby Corporation by the US government and its connection to the MOTB (see Brodie 2020; Gerstenblith 2022; Kersel 2021). Or possibly any relationship between VTS and the MOTB would be seen as normalizing the continued colonial cultural plunder of the country, rather than seeking justice for Iraq as scholars Mehiyar Kathem and Dhiaa Kareem Ali (2021) and Candida Moss (2020) have stressed. The relief would just go from one Western institution to another.

In the comments on the white papers, some did suggest repatriation to Iraq, an option not offered by VTS in considering the fate of the reliefs. Respondents wondered why, "given VTS's fiscal security, the institution would pursue a sale that was both financially unnecessary and ethically complex" (Bourne and Knowles 2021:263). If VTS could not afford to pay the insurance premiums and for updated care and conservation, why shouldn't it return the artifacts to Iraq? Instead they chose option three—to sell.

In response to the announcement of the sale, the Iraqi government appealed to Christie's Auction House to stop the auction, arguing that the relief was part of the heritage and patrimony of the Iraqi people (Arraf 2018). In a public campaign protesting the sale of Iraqi cultural heritage, the Assyrian American National Federation (2018) wrote,

We have a deep moral obligation to challenge these "legal" sales, and we should not condone those that seek financial profit from our past. This is a rallying cry for the Assyrian American community to mobilize its collective voice in order to petition against the sale of heritage, especially when the very survival of this ancient people is threatened. As a community, we share the responsibility to

ensure this piece is accessible to future generations so that they will understand what came before them.

In none of the press releases and available VTS documentation of the consultations around the sale of the Assyrian relief is there any mention of the possibility of repatriation to Iraq. For decision-makers at VTS, the question of repatriation was not just one of legality but of responsible stewardship. Given the political climate in Iraq in 2017, the VTS Committee did not consider Iraq a safe environment for the relief, citing “unsure long-term stability” (Bourne and Knowles 2021:264). As Kathem and Kareem Ali (2021) aver, this position by a Western institution of deciding who is capable of caring for culture perpetuates the enterprise of colonialism, reinforcing the extractive nature of archaeology.

In the end, the decision to sell was based on VTS’s status as a seminary, rather than as a museum (Ferlo 2011). Unlike other schools such as Dartmouth and Bowdoin, which created dedicated spaces and devoted significant budgets to their Neo-Assyrian reliefs and other artifacts, the consensus was clear that the seminary “should not become or create [a museum]” (Ferlo 2011). The executive committee recommended that the seminary sell VTS 58 and keep VTS 59. Among the reasons for this decision was a desire to be more responsible stewards by funding the renovation of a space to preserve and house the remaining relief (Bourne and Knowles 2021).

In a press release regarding the sale of the VTS relief, Ian Markham, dean and president of VTS stated “It was a difficult decision, says [Ian] Markham [dean and president of VTS]. These are world-class treasures that have been part of Virginia Seminary’s history for over 150 years. But in the end, the Trustees felt that the cost of maintaining the entire collection would pull resources from our primary mission to educate lay or ordained leaders for the Episcopal Church” (Modisett 2018). This explanation for the decision to legally sell an ancient artifact fits neatly into the classic collecting trope of buying or selling the past to save it. VTS also stated, “Proceeds from the sale will underwrite Bicentennial initiatives such as the Vocations Scholarship Fund, making residential seminary education more accessible to candidates who reflect the changing face of the Episcopal Church. Funds will also be used for conservation and display of a remaining pair of carvings” (Modisett 2018).

In line with its mission to prioritize its students and the education of future church leaders, VTS decided to deaccession one of its Neo-Assyrian reliefs and to use the proceeds for scholarship funds and for the conservation and installation of the remaining relief in a prominent, more accessible place.

The institution also set aside ten percent of the sale price of the reliefs as an outreach fund. \$1.7 million of this is dedicated to reparations, with proceeds to be distributed to descendants of enslaved persons that the seminary or families living at the seminary exploited. Funds have also been donated to the Assyrian Aid Society to support humanitarian projects in Iraq (in 2019), the Episcopal Church in Jerusalem and the Middle East (in 2019), and the World Monuments Fund (in 2020)” [Bourne and Knowles 2021:269].

Through these actions, VTS asked the public to acknowledge its altruistic act in selling the relief because, first, it admitted that it could not adequately care for the piece, and second, the monies generated from the sale would be put to good use.

This declaration of benevolent motives and outcomes superseded any discussion of original ownership (Iraq) and ignored the direct link between the legal demand for archaeological artifacts and the destruction of archaeological sites and monuments. There are numerous studies demonstrating that the sale of artifacts leads to increased looting at archaeological sites (see Brodie 2006; Brodie and Sabrine 2017; Kersel and Hill 2019; Mackenzie 2005, 2014; Mackenzie and Davis 2014; Mackenzie and Yates 2016; Sabrine et al. 2022; Yates 2016). Iraqi scholars like Lamia Al-Gailani questioned the legality of the Ottoman permission granted to Layard (quoted in Arraf 2018; for further discussion of Layard’s legacy in the present, see also contributions in Bahrani et al. 2011). Although VTS maintained it was legally entitled to sell the artifact, it seems that it did not consider the ethical consequences of this decision. Could the sale contribute to heightening interest in material from this region, which could result in more looting in Iraq? In an interview after the sale, MacGuire Gibson, professor of Mesopotamian archaeology at

the University of Chicago, asserted, “This is going to spark a whole bunch of new looting because the prices of antiquities will go up” (quoted in Arraf 2018). There is a demonstrable problem with looting in Iraq, and, moreover, the sale of looted antiquities has been linked to the terrorist activities of Daesh (Arraf 2018; Al-Azm and Paul 2018; Barnard 2015). Thus, the seemingly innocent demand for a Neo-Assyrian relief in the legal market might result in the targeted destruction of an archaeological site by Daesh (Barnard 2015). The buying of antiquities from Iraq might also result in the negative externality of terrorist network funding (Al-Azm and Paul 2018; Terrill 2017). The auction of the Neo-Assyrian relief may be “legal but it ain’t right,” to borrow the title of the 2004 edited volume by Nikos Passas and Neva Goodwin.

There is a general consensus that a legal industry is basically benign and beneficial, but as Passas and Goodwin (2004:6) argue, this thinking “obscures the fact that, on balance, society may be negatively affected by allowing certain operations and practices to continue.” Legal actions often result in negative consequences and outcomes. Although rooted in legal precedent and historically entrenched, the act of selling artifacts has a direct negative effect on archaeological landscapes and history more generally. There are harms suffered by innocent bystanders as a result of the sale of illegal antiquities (Rothfield 2019). In addition to the loss of archaeological integrity as artifacts are ripped from their context, local populations are disenfranchised by the loss of their cultural heritage (Greenland 2021; Kersel and Hill 2019; Mickell 2021). Zainab Bahrani, a Columbia University professor of ancient Near Eastern art and archaeology and once senior adviser to Iraq’s Ministry of Culture, articulated forcefully the destructive effects of the sale: “The Virginia Theological Seminary has been incredibly insensitive to the suffering of the Iraqi people who have endured horrendous violence and seen their heritage obliterated under ISIS, including the demolition of the Assyrian palace at Nimrud, from which this relief was originally taken” (quoted in Small 2018).

On October 31, 2018, Christie’s sold the seven-foot stone panel (Figure 3) at a price of USD \$30,968,750. Max Bernheimer of Christie’s remarked that this sale was one for the generations (Christie’s 2018). The identity of the buyer remains anonymous, which means the artifact, once available for public viewing at VTS, is now behind closed doors, inaccessible to everyone but the buyer(s). Although the sale of VTS 58 was “legal”—and that is debatable in the same way that acquiring the Parthenon Marbles and receiving permission from the occupying Ottoman Empire were legal (see Bahrani et al. 2011)—it wasn’t right. The negative consequences of selling the ancient artifact—the commodification of the past, the continuation of colonial appropriation, and the lack of consultation with Iraqis—are all the antithesis of what constitutes a duty of care. VTS had the funds to care for the culture in their collection (see Bourne and Knowles 2021:263) but chose not to. They also chose not to consider a voluntary return to Iraq, opting instead to reinforce the colonial legacies of archaeology (see Kathem and Kareem Ali 2021) by selling an ancient artifact to the highest bidder. Although there may be a moral maze facing individuals and institutions and a duty of care in the twenty-first century, there were and are ethical choices available.

A Duty of Care

The VTS perceived selling one of its prized Neo-Assyrian reliefs, which was languishing in a library basement, as caring for culture. For many governments, caring for culture means passing legislation designed to protect the past and to ensure that their cultural heritage remains within their borders. For scholars, sometimes it means publishing artifacts with little or no provenance. For others, caring for culture begins with collaboration, efforts that are community designed and desired. International agencies care for culture through a series of conventions and treaties aimed at leveling protection efforts to stem the one-way movement of materials and knowledge from the global south to the demand-centered global north. Local, national, and international nonprofits are dedicated to caring for culture through locally driven grassroots efforts with missions of protecting the past for the present and future. Museums care for culture by doing the yeoman’s work of conserving, curating, acting as safe havens, and educating thousands of visitors through programming and exhibits. Sometimes, as in the case of VTS, caring for culture may be self-serving and not always in the best interests of the artifacts, archaeological sites, cultural institutions, or contemporary populations. The following contributions to this issue share the theme of caring

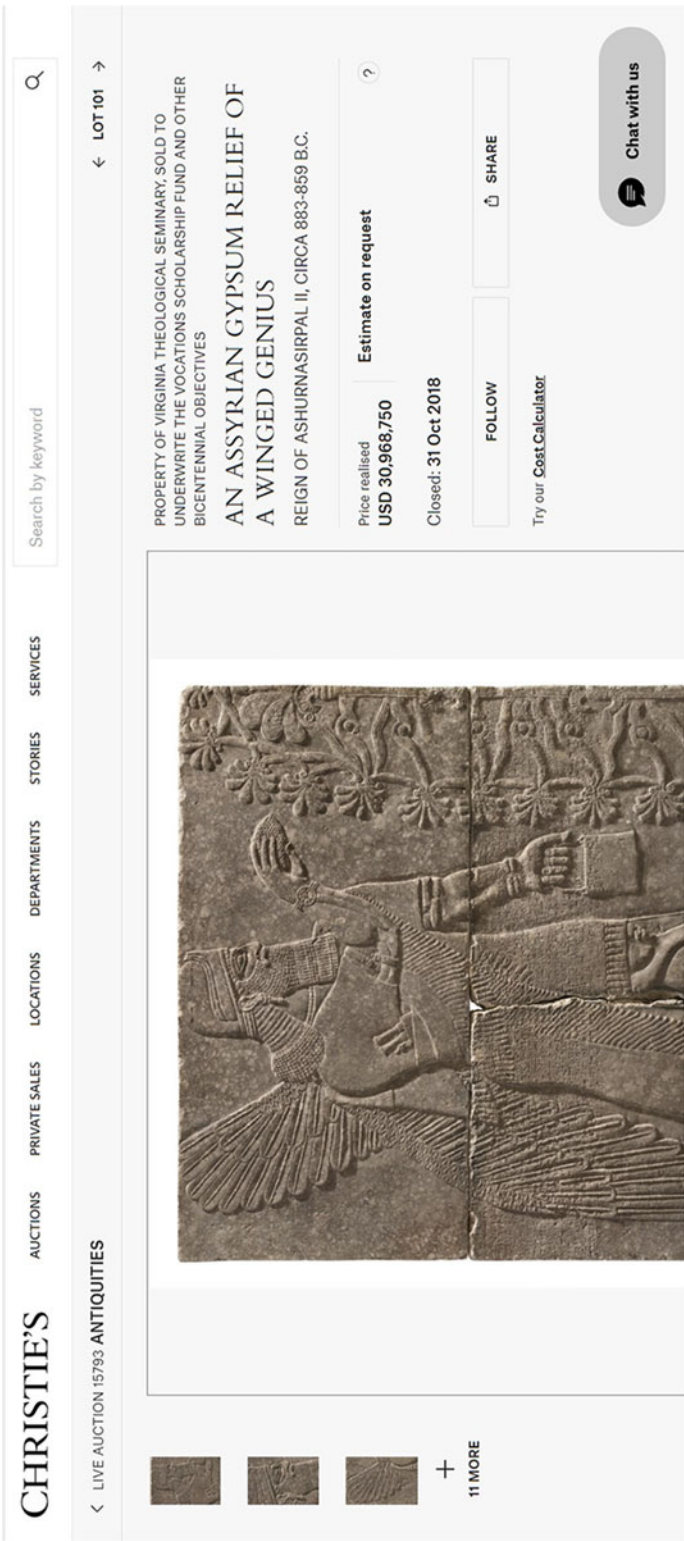


Figure 3. Screen capture of the Christie's online auction catalog entry for VTS 58. Image by Morag M. Kersel.



Figure 4. Neil J. Brodie. Image by Camilla Briault, used with permission.



Figure 5. Patty Gerstenblith. Image by DePaul University, used with permission.

for culture and the enduring influence of Neil J. Brodie (Figure 4) and Patty Gerstenblith (Figure 5) to a field dedicated to preserving the past.

Any consideration of archaeology and law, cultural heritage at risk, protecting the past, or trafficking in antiquities is incomplete without reference to the work of Brodie and Gerstenblith: they are among the original disciplinary influencers. Their years of dedication to people and their histories have resulted in a robust body of scholarly work fundamental to our understanding, exploration, study, and conservation of heritage. Collaborating with experts, governments, local communities, and students, Brodie and Gerstenblith have assisted, inspired, and fostered a discipline. Articles in this thematic issue demonstrate the influence of Brodie and Gerstenblith on the ways to care for culture and the future directions that such a duty of care might take.

Brodie, a renowned archaeologist and scholar, has researched extensively the illegal trade in antiquities. His work spans the historical and contemporary aspects of the antiquities trade, shedding light on the patterns, networks, and motivations behind the trafficking of cultural artifacts. Brodie's publications are foundational in the study of antiquities markets, offering insights into its cultural, economic, social,

and legal dimensions. Gerstenblith, once an archaeologist, is now a leading authority in cultural heritage law. Her academic contributions have been pivotal in shaping legal frameworks for the protection of cultural heritage, both nationally (in the United States) and internationally. Her insights into issues such as repatriation, the role of museums, and the legal consequences of the illicit trade inform international debates and influence legal approaches to safeguarding cultural heritage. Beyond their scholarly work, Brodie and Gerstenblith are actively involved in advocacy and education, making tangible impacts on policy related to cultural heritage protection. They contribute to local, national, and international initiatives aimed at raising awareness about the importance of cultural heritage protection, engaging with policymakers, and promoting ethical practices within the field.

This thematic issue delves into the multifaceted dimensions of the illegal trade in antiquities, an insidious global phenomenon that spans centuries and continues to plague the cultural heritage of nations worldwide as archaeological materials become commodities in the black market. This collection of articles seeks to shed light on the intricate web of factors contributing to the illicit trafficking of cultural artifacts, the laundering and eventual legitimizing of such objects, consumer demand for artifacts, and academic interaction with these items. Scholars explore case studies from diverse regions, highlighting the social, economic, and psychological aspects of collecting and the consequences of demand on cultural loss. Additionally, experts from the fields of archaeology, criminology, law, and cultural heritage protection evaluate existing national and international frameworks, scrutinize gaps in legislation, and propose new strategies for the effective protection of cultural heritage.

In “Marketing, Narratives, and Consumer Desire within Auction Catalogs of Cultural Objects,” archaeologist Donna Yates (2025) examines how consumer desire is reflected in the language used for marketing purposes in antiquities auction catalogs (the active publication that Brodie highlights in his contribution). Yates studies the specific narratives used to emphasize the Pacific imaginary as envisioned by white consumers. Exploring this qualitative data, Yates argues that these descriptions are marketing ploys used to appeal to white, Western consumers, rather than accurate reflections of the items up for auction. Her article reinforces the collecting trope of domination and conquest over “the other” through the acquisition of cultural items (Thompson 2016). Understanding this marketing strategy may lead to ways to “prevent cultures from continuing to enjoy the literal spoils of violence” (Yates 2025). We are asked to think not only about white consumption of Pacific culture but also the persistence of colonial violence. Yates also encourages us to interrogate the auction catalog language rather than passively accepting the promotional narratives. She asserts that this type of analysis, in conjunction with an examination of well-established commodity theory, could aid in regulating or discouraging bad acts and actors in the marketplace. It is this close reading and critical analysis of the auction catalog that allows for more accurate representations and a greater caring for culture.

In what could be conceived as another marketing ploy related to the sale of antiquities in “Cultivating Desire: Touch and Transgressive Thrill in the Art Fair,” criminologist Diāna Bērziņa (2025) deconstructs the art fair in the guise of museum. At their very core museums are thought to be places of care: with missions steeped in access, conservation, and education, they have an inescapable duty of care. Bērziņa contends that art fairs want visitors to feel like they are in a museum: “Visitors encounter artworks in pseudo-galleries, displayed on walls, exhibited on pedestals, and accompanied by informative labels” (Bērziņa 2025). However, in this transgressive space, art fairs allow buyers the rare opportunity to touch, offering a more holistic experience than a “real” museum. Demonstrating that consumption is about more than mere objects, Bērziņa argues that buyers want a complete experience, including the emotional, the sensorial, and the atmospheric. Like Mackenzie (2025) and Yates (2025), Bērziņa asks us to consider how people consume artifacts and how our understanding of their actions might lead to deterrence. If demand is at the heart of the illegal trade in antiquities, comprehending demand may also lead to greater insights into the legal and illegal intricacies of the market for antiquities.

Simon Mackenzie, a criminologist who has studied the antiquities trade for decades, like Yates and Bērziņa uses the concept of deterrence and different types of deterrence to consider the illegal sale and collecting of artifacts. In “What Deters Antiquities Looting and Trafficking?” Mackenzie (2025) focuses on identifying the best way to care for culture, concluding that identification of the decision-making and impulses of collectors is key: “While, as with any research area, deterrence remains a developing

idea, rich with practical implications for crime prevention but also harboring some profound unresolved questions about precisely what drives human action in certain contexts, a more rounded understanding of the concept than has previously been applied to illicit antiquities studies will no doubt be a step in the right direction” (Mackenzie 2025). Drawing from the earlier work of Brodie and Gerstenblith, he argues that if we know or understand why people want unprovenanced artifacts, we can develop methods of deterrence, whether through law, policy, customary norms, or moral persuasion. Using a criminological approach to caring for culture, Mackenzie suggests that the best form of deterrence is “don’t do this or you will likely be caught.” Whether you are the looter nabbed by SmartWater technology embedded in an antiquity or if you are a billionaire collector like Michael Steinhardt who had \$70 million of antiquities seized by the US government, you are caught. Mackenzie highlights the interconnectedness of the trafficking commodity chain, illustrating that measures taken at each end of it can shape decisions made by the various participants, which may lead to future deterrence.

Moving from art fairs, auction sales, and collector motivations, Neil J. Brodie and Emiline Smith each examine the influence of scholarly interaction with the art market and unprovenanced artifacts. In his “thinking out loud” exercise, Brodie examines looted military material from Dura-Europos in Syria through scholarly publications and the publication policies of some professional organizations, demonstrating the destructive consequences of publishing unprovenanced artifacts. Although there is a well-established body of literature on whether to publish artifacts with little or no documentation (see the extensive work of Neil Brodie and others), debate remains. I recently (Kersel 2023) urged us to move beyond the binary of to publish or not to publish, arguing as Brodie does that scholars are always going to find justifications for publishing (and the attendant laundering of) decontextualized objects. In his contribution, Brodie (2025) contends that “publication becomes part of an artifact’s provenance or pedigree, and the scholar’s name will remain attached to it as a sign of acceptability or legitimacy.” In “Thinking about Current Archaeological Attitudes toward the Illicit trade in Antiquities: The Example of Ancient Arms and Armor,” Brodie (2025) compares the publication policies of three professional organizations: he discusses the negative impacts of allowing for the publication of undocumented artifacts, suggesting that the ongoing destruction of archaeological sites in the quest for salable artifacts has both material and intellectual consequences for archaeological scholarship (Brodie 2025; Marlowe 2013). Through the analyses of scholarly publication of ancient arms and armor looted recently from Bulgaria and Syria, Brodie eschews the rationalizations (scholars are saving the past and creating knowledge) of why scholars should be allowed to study and publish unprovenanced artifacts. Instead, he focuses on professional publication ethical codes, which he argues “create conditions conducive to the guilt-free publication of unprovenanced artifacts without any reflection upon the utility or quality of the published research or its possible consequences” (Brodie 2025). Brodie eloquently makes the case for a relationship between academic scholarship and archaeological site looting, demonstrating why his informed scholarship has and continues to impact the field.

Influenced by Brodie’s research into the impact of the academic study of unprovenanced artifacts and the market for this material, criminologist Emiline Smith uses a corpus of Asian artifacts to illustrate the myriad consequences of the scholarly impact of Emma Bunker and Mary Slusser. These scholars rarely, if ever, came into contact with the various elements of the trade, but they benefited from its existence through access to objects. This idea of scholarly benefit without direct involvement is also clear from Brodie’s contribution to this issue (see also Brodie 2023). Instead, Bunker and Slusser (and others) play a role behind the scenes by authenticating, studying, validating, and creating knowledge affecting the objects, the market, and local communities who no longer have access to their goods or the associated knowledge. In “Scholarly Facilitation of the Illicit Trade in Cultural Objects: Providing a Veneer of Legitimacy,” Smith (2025) examines the harmful and criminogenic effects of knowledge production on cultural objects. She provides helpful guidance for those of us in the global north in situating our knowledge acquisition and production, in making efforts at inclusivity, and in recognizing our colonial origin stories: “We must ask ourselves: How are we stakeholders in the global illicit trade in cultural objects? How are we potentially sustaining the violence that is involved in the global illicit trade in cultural objects? And what responsibilities come with the power of academia and museum curation in the knowledge creation and debates around cultural objects?” (Smith 2025). As with many of the articles in

this issue, Smith's admonishments to be self-reflective and self-critical may be uncomfortable, but they are necessary as we move forward in a duty of care for objects, sites, and communities.

Cultural heritage experts Eva Licci and Isber Sabrine of the international NGO Heritage for Peace (<https://www.heritageforpeace.org/>) demonstrate the need for a shift in response to heritage in crises, particularly crises created by nonstate actors like ISIS/ISL, which may require a nonstandard response. For many of us, this is an unprecedented moment with wars in Gaza and Ukraine, civil wars in Sudan and Syria, and the earthquake along the Syrian–Türkiye border all creating unfathomable at-risk situations for people, places, and objects. In “Beyond the Rubble: Civil Society Organizations’ Emergency Response to Protect Cultural Heritage in Conflict Areas,” Licci and Sabrine (2025) conclude that only through greater roles for local populations and civil society organizations (CSOs) can the protection and conservation of culture be effective and immediate. In their contribution, they also examine the obstacles, challenges, and success stories of carrying out emergency triage and assessments in the aftermath or the midst of disaster. Their proactive approach relies on the role of CSOs in supporting preparedness and immediate response to combat cultural heritage destruction and looting during times of war, arguing that in-country or regional CSOs should take the place of international entities like UNESCO and ICCROM, which may be slower to act; they also suggest moving beyond more traditional Western models of preservation. Licci and Sabrine believe that responding to culture at risk is no longer the sole responsibility of centralized institutions and governments. They advocate for locally coordinated emergency responses with cooperative and coordinated support at the international level.

The remaining contributions in the issue are by lawyers and cultural heritage practitioners who are committed to caring for culture through law, policy, and programming. Tess Davis and Helena Arose of the Antiquities Coalition—a nongovernmental nonprofit organization dedicated to safeguarding cultural heritage through advocacy, research, and practical solutions (<https://theantiquitiescoalition.org/>)—offer an in-depth discussion of bilateral agreements between the United States and a group of foreign nations aimed at reducing the illegal import and export of looted and stolen artifacts. In “Antiquated Policy? Rethinking Cultural Property Agreements with Foreign Governments under US Law,” Davis and Arose (2025) contend that international agreements, executive orders, and US policy and law act as deterrents to looting, laundering, and antiquities trafficking. Their detailed discussion of the US process demonstrates that the coordinated efforts of law enforcement, border controls, bilateral agreements, national laws, and international treaties and conventions work to protect cultural heritage. This article, read in tandem with the contribution by Patty Gerstenblith, illustrates the advances made in the effective safeguarding of culture, while also highlighting the shortfalls that remain, particularly in preventing the trade in cultural objects illegally removed from areas of armed conflict. Progress has been made, but both articles concede that there is still much work to be done.

In “Influenced, Influence: The Evolution and Future of Cultural Heritage Law” archaeologist and lawyer Patty Gerstenblith reflects on how caring for culture has evolved in the more than 40 years she has worked in the field. Standing on the shoulders of notable archaeological and legal forebearers, Gerstenblith examines what she identifies as four distinct issues that still pose limitations to protecting the past. In considering the trafficking of undocumented archaeological artifacts, like Bêrziņa, Mackenzie, and Yates, Gerstenblith emphasizes the harms caused by demand (institutional and individual) and the opacity of the market. Until we know more about how and why acquisitions are made, “it is impossible for us to assess whether we have, in fact, reached a turning point in market behavior” (Gerstenblith 2025). She highlights the piecemeal nature of legal measures and policy aimed at protecting cultural heritage during times of war, which reflects a more reactive than proactive stance in caring for culture. Similarly to Licci and Sabrine, Gerstenblith sees the future of cultural heritage protection in local communities and a greater state recognition for the rights of Indigenous and minority communities within a legal structure. In the final part of her article, Gerstenblith underscores the legacies of colonialism and imperialism and the need for justice through reparations and repatriations. Considering the present condition of international cultural heritage law, Gerstenblith acknowledges the debt that we owe to past activist cultural heritage scholars, lawyers, practitioners, and contemporary communities, while also challenging the next generation of activists to do more.

Contributions to this thematic issue bring together the works of the influencers (Brodie and Gerstenblith) and the influenced (Arose, Bērziņa, Davis, Kersel, Licci, Mackenzie, Sabrine, Smith, Yates, and others) related to archaeology, criminology, law, policy, and practice in caring for culture. The academic impact of Brodie and Gerstenblith is evident across this set of articles and in the discipline writ large. A comprehensive explanation of the illegal trade in antiquities—from its historical roots to its contemporary manifestations—and efforts to bridge the gap between scholarly research, legal frameworks, and practical solutions for the protection of cultural heritage on a global scale are woven throughout the case studies presented in this issue. Their work continues to inspire and guide teachers, researchers, policymakers, and practitioners in the field. We hope this set of articles contribute to a better understanding of the illegal trade in antiquities, the protection of cultural heritage during times of conflict, and potential solutions and remedies, while also emphasizing the enduring influence of Brodie and Gerstenblith.

I suspect that both Brodie and Gerstenblith are often asked whether we are at a turning point in the illegal market for antiquities, given the recent spate of cultural property requests, seizures, repatriations and voluntary restitutions (see the work of Matthew Bogdanos and the Antiquities Trafficking Unit in the New York District Attorney's Office [*Economist* 2024]). Is this the moment when individuals and institutions do their due diligence, ask sticky questions, and refuse to buy material without a solid object biography? The answer is unclear. If they do not, however, it is certain that they will be front-page news and social media fodder. What Brodie and Gerstenblith are really being asked is whether they think their work has made a difference. I believe that the articles in this issue, heightened public interest in these topics, and the start of meaningful reparations and object repatriations are all a testament to the legacies of Brodie and Gerstenblith and are signposts of a brighter future for the past.

In his paper on the Neo-Assyrian relief at Wellesley, Eric Jarrard (2022) asked, “What is our responsibility to the objects in our care? And more importantly, how does the curation of these objects and collections extend the orientalist impulses out of which they were procured?” The inherited legacies and the ongoing imbalance of demand from the Global North and a steady supply from the Global South ensure the perpetuation of the colonial conditions of resource extraction and exploitation. I introduced this issue with an analysis of the duty of care for the Neo-Assyrian reliefs at the Virginia Theological Seminary, asking whether the decision to sell one of their fragments was caring for culture or a commodification of the past. Opinion on this is divided, but the articles in this issue offer greater clarity on the harms caused by the disregard for communities, the demand for cultural objects and the study of unprovenanced artifacts, the risks to sites and objects caused by conflicts, and the potential avenues for law, policy, and cooperation in protecting the past. We hope these articles stimulate informed discourse, foster collaboration, and inspire concrete actions to safeguard our shared cultural heritage for current and future generations.

Acknowledgments. There are people far more knowledgeable than I am about Neo-Assyrian reliefs and museum display. I am guided by the work of Lindsay Allen, Eric Jarrard, Amanda Kelly, Judith MacKenzie, Alex Nagel, Kiersten Neumann, and John Russell; with regard to the VTS reliefs, Roger Ferlo, Amanda Bourne, and Melody Knowles provided invaluable insights. Melissa Kerin of the Roger Mudd Center for Ethics at Washington and Lee University also offered very helpful feedback on the VTS case study. Versions of this article were presented at the AIA and ASOR annual meetings. My thanks to my friends and colleagues who offered a thought-provoking set of articles for this issue. I am indebted to the scholarly work, guidance, and friendship of Neil J. Brodie (my PhD supervisor) and Patty Gerstenblith (my PhD examiner and DePaul University colleague). Their dedication and commitment to caring for culture are inspiring.

Funding Statement. This research received no specific grant funding from any funding agency, commercial, or nonprofit sectors.

Data Availability Statement. No original data are presented in this article.

Competing Interests. The author declares none.

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