

A Response to *Invasive Sampling versus Object Integrity*

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Tite has laid out the process of how all curators of collections should approach the matter of requests for invasive sampling. He has also provided an analysis of the introduction of scientific techniques into archaeology, the relationship between archaeological science and invasive sampling, and the attitudes that museum curators take to it. If his understated – but apparently real – concern is correct and there is now resistance to invasive sampling from some museums, particularly in the UK, then this requires examination.

He certainly made me reconsider my own attitude to the process when I was a curator. In the 1970s, new into the museum world, and Keeper of Archaeology for Hampshire County Museums Service, I was about to agree that a number of stone axes could be thin sectioned if necessary. This was so that they could be identified in terms of their likely geological origin as part of the longstanding programme on the ‘stone axe trade’. Thin-sectioning had gone on for some time in collections. Although such sections were, in those days, less frequently taken and certainly less unsightly than earlier work – and are now hardly ever even contemplated – I was quite happy to give permission for work to be done. This was because I felt that it would further enhance knowledge about the movement of material in Neolithic Britain and other related matters; I suspect that I would have very different views today. My then director, an archaeologist but also a longstanding member of the museums profession, exploded with fury when I told him of my decision, asking me how I could contemplate allowing objects over 4000 years old to be damaged by such a dreadful disfiguring technique. I was taken aback and mumbled something about the fact that it would add to our knowledge of the Neolithic and to our overall understanding of the past, and was quite clear that any limited damage done to the object could be made good in terms of appearance. He remained appalled that I could contemplate the damage of such beautiful objects. I had never, until then, considered objects of that sort of date as being anything other than a source of information – beautiful or not! Maybe this was, even thirty years ago, a ‘wrong’ attitude on my part, and maybe I should have waited for a non-destructive technique to appear. However, I had never considered until then that the integrity of an object was critical, and I certainly had not applied an aesthetic approach to objects.

Tite talks about over-bureaucratic approaches to applications for invasive sampling. In this he may fail to recognise the changes that have occurred, and are still occurring, in UK museums as a whole in relation to documentation. Documentation in most museums, well into the 1980s, was frequently only partial and inadequate. The development of documentation standards and systems has inevitably, and quite rightly, meant that movement and treatment of objects is now far more tightly controlled than it was in many cases in the past. This inevitably means that requests

and decisions about treatment need to be documented and logged, which in the past many were not; indeed, I know of museums where objects were taken from collections without any documentation at all. Museums and museum workers now recognise their responsibilities far more clearly than they did in the past. Whether what Tite implies as a 'veneration' of objects is a result of better control of their movement through documentation is by no means clear.

Tite rightly demonstrates the increasing rigour that has been applied by scientists and curators to any programme that involves invasive sampling; the museum world is littered with stories of programmes that have failed or gone wrong. This possibly increases the reluctance of the object-orientated curator to allow programmes to be carried out. I well remember finding a series of Anglo-Saxon pots in one museum collection for which I was responsible, all of which had a small sample removed from their bases for a programme of scientific analysis. On enquiring, it turned out that the archaeologist responsible for the programme (not the scientist) had lost interest in the project and not pursued it. We never got the samples back either! Incidents like this do make curators reluctant to aid programmes – and that particular example had a clearly argued and well-documented basis (again I am not sure that that particular programme would receive approval today). These sorts of incidents will continue to occur, but hopefully greater vigilance will reduce their incidence. They do nothing, however, to increase the desire to allow objects to be sampled.

The core of Tite's concerns seem to be that it is more difficult to persuade UK museums to allow objects to be invasively sampled than museums elsewhere. I am not sure that it is conservators who are able to influence curators in the matter of object integrity, and certainly not directly. In most museums this is because it is curators who make decisions rather than conservators, and in any case (sadly) there are fewer conservators employed in museums today than at any time in the past.

Curators today are much better trained and instructed than at any time in the past. Increasingly, the majority will have completed at least one year of graduate study before becoming employed, and will be well aware of the need for object care. It may well be that they are also in the process of training which is inculcated to a greater degree with the need to treat objects (especially whole and complete objects) as in some way 'sacred' and inviolable. Certainly in terms of museum philosophy today, there is a growing (and probably postprocessual) desire to recognise the often unknowable ways in which objects were treated and respected in the past. Tite makes the point that objects acquired from indigenous peoples should be treated differently. In this he quite rightly recognises the growing world-wide concern for indigenous rights, an area of conflict underlined by the recent furore over 'Kennewick Man'. It might be that we are seeing a drift towards transferring the recognition of 'sacredness' of indigenous objects onto objects that cannot be termed as having a connection with existing indigenous people. In addition, the aesthetic approach that many museums now adopt to objects from the past, which frequently sees objects decontextualised from their past environments and associations, might also militate against allowing scientists to carry out invasive sampling. Most museum curators are at least made aware of their intergenerational responsibility during training, and this too might increase reluctance to make decisions about the

process of invasive sampling. Finally the last quarter of the 20th century has seen a progressive concern about the effectiveness of 'science' in general in Western society. I am not suggesting that archaeological science is responsible for the failure of nuclear power to live up to the claims made for it earlier, or for the fiasco over CJD (Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease), or even GM (Genetically Modified) crops. I am suggesting that a general mistrust of science is pervading society as a whole, and it is inevitable that this broad change will even impact upon the views that curators have about programmes that involve invasive sampling.

It seems to me, however, that as long as archaeological scientists can demonstrate that invasive sampling is carried out within programmes that are laid out and constrained in the way that Tite has described in his article, curators should be able to arrive at balanced decisions, accepting the potential that such programmes will have for advancing knowledge. If this is not the case – and he certainly suggests that there is a change in attitude – then he is correct in fearing that a new set of criteria are beginning to govern what museums now do. The roots of these changes must lie in influences from the areas that I have outlined. Maybe the time has come to open debate within museum archaeology about attitudes towards invasive sampling so that we can both isolate the reasons for this change and debate its consequences. I was not aware that there was what Tite implies is a 'sea change' in attitudes to sampling. If this is so it must be addressed, otherwise our collections will be even less useful as avenues for increasing our knowledge and understanding of the past.