

ETHICAL QUESTIONS

There are four hypothetical questions below that require decisions to be made in difficult archaeological situations. Considering what you have read in this chapter and the ethical guidelines of the Society for American Archaeology and your own moral standards, please write a two-paragraph response to each situation outlining your decision in each case and the reasoning behind it.

1. Permission from landowners is essential for archaeological fieldwork. Most people are willing to have archaeologists on their property, but problems sometimes arise. On one occasion a few years ago, a farmer reluctantly gave permission for fieldwork on his land. Excavations began at what became a very important site of regional importance. The farmer frequently visited the excavations, but seemed anxious about the project. After a week or two, artifacts began disappearing from the trenches. Keeping a night watch, the archaeologists caught the property owner removing conspicuous items. Confronted, the landowner told the archaeologists that he was worried that if anything of importance was found that his land would be taken by the government without sufficient compensation. How can this problem be resolved?
2. Excavations had gone on for 10 years at a major Maya site in the Yucatán of Mexico. The archaeologists had made a major effort to involve the local villagers and once took an injured child to a distant hospital. Toward the end of the last field season, an old man from the village came out to the site with a small bag containing a beautiful painted figurine. The figurine had been looted from the site some years before. It is a museum-quality piece, although its exact provenience at the site is unknown. The old man offers to sell the artifact to the archaeologists. The dilemma arises. Should the archaeologists pay the old man for the artifact, potentially encouraging others to loot the site for other valuable items? Or should the object be refused even though the old man will probably sell it to a tourist?
3. You are a professor of archaeology. During your field excavation season, you and your students visit a number of archaeological projects in California. At the excavations of another, well-known professor, you notice that the work is very sloppy, recording procedures are inadequate, and a number of important objects are being missed or ignored. The site is clearly significant based on its size and richness, but the excavations are below standard. You are new to the area and your job, while the archaeologist in charge of this excavation is well known and respected. What do you do? Speak to the archaeologist at the site, inform the state historic preservation office, or remain quiet?
4. Through the grapevine you hear a story about an archaeologist you know. It seems that a horde of valuable silver antiquities was found in Hungary and pirated out of the country to be sold to a collector in the United States. The Hungarian government eventually learned of this theft and sued the collector in a U.S. court. The collector denied that the items came from Hungary. Some of the evidence involved soil traces, still present on the artifacts, which were similar to the soils from the place in Hungary where the artifacts had been found. The defense lawyer for the collector paid an expert, the archaeologist you know, a large sum of money to testify that the tests for soil provenience were inconclusive. The court found for the collector. While it is technically true that soils are difficult to provenience, the evidence for Hungary as the place of origin was very good. What do you think about the behavior of the archaeologist? What should be done in a case like this?