



# A Contemporary Commentary: Excavation Ethics and Repatriation in the African Context of Egypt

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## Abstract

### Revised Abstract

The period from 2021 to 2023 has witnessed a profound intensification of global debates on decolonising heritage, with Egypt's concerted campaign for artefact restitution emerging as a pivotal case. This commentary provides a critical examination of how these restitution dynamics are reshaping the ethical foundations of archaeological practice and heritage diplomacy in Egypt. It argues that the repatriation discourse has fundamentally altered the ethical landscape, moving beyond legalistic claims towards a paradigm of restorative justice and epistemic reclamation.

The analysis is constructed through a critical review and synthesis of recent developments, drawing on pertinent sources from archaeology, heritage studies, Egyptology, and decolonial theory. It applies a normative ethical framework to evaluate the tensions between scientific value, cultural sovereignty, and international collaboration. A key insight is that Egypt's coordinated restitution efforts have successfully reframed returns as a restoration of national narrative and authority, thereby making ethical practice inextricable from repatriation. Consequently, the legitimacy of future archaeological work is increasingly contingent on transparent, equitable partnerships that prioritise Egyptian stewardship and address historical inequities.

The commentary concludes by advocating for a reoriented approach. This includes the adoption of collaborative models from project inception, ensuring Egyptian leadership in knowledge production, and urging international institutions to establish proactive restitution protocols. Ethical field practice must now explicitly integrate plans for local curation and digital access, embedding principles of equity directly into operational frameworks.

**Keywords:** Archaeological ethics, Repatriation, Restitution, Egypt, Cultural heritage, Decolonisation, Collaborative archaeology

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## INTRODUCTION

The ethics of archaeological excavation and the repatriation of cultural property are subjects of intense, global debate within heritage studies, yet their specific interplay within the Egyptian context demands a more focused, contemporary analysis ([A. El Azazy, 2022](#)). Egypt's unparalleled archaeological record has long been a focal point for international scholarship and public fascination, but this attention has historically been entangled with colonial-era practices of appropriation and epistemologies that divorced ancient remains from their modern cultural and geographical setting ([Garrett, 2023](#)). Recent scholarship signals a pivotal shift, advocating for a post-colonial ethic that reorients fieldwork towards community-inclusive, holistic methods and champions the restitution of cultural patrimony ([Cole, 2021](#); [Hartung, 2021](#)). This introduction reviews these concurrent developments, identifying a critical gap in literature that synthesises the practical evolution of excavation methodology with the political and philosophical imperatives of repatriation. It argues that in contemporary Egypt, ethical archaeological practice and the restitution movement are inextricably linked, together forming the foundation for a restorative model of knowledge production.

The very nature of archaeological excavation in Egypt is undergoing substantive methodological recalibration ([Abdel Mohsen, 2022](#)). Moving beyond a traditional focus on monumental tombs and temples, contemporary projects increasingly emphasise settlement archaeology, environmental studies, and the quotidian aspects of past life ([Malleon, 2021](#); [Cole, 2021](#)). This shift from the spectacular to the representative is not merely technical but inherently ethical, seeking to construct a more complete and equitable human past. It directly informs repatriation discourses, as the value ascribed to non-elite material culture—often overlooked in colonial collecting—influences what is deemed worthy of restitution and how source communities connect with these artefacts. Concurrently, the management of this heritage presents a complex ethical terrain, where the economic imperative of tourism development must be balanced against risks to physical integrity and the loss of local cultural context ([A. El Azazy, 2022](#); [Abdel Mohsen, 2022](#)). An ethical excavation framework must therefore consider its role within this wider ecosystem, ensuring it does not undermine the social fabric of surrounding communities.

Simultaneously, Egypt has pursued a vigorous, state-led campaign for the repatriation of antiquities, a movement central to modern cultural diplomacy and national identity ([Soliman, 2022](#)). This drive forces a critical re-examination of the colonial foundations of Egyptology, including the Western scholarly hegemony over historical narrative ([Garrett, 2023](#)). Repatriation is thus framed not only as a physical return but as an epistemological correction, challenging fragmented chronologies and enabling the potential for endogenous narratives that connect pharaonic, Greco-Roman, and Islamic periods into a continuous national story ([Darnbrough, 2022](#); [Bennett, 2023](#)). The process of restitution, therefore, intersects with evolving excavation ethics, as each new field project generates a renewed responsibility for transparent stewardship and collaborative practice ([Hartung, 2021](#)).

This commentary contends that these strands—methodological shifts in fieldwork, the politics of restitution, and the decolonisation of historical narrative—are mutually constitutive ([Bennett, 2023](#)). It aims to provide a critical synthesis of recent literature across archaeology, heritage studies, and law to

analyse this nexus. By examining how ethical excavation protocols can support repatriation goals and how restitution debates reshape research agendas, this analysis seeks to advance a coherent framework for restorative heritage practice in Egypt and analogous contexts.

## ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

A critical analysis of recent developments reveals a dynamic and often contentious landscape surrounding archaeological ethics and repatriation in Egypt ([Cole, 2021](#)). This discourse is fundamentally shaped by the interplay between evolving international ethical standards, Egypt's assertive national heritage policies, and the persistent legacy of colonial-era practices. A primary contemporary trend is the increasing alignment of excavation methodologies with community-centric and decolonial principles. As noted by Almevik et al. ([2021](#)), critical reflections on field practices are essential for ethical progression, a sentiment echoed in community archaeology projects which prioritise local engagement and knowledge ([Westmont & Clay, 2021](#)). Within Egypt, this shift is evidenced by a growing emphasis on sustainable site management and the integration of cultural heritage into national development frameworks, as discussed by A. El Azazy ([2022](#)). However, the practical application of these ethical ideals often encounters challenges related to resource allocation and institutional priorities ([Zaghloul, 2021](#)).

Concurrently, the repatriation of Egyptian cultural objects has intensified as a central pillar of both ethical debate and diplomatic activity ([Darnbrough, 2022](#)). Egypt's sustained efforts to reclaim artefacts, supported by robust legal arguments and international partnerships, reflect a broader global movement towards restorative justice in heritage ([Bennett, 2023](#); [Mountjoy & Hilling, 2023](#)). This drive is underpinned by scholarly work that re-examines colonial collection histories and advocates for the return of culturally significant items ([Hartung, 2021](#); [Rabie, 2021](#)). The normative ethical framework for these efforts draws significantly from decolonisation theory, which challenges Western-centric museum practices and calls for the re-evaluation of provenance research ([Youssef, 2022](#)). The successful return of objects not only addresses historical wrongs but also strengthens national cultural identity and authority over heritage narratives ([Soliman, 2022](#)).

Nevertheless, significant tensions persist ([Garrett, 2023](#)). While ethical frameworks advocate for shared stewardship and access, the practical realities of restitution involve complex negotiations over legal ownership, conservation capacity, and the definition of 'cultural patrimony' ([Cole, 2021](#); [Visconti, 2021](#)). Furthermore, the prioritisation of high-profile repatriation cases can sometimes overshadow equally critical ethical issues within Egypt, such as the protection of sites from urban encroachment, the ethics of commercial archaeology, and ensuring equitable benefits from tourism for local communities ([Pavão, 2021](#); [Srouf et al., 2023](#)). The divergent outcomes reported in various case studies, from temple zone excavations to craft centre challenges, underscore that ethical application is highly context-dependent ([Abdel Mohsen, 2022](#); [Bennett, 2023](#)). Ultimately, the path forward requires a balanced approach that harmonises international ethical norms with Egypt's sovereign rights and developmental needs, ensuring that both the physical integrity of its monuments and the philosophical integrity of its heritage governance are maintained ([Darnbrough, 2022](#); [Z., 2021](#)).

## CONCLUSION

This commentary has argued that the ethical imperatives governing archaeological excavation and restitution in Egypt must be fundamentally re-contextualised within a broader, restorative paradigm ([Mountjoy & Hilling, 2023](#)). Moving beyond a purely national framework, the analysis demonstrates that Egypt's heritage management is inextricably linked to continental discourses on decolonisation and epistemic justice. A transformative ethical approach must therefore integrate three interdependent strands: a commitment to epistemic restitution across Africa, the fostering of robust intra-African scholarly collaboration, and a substantive revision of cultural policy to acknowledge transnational African claims.

The repatriation of cultural property must be championed not merely as a legal transaction, but as a profound act of epistemic justice essential for restoring narrative authority ([Pavão, 2021](#)). For Egypt, this entails actively supporting the return of artefacts to other African nations, thereby countering the historical fragmentation of African history and challenging the Western curation of the African past. Such a stance aligns with the growing global restitution movement but grounds it specifically within Pan-African solidarity, strengthening the moral foundations for all such claims.

To operationalise this vision, Egypt must proactively invest in enhanced intra-African scholarly partnerships and the development of accessible heritage databases ([Rabie, 2021](#)). Leading the creation of open-access digital repositories would empower scholars from across the continent, addressing the critical need for equitable access to primary archaeological data and supporting the preservation of intangible heritage facing modern challenges ([Zaghloul, 2021](#)).

Consequently, a key recommendation is the urgent revision of Egyptian cultural policy to explicitly address transnational African claims alongside domestic patrimony laws ([Soliman, 2022](#)). Establishing a dedicated office for African Heritage Cooperation could facilitate scholarly exchanges, support conservation projects regionally, and develop formal protocols for handling restitution claims. This would reposition Egypt as a leader in ethical heritage practice, recognising that its cultural security is intertwined with that of its neighbours.

Future research must critically explore the practical pathways for implementing this framework, examining case studies of potential object restitution within Africa and modelling mechanisms for sustainable partnerships ([Malleeson, 2021](#)). Archaeological practice itself requires greater introspection, moving beyond traditional excavation reports to explicitly document community engagement methodologies and the ethics of working within living landscapes ([Bennett, 2023](#)). Research should also investigate how digital public archaeology can disseminate findings to foster a shared sense of custodianship.

In conclusion, the future of excavation ethics in Egypt must be reconceived as an ongoing decolonial project ([Mountjoy & Hilling, 2023](#)). This demands a deliberate pivot from an ethos centred on monumentality and tourism towards one of reconnection and restorative justice. By forging equitable partnerships, advocating for the return of African patrimony, and reshaping policy, Egypt can help dismantle the epistemological hierarchies imposed by colonialism. The goal is an archaeological practice that contributes to healing historical ruptures, thereby restoring Africa's authority over its own past.

## CONTRIBUTIONS

This commentary provides a timely analysis of the evolving ethical landscape surrounding excavations and repatriation in Egypt between 2021 and 2026. It contributes a structured framework for evaluating competing claims of cultural heritage stewardship, balancing national sovereignty with global scholarly access. By synthesising recent policy shifts and high-profile restitution cases, the work clarifies the practical challenges faced by museums, archaeologists, and government authorities. Consequently, it offers a constructive scholarly foundation for developing more equitable and collaborative practices in Egyptian archaeology, moving beyond theoretical debate to address actionable protocols.

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