

# There is Power in the Past

## The Politicization of Archaeology and Heritage in the *Star Wars* Universe

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**Abstract:** Heritage (and by extension, archaeology) is an important part of the *Star Wars* universe. Both the Jedi and the Sith share teachings revolving around sites and artifacts important to their heritage and identities, and archaeologists like Dr. Chelli Aphra have played important roles in the development and maintenance of such heritage. However, the politicization of sites and artifacts by many groups and individuals has also served as motivation behind significant schisms, battles, imperialism, and resistance. As professional archaeologists, we have become familiar with the ways these themes are also appearing within our real-world discipline. This paper will broadly examine the roles that archaeology and heritage play in the *Star Wars* universe. Using examples from both canon media and expanded universe (now referred to as *Legends*) lore, this paper will explore the ways in which political factions manipulate and weaponize heritage and archaeology to their benefit. These examples will then be discussed within real world contexts to illustrate how *Star Wars* is ultimately a perfect encapsulation of the political powers inherent in archaeology and heritage studies, and the resistance to the manipulation of these fields.

**Keywords:** *Star Wars*, Heritage, Archaeology, Pseudoarchaeology, Nationalism

Yes, archaeology is political. Even in *Star Wars*.

The relationship between *Star Wars* and archaeology began long before *Star Wars* was even written. The common science fiction theme of evil empires, like the Galactic Empire of *Star Wars*, has roots in the “lost world” fantasies that became a popular narrative at the end of the nineteenth century. Coinciding with the height of British colonialism, these stories were inspired significantly by the rise of imperialist and colonialist archaeology in the mid-19th century, through which the public became engrossed with archaeological expeditions in places like the United States, Mexico, Central America, Egypt, and Turkey. Between 1871 and 1914 over 200 stories of lost cities, sunken continents, and artifacts left by grand ancient empires submerged beneath the ocean or covered up by earth were published in Britain alone (Deane 2008). Through dramatized stories of rediscovery of places and peoples, lost world narratives pitted contemporary characters against traces of antiquity and imperial legend from places like Rome, Egypt, Lemuria, and Atlantis, which energized “the political fantasies of the present not with a dream of what might be, but of what has been” (Dean 2008, 206).

Imperialist and colonialist archaeology was interested in understanding technological progress and the advance of “civilization”, arguing that all cultures passed through the same cultural stages enroute to civilization, but that some cultures were slower to progress than others. When archaeologists uncovered technologies, structures, and monuments that they deemed “too advanced” to have been created by cultures that anthropologists deemed as “less progressed”, hyperdiffusionist theories claiming that an advanced (and often white) “civilization” had originated elsewhere and diffused around the world were used as a popular explanation until after World War II (Card 2019; Trigger 1984). Victorians reading about archaeological expeditions became less interested in progress and more focused on the grandeur and transience of what they believed were forgotten or lost grand empires (Deane 2008). Lost world fantasies took the popular idea of ancient empires and transformed them away from a focus on rise and decline and into a focus on a cyclical, everlasting existence - “empires come and empires go, but empire itself remains constant” (Deane 2008, 217). By transforming archaeological histories of colonized peoples from narratives of ontological progress into narratives of circumstantial loss, Victorians entertained the idea of a forgotten shared identity - that notions of empire and civilization existed in the “other” just as it existed in the “self” (Deane, 2008). Differences were explained as a result of circumstance rather than a lack of progress, and the purpose of colonial exploration was seen as helping to recover what had been forgotten.

Just as the roots of science fiction empires can be found in politicized forms of archaeology, many of the political issues of archaeology can be found in *Star Wars*. *Star Wars*, as a heightened version of many of the political issues that archaeologists face in the real world today, makes an interesting case for the critical examination of archaeology. Indeed, the origins of the franchise itself were politically charged, as George Lucas originally conceived of the Original Trilogy with Watergate and the Vietnam War in mind (Caro 2005), and eventually centered the Prequel Trilogy on the conceit that democracies eventually fall into dictatorship (Corliss and Cagle 2002). Lucas also modeled much of the imagery of the Galactic Empire off Nazi Germany (Henderson 1997). This paper will highlight just some of the parallels seen between the politicization of archaeology and heritage in *Star Wars*, and the politicization of archaeology and heritage in the real world.

It should come as no surprise that two of the largest factions in the *Star Wars* universe take advantage of the political power inherent in archaeology. Both the Jedi *and* the Sith have their own archaeologists in their employ, and both utilize the knowledge gleaned from excavation of Force-sensitive sites to further their own means, for better or for worse.

Sith archaeology is arguably the more heavily politicized of the two, as it is more overtly used as propaganda. This is made particularly explicit in the video game *Knights of the Old Republic* (BioWare 2003), where one of the levels is set on Korriban; this planet, sometimes referred to as the “homeworld” of the Sith, has made appearances in other spin-off media including *Star Wars: Tales of the Jedi* (1993) and *Star Wars: The Clone Wars* (2008). On Korriban, the local Sith academy was sending out teams of archaeologists to excavate the Valley of the Dark Lords, a series of ancient tombs for Sith Lords akin to Egypt’s Valley of the Kings. But for what reason? Similar to the real-world fascist dictatorships that they were based on, the Sith were likely using this research for the purposes of propaganda (Fitzpatrick 2017). It can be argued that the Sith,

seemingly inspired by their belief that one should be proud of the power they yield, may have undertaken archaeological projects in the Valley of the Dark Lords out of the desire for more power. As will be discussed in more detail later in this paper, interactivity with the past, whether through artifacts or holocrons, was used by the Sith as a powerful propaganda tool.

In contrast, the archaeologists from the Jedi Council could be mistaken for more apolitical, or at least politically neutral, counterparts to the Sith. Jedi archaeologists forewent the path of the Jedi Knight and instead dedicated their lives to historical and archaeological research. As part of the Jedi Exploration Corps, Jedi archaeologists traveled the galaxy alongside other researchers, such as zoologists and biologists (Wallace 2010), gathering information as part of their own practice of the Jedi Code: “there is no ignorance, there is knowledge.” And yet, despite their proclamations of neutrality, the Jedi ultimately acted as foot soldiers for the Republic in all its various incarnations. As such, this political affiliation cannot be separated from their archaeological research. In fact, one could even argue that the Jedi themselves performed “neutrality” as a means of claiming ultimate expertise on their research subjects. This performance of neutrality was perhaps best illustrated in a scene from *Star Wars: Episode II - Attack of the Clones* (2002), in which Jedi archivist Jocasta Nu responded to an accusation of missing material in the archives with, “if an item does not appear in our records, it does not exist!”

The Jedi’s performance of neutrality as a means of claiming research expertise acts as a representation of the colonial history of real-world archaeology in North America. Indigenous communities acted as stewards over their own cultural belongings and history prior to European colonization, using their expertise of their own history to help remember, teach, and protect their heritage. As Europeans took over the lands, European settler anthropologists and archaeologists also took over the role of historical stewards (Atlay 2006). In only a few short centuries settler archaeologists appropriated expertise over heritage that Indigenous communities had been experts in since time immemorial. Just as the Jedi built archives of knowledge and artifacts belonging to the communities they researched, so too did settler archaeologists, who re-interpreted Indigenous knowledge under a Euro-Western framework and placed it into Euro-Western records developed according to Euro-Western systems of knowledge production (Atlay 2006). When Jocasta Nu in *Star Wars* and settler archaeologists in the real-world proclaim that the lack of a record implies a lack of existence, they fail to recognize, or even ignore, that record is lacking according to their own system of knowledge production. These systems are not neutral, they are the result of political, social, and economic power.

There are archaeologists within *Star Wars* who are neither Jedi or Sith. Doctor Chelli Lona Aphra, for example, is a human archaeologist who is a specialist in droid and weapons technology and willing to get ahead by any means necessary. That includes collecting artifacts both for and against the Empire (Gillen and Spurrier 2021). On the surface Aphra appears to be neutral in her position, not taking sides with the Empire or Resistance, not endorsing anyone’s view. Neutrality itself, however, is a position. And it does require some level of judgment from Aphra in deciding what is important to collect, why it is important to collect, and to whom the artifacts should be given.

Just as in *Star Wars*, neutrality in real-world archaeology is a myth. As Franklin et al. (2020, 754) wrote, “archaeology . . . does not exist in a social and political vacuum.” Changes in archaeology, from its practices to its politics, have always reflected and impacted their broader social context (Franklin et al. 2020). As archaeology today moves towards profound structural change through interventions centering Black feminism (Battle-Baptiste 2011), decolonial praxis (Atalay 2006), and Indigenous sovereignty (Roberts 2022), archaeologists have begun to loudly confront the questions of who gets to decide what is important to excavate and collect, why those decisions are made the way they are, and where excavated materials are sent. While in the past the appearance of neutrality within archaeology may have been the norm, today neutrality, like Aphra’s, is becoming the outlier.

Heritage, both in the real world and the *Star Wars* universe, is a particularly integral part of cultural ways of life and resonates strongly with emotional value. Acting as memories of the past, heritage and history provide an understanding of cultural and national identity. In *Star Wars*, one of the most fleshed out examples of the cultural importance of heritage can be seen in the recent television series *The Mandalorian* (2019). As a distinct culture, the Mandalorians are first introduced - albeit quite briefly - in the novelization of *Star Wars Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back* (1980). The Mandalorians have since been developed more fully as its own culture and society in the expanded universe, eventually returning to the canon with *Star Wars: The Clone Wars* (2008) and the aforementioned *Mandalorian* (2019) series.

Early Mandalorian culture is established as militant and consists of various clans that create “Mandalorian Space”, although the center of power is on the planet of Mandalore. The dismantlement of their empire is documented throughout the expanded universe and made canon with *The Clone Wars* (2008) and its sequel series, *Star Wars Rebels* (2014). By the time that *The Mandalorian* (2019) takes place, the Mandalorians have been reduced to disparate groups of survivors, having been wiped out by the Empire in the preceding years. As such, their cultural heritage becomes a vital component to Mandalorian survival as a people and as a political force that fights back against their erasure by the more dominant cultures and political factions of the *Star Wars* universe. Cultures and factions who, as part of the attempted erasure of the Mandalorians, target Mandalorian cultural heritage. During the war between Clan Wren and the Empire-supported Clan Saxon, for example, the statue of Tarre Vizsla - the first Mandalorian inducted into the Jedi Order - was intentionally defaced when the Empire constructed a militarized outpost on top of it (*Star Wars: Forces of Destiny* 2017).

This type of politicized destruction of cultural heritage is not restricted to the fictional world of *Star Wars*. In Syria and Iraq, for example, many important cultural sites, including archaeological sites and museums, have been attacked and destroyed by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) over the past decade<sup>1</sup>. Famous ancient city sites like Nimrud and Nenevah, which were several thousands of years old, were occupied, destroyed, and looted by ISIL between 2014 and 2016. As Pawlina (2020, 281) described, the destruction of cultural heritage and archaeological sites during conflict can serve multiple purposes, including to “break the spirits of society engaged in the conflict” and to create a stable foundation for setting a new

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<sup>1</sup> In 2016, the United Nations Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) produced a report about some of the archaeological sites that had been intentionally damaged or destroyed in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and naturally damaged by the 2015 earthquake in Nepal <https://whc.unesco.org/document/155998>

ideology. In Syria and Iraq, sites of important cultural heritage were specifically targeted because of their cultural importance to the people of Syria and Iraq as ISIL attempted to assert their political dominance in the regions based on their strict reading of Islam. ISIL's purpose in targeting archaeological sites was to eliminate anything demonstrating a historical connection to culture, religion, and beliefs that did not fit ISIL's ideology, and to clear the area to set their new ideology and new connections to the past (Pawlina 2020). ISIL destroyed ancient religious relics, for example, to legitimize themselves as "the proper heirs to the legacy of earlier 'destroyers of idols'" (Pawlina 2020, 284), and to remind the people of Syria and Iraq that any history before Islam was not important. More recently, similar acts of destruction of cultural heritage have also been committed by Russia during their invasion of Ukraine,<sup>2</sup> which United Nations (UN) experts have seen as part of an attempt to erase Ukraine's cultural identity.<sup>3</sup>

In the United States, the destruction of First Nations cultural heritage has also long been used as a tool for erasing and replacing cultural connections to land and history. The earliest European settlers in what is now called the United States regularly robbed First Nations graves, taking both the material belongings buried with the ancestors *and* the ancestors themselves (Evitts Dickinson 2021). This theft of ancestors and belongings served and supported Euro-Western colonialism by identifying First Nations peoples as 'others' who were "not considered to be fully people" (Gabrielle Tayac, quoted in Evitts Dickinson 2021) and identified Euro-Western settlers as the knowledgeable stewards of lands and histories, making it easier for First Nations communities to be displaced from their lands as the United States asserted its political dominance. Today First Nations graves are still looted, despite legislation (e.g. the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act) in place to prevent this. In addition, other forms of First Nations cultural heritage, such as rock art, are also destroyed. While at times rock art panels have been defaced out of ignorance for their cultural significance (Nelson 2021), there are examples of when rock art was intentionally defaced. In late 2020 or early 2021, for example, several culturally significant 1,000 year old rock art images in the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests were scratched out and painted over (Davis-Marks 2021). And in early 2021 in Utah a culturally significant rock art panel over 1000 years old, known as the "Birthing Scene Petroglyph," was scratched over with the white nationalist and white supremacist phrase "white power", as well as other vulgar images and phrases (Williams 2021).

White supremacists and white nationalists have not just damaged and destroyed elements of cultural heritage. Just as the original *Star Wars* trilogy was appropriated by the alt-right (Walker 2019), the alt-right has also appropriated archaeological knowledge to further their own bigoted agenda (Hakenbeck 2019; Richardson 2018). As a political tool, archaeology is viewed as a source of authority that can be used as "proof" for a distorted past that gives credit to whatever propaganda a political party is rallying behind; that one race is better than another, that one's

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<sup>2</sup> UNESCO has been tracking reported incidents of cultural heritage destruction in Ukraine, which you can learn more about here: <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/damaged-cultural-sites-ukraine-verified-unesco?hub=66116>

<sup>3</sup> As part of the Special Procedures of the Human Rights Council, UN Special Rapporteurs issued a statement detailing their concern for the destruction of cultural heritage in Ukraine, which you can read here: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements/2023/02/targeted-destruction-ukraines-culture-must-stop-un-experts>

beliefs are truer, etc. History can be a powerful tool for oppression, and the misuse of archaeology makes for an excellent legitimizing tool for that oppression (Arnold 1990).

Cognizant of the alt-right's appropriation of *Star Wars*, the recent *Star Wars* films in the Sequel Trilogy more overtly tackled themes of white supremacy and white nationalism within the *Star Wars* universe, though not without aggressive alt-right backlash against the films and their actors (Walker 2019; Zakarin 2021); this includes the racist harassment of stars John Boyega (Desta 2020) and Kelly Marie Tran (Desta 2018), as well as the sexist backlash against *Star Wars Episode VIII: The Last Jedi* (2017) (Sharf 2017). Similarly, archaeologists have also faced increased backlash from the alt-right as we have begun to more overtly oppose the alt-right's abuse of archaeological knowledge to support their own ideologies. Both authors of this paper, for example, have been the targets of online harassment, multiple times, from alt-right adherents on social media websites like Twitter and Reddit in reaction to our denouncement of alt-right themes within and adjacent to archaeology.

Many times, the alt-right actually employs pseudoarchaeology – archaeological conspiracy theories that propose speculative and alternative claims about human history (Halmhofer 2021) – to support their idealized versions of heritage. Much of pseudoarchaeology calls back to imperialist and colonialist archaeology, arguing that there was a singular, highly advanced civilization whose cultural values, knowledge, and technology was hyperdiffused to help “progress” cultures around the world. One of the most well-known examples of pseudoarchaeology, and one that is found in alt-right ideologies, is that of the continent of Atlantis, an allegorical tale from Greek philosopher Plato that became popular in 19th century lost world narratives. Just like the story of the Anselmi and Nautolans in *Star Wars Myths and Fables* (Mann 2019), over 2000 years ago Plato wrote that the enormous continent of Atlantis was destroyed in an earthquake and flood by Greek deity Zeus. The destruction of the continent, which was described as being larger than Asia and Libya combined, was punishment for the arrogance and greed of the Atlanteans after they lost a war to neighboring Athens (Plato (c. 360 BC) 1929). In the centuries that have passed since Plato wrote this fictional account, Atlantis has been manipulated from fiction into a reality for which people now seek archaeological evidence (Halmhofer 2019). And indeed, that transformation from fiction to reality includes Atlantis's use as a political tool, both in the past and the present.

Archaeological excavations under Nazi Germany were led with the intent of producing results that would become part of the proud nationalism that so identified their political party (Galaty and Watkinson 2017). SS leader Heinrich Himmler, who was leader of the Nazi heritage research institute called the *Ahnenerbe*, instructed Ahnenerbe archaeologists to find evidence for German heritage. Inspired by the Theosophical doctrines of Helena Blavatsky, Rudolf Steiner's Anthroposophy, Hanns Horbiger's World Ice Theory, and the work of architect-turned-archaeologist Edmund Kiss, Himmler believed that Germans had descended from almost-supernatural Aryans, who themselves had come from Atlantis. Archaeological artifacts were sought to support the theories behind the origins of the German people, and the search for Atlantis was seen as the search for the German homeland (Kurlander 2015, 2017; Pringle 2006).

Though Nazi Germany may have been the inspiration for the Galactic Empire in *Star Wars*, it is actually the hyper-politicized use of archaeology by the Sith that is most reminiscent of

Ahnenerbe archaeology, where interactivity with artifacts and sites were used for power and propaganda and to support the ideologies of the SS. Similarly, the Sith used interactivity with the past as a tool for pushing their own propaganda as well as instilling the lessons they lived by – that power is key and you must defeat those around you to succeed (Veitch and Anderson 1994). An excellent example of this is found in the video game *Knights of the Old Republic* (BioWare 2003), where your character infiltrates the Sith Academy as an apprentice and is put to work diving into the ruins of the Sith tombs. There are two benefits for Sith Masters from this practice: one is that the defense mechanisms placed into the tombs can weed out the weak from the strong, which is an important aspect in Sith ideology. The other is that this practice also aids in the retrieval of many Sith artifacts, which works as both propaganda and as a transfer of power from the dead to the living. A Sith who wields the mighty sword of Ajunta Pall, for example, could lay a hefty claim to power within the Sith hierarchy (Fitzpatrick 2017).

Similar instances of interplay between the past and the present are found in storylines regarding holocrons - artifacts used by both the Jedi and the Sith to preserve and circulate knowledge or important information, even long after their deaths. Sith holocrons in particular were dangerously powerful; for example, in an episode of *Star Wars Rebels* titled “Steps into Shadow” (2016), burgeoning Jedi Ezra Bridger begins to succumb to his darker instincts after acquiring a Sith holocron. The unnamed Sith whose teachings are recorded within the holocron is able to speak to Ezra from the past, influencing his actions in the present through promises of power that resonate with the main tenets of the Sith.

Just as the Sith believed that one should be proud of the power they wield and are constantly seeking more, today the alt-right loudly claims pride for the power they believe they wield from idealized pasts developed in part from pseudoarchaeological theories, such as those promoted by the SS Ahnenerbe and Heinrich Himmler. Today archaeologists continue to feel the brunt of this influence as our work continues to be appropriated and manipulated by the alt-right seeking to legitimize their invented heritage.

Although the in-universe archaeology of *Star Wars* may be an overly romanticized and dramatically heightened reflection of our real-world archaeological discipline, it puts forth a question that some archaeologists still find themselves pondering: is archaeology inherently a political venture that cannot be disentangled from the socio-cultural politics that has both formed it and formed *around* it? That the plethora of writers and creators that have helped shape *Star Wars* have intentionally chosen to depict cultural heritage as a key component to the fictional universe’s political drama (and archaeologists and other heritage workers as influential figures in its formation) perhaps answers that question for us.

And in a way, that is ironic: between the hyper-politicized archaeology of the fictional *Star Wars* universe and the allegedly apolitical archaeology of the real world, it is the latter that is the most fraudulent depiction of the realities of the discipline. Although many archaeologists *do* understand the potential political power our research can yield, there are still some that choose to believe in the myth that science is a neutral force without any political affiliation (Shearer et al. 2020), and that ethical practices are obstacles in the path of scientific discovery (Beisaw 2021).

If archaeologists and heritage workers in our galaxy wish to avoid the temptations of the Dark Side (read: white supremacy and neo-colonialism), we cannot continue to feign ignorance

of the political power inherent in archaeology and heritage. And while the Jedi Code asks us to seek knowledge in its stead, we also must critically interrogate what “knowledge” is, and rather than just see it as the diametric opposite of “ignorance”, understand that it is also inherently political.

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