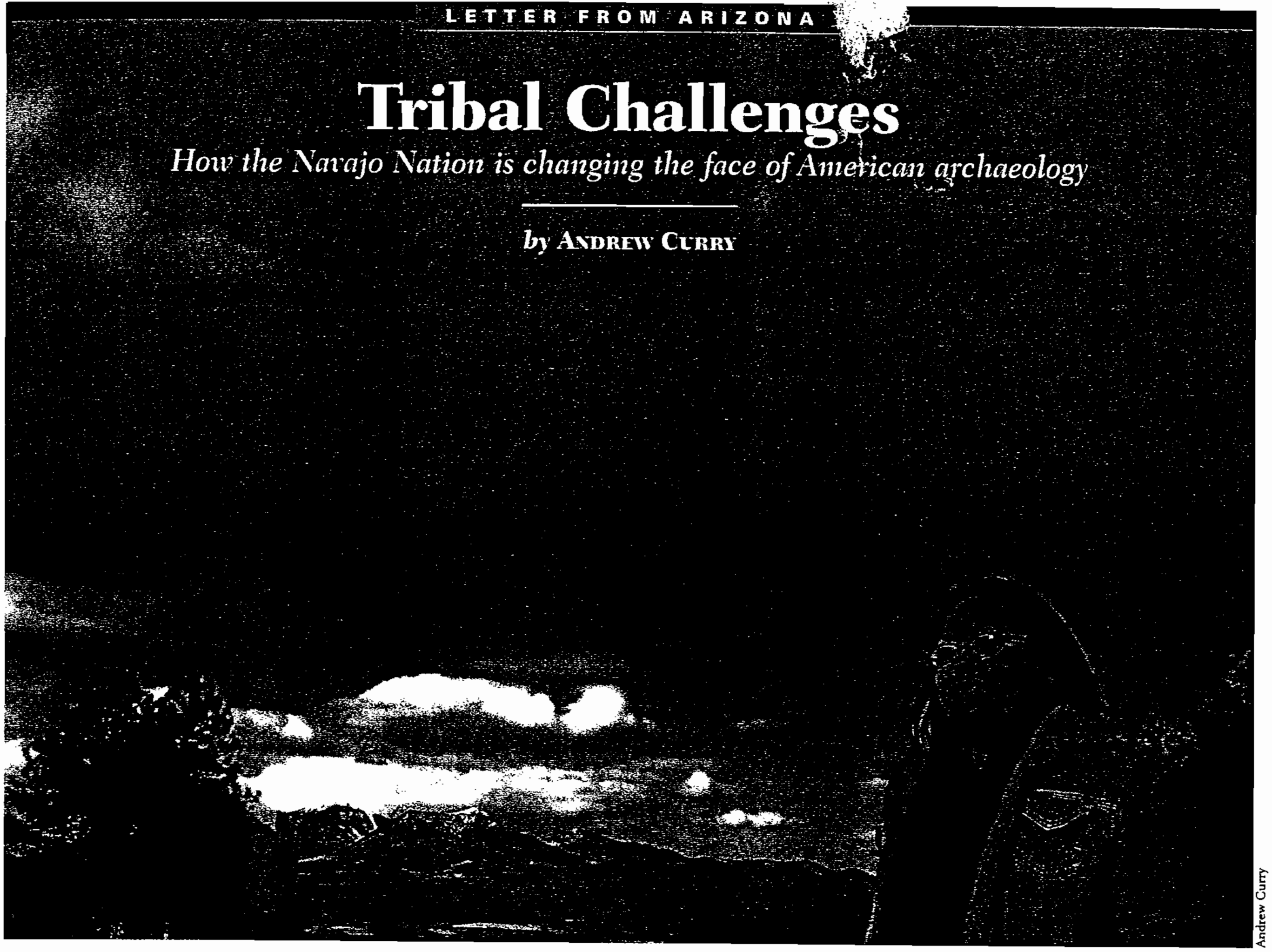
LETTER FROM ARIZONA

Tribal Challenges

How the Navajo Nation is changing the face of American archaeology

by Andrew Curry



Andrew Curry

Davina Two Bears, program manager of the Navajo Nation Archaeology Department at Northern Arizona University

Northern Arizona University's Bilby Research Center in Flagstaff is a domed white building that resembles a giant version of a hogan, a traditional Navajo dwelling. It's an appropriate home for one of the country's most innovative and unusual archaeology programs.

Housed in a warren of offices and labs under the Bilby Center's dome, together with programs in biology and ecology, the Navajo Nation Archaeology Department (NNAD) exemplifies a trend that has changed the face of American archaeology in the past two decades: the increasing involvement of Native Americans in almost every aspect of how their past is studied and preserved. Since the passage of the landmark Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) in 1990, American archaeology has been deeply affected by the expectations and demands of Native Americans. Perhaps the most visible impact of NAGPRA has been at museums and universities. Since the law's passage, scholars have been obligated to reevaluate their research policies and to return collections of human remains and spiritual objects gathered from federal lands during the past two centuries.

Museums and curation facilities that accept federal funding have been compelled to create a database of all the Native American objects in their care, since all are possibly subject to repatriation to Indian groups. Archaeologists across the nation have spent years revisiting old collections to comply with NAGPRA, returning thousands of human remains to tribes and dealing with claims for religious objects like an important collection of buffalo-hide shields recently returned to the Navajo Nation.

But archaeology remains a field in which many Native Americans are reluctant to participate because of religious taboos, lack of opportunities in the field, and deep-seated suspicion of archaeologists. For Davina Two Bears, the woman I had come to the university to meet, it's a familiar challenge. A short, enthusiastic thirty-something who holds an MA in archaeology from NAU, Two Bears' mission is to encourage Navajo to get involved in archaeology.

It's been a long road. Sitting in her office, Two Bears told me about her childhood on the reservation. Her high school in Winslow, Arizona—she lived in a Bureau of Indian Affairs dormitory because the trip from her hometown of Bird Springs was too far—hadn't taught anything about Navajo culture. But at Dartmouth College she found an outlet for her curiosity about her people, delving into archaeology and history and becoming an anthropology major.

Her senior year, Two Bears took part in a field school at Wupatki National Monument near Flagstaff, Arizona. A Pueblo man touring the monument's 900-year-old structures approached her angrily. "He told me I shouldn't be in there digging up his

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Courtesy Navajo Nation Archaeology Department

A Navajo Nation excavation of an early Pueblo site (A.D. 750–800), part of a road clearance project on the reservation

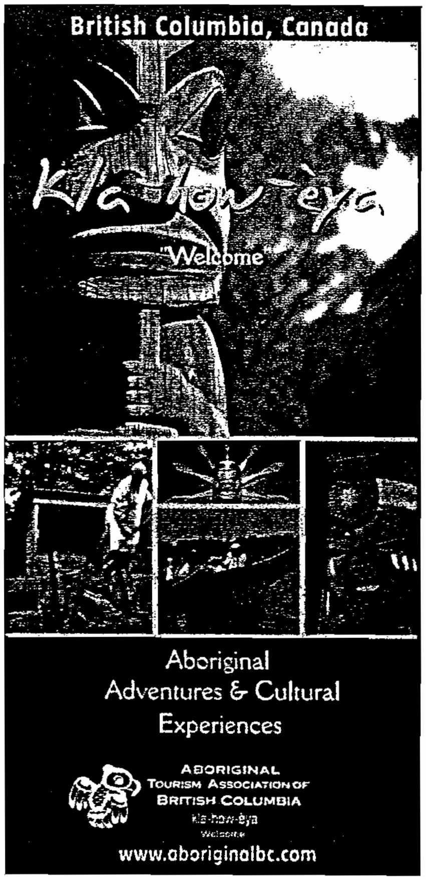
ancestors," she recalls. Though Two Bears was raised in a traditional Navajo family on the reservation, the encounter came as a shock, and it left her wondering if she was doing the right thing. "When I went back to Dartmouth I told my professor I didn't want to disrespect elderly tribal members," she recalls. "She told me there were types of archaeology other than excavation."

Fifteen years later, Two Bears manages the NNAD's student program, which gives Navajo in-depth archaeological training. In many ways the NNAD is a typical archaeological firm, it does surveys, excavates sites that are threatened by development, and writes up its findings in reports. But through its training program, one of its goals is also to give control of the archaeology that's being done on Navajo Nation land to tribal members, introducing a different perspective to a field Navajo say has been largely ignorant of or insensitive to their concerns and beliefs since the first anthropologists started shoveling here more than a century ago.

For Navajo archaeologists, excavation is a last resort, done only when a road or power line can't be laid any other way. Digging up human remains in particular is a cultural taboo for traditional Navajo. "Human remains have to be avoided and protected, not analyzed, documented, or photographed," says Two Bears. "You can't always be a scientist. Sometimes you have to be human."

This attitude makes some anthropologists uneasy. "In cases when no significant scientific work is done on collections, whatever the remains of the deceased person could have told us about what their life was like and what happened to them is lost," says Philip Walker, a past president of the American Association of Physical Anthropologists. But Walker also believes more Native involvement in archaeology is positive. "The good part about NAGPRA is that it opens up communication between Native Americans and physical anthropologists that didn't exist before," he says. "It's provided for better understanding on both sides."

Archaeology is a familiar activity on the reservation. For much of the last century, white scholars dug at will all over the Southwest, uncovering the region's past—evidence of the Fremont, the Anasazi, the Pueblo, and of course Navajo people who cultivated and populated the land for thousands of years. And it's not as if Navajo have never been involved. Serv-



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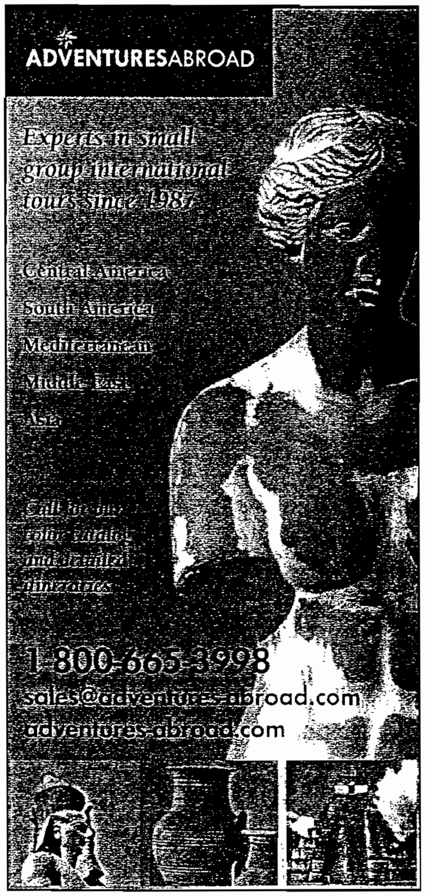

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ing as paid laborers or translators, locals long worked on digs. But they did so out of necessity. For traditional Navajo, disturbing ancient sites is a serious transgression. "Places where people once lived and died are treated with great respect and left alone," Two Bears wrote in a 2003 paper. "One does not go there, or they risk harming themselves or their families."

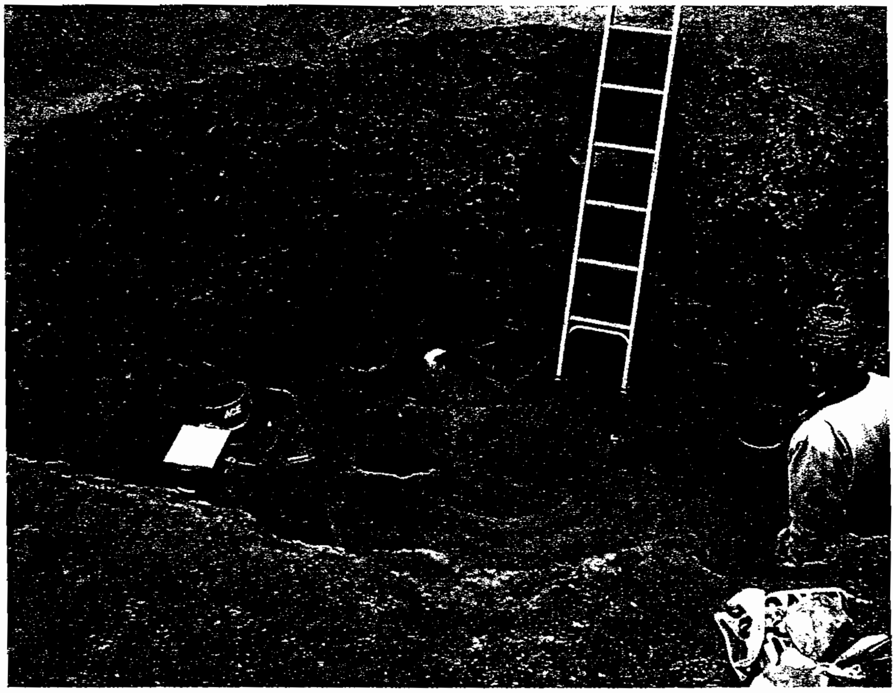
The proscription against disturbing human remains has deep roots in Navajo religion. As a result, most Navajo have never trusted archaeologists. At best, the whites working in the Southwest were regarded as rude and nosy; at worst, as grave robbers. From whites—or *bilagaana*—such behavior came as no surprise. "They expect us to be doing something inappropriate," says Phil Geib, an "Anglo" archaeologist who works for the Navajo Nation. "We're lost causes and don't know any better. But they'll get really mad at the Navajo [archaeologists]."

Challenging this combination of suspicion and traditional taboos was a huge task. The night before visiting the NNAD, I met Miranda Warburton, the department's former head, at a bar near NAU's campus. Warburton, an Anglo, started the NNAD training program in 1988, using Navajo Nation funding to pay tribal members to work on archaeological projects while earning anthropology degrees. At the time, most supervisory positions in the tribe's historic preservation department were held by whites; job descriptions demanded master's degrees and doctorates. Warburton says financial pressures made it difficult for Navajo to pursue the advanced degrees required. "We weren't doing a sufficient job of training Navajos. They were doing fieldwork, but not getting the academic degrees they needed to advance in the field," she says. "Because so few Native Americans were involved in the creation of research designs and the interpretation of finds, the past as it was presented didn't reflect the Native voice."

Since the inception of the program's training program 18 students have earned BA degrees and five have completed MA degrees from NAU. Interestingly, almost all of the program's alumni are women. In a paper exploring why women dominate Navajo archaeology, Two Bears suggested the reason may lie in the prominent role of women as heads of the household in Navajo society. "Women are also more knowledgeable about the land, since traditionally Navajo are matrilocal [meaning married couples live with the wife's clan] and it is the wife who is most familiar with the history and sacred areas of their land," she wrote.

It's been an eye-opening—and not entirely smooth—experience for the Navajo, who often face a strange sort of

A kiva, or underground ceremonial chamber, excavated by the Navajo Nation near Pinon, Arizona



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Students (second from left, Lanell Poseyesva, Roxanne Begay, and Carissa Tsosie) are taught to replicate ancient pottery by archaeologist Timothy Wilcox.

schizophrenia when trying to reconcile Anglo approaches with their traditional beliefs. Archaeology on the 16-million acre reservation is an extremely practical pursuit. As part of Navajo Nation development projects, survey work has to be done to make sure construction isn't disturbing archaeological sites. Nearly half of the 175,000 Navajo on the reservation lack running water and electricity; roads in many parts of the reservation are in bad condition or nonexistent. But even when the need for development work is critical, archaeologists face strong opposition from residents. "Most people think we enjoy digging up remains and that we're some kind of witches," Two Bears told me. "People look at me strange and say, 'You shouldn't be doing that' and call me a grave digger."

The department has responded by changing the way it approaches archaeology. Students, most of whom live on the reservation, regularly visit Navajo schools and communities to explain why the work is important and necessary. Navajo archaeologists have developed their own set of procedures and rules for the handling of *jishchaa,* or human remains and funerary items, although no one I talked to was willing to tell me specifics. Behind the scenes, each Navajo archaeologist deals differently with the taboos against disturbing human remains. Many use traditional ceremonies to ward off the potential ill effects of their work, which they believe lead to depression and nightmares. Others have developed their own ways of treating remains. Ezekiel Yazzie, 33, graduated from the program in May. Though his feelings on the traditional taboos are mixed ("I'm a Jesus man, myself," he tells me over the phone, pointing out that he's named for an Old Testament prophet said to have raised the dead) his approach to fieldwork, especially the sensitive task of dealing with human remains, is a constant conversation between modern method and traditional concerns. "I talk to them and try to tell the truth about what's going on. I just say 'I'm moving you, I'm just doing my job, we're building a road through here,'" Yazzie says. "I just think about my grandparents, about how I'd like to be treated."

The religious approach to Navajo heritage doesn't stop at human remains. The tribe actively pursues claims using NAGPRA, hoping to gain possession of objects they sometimes consider living beings from museums and storage facilities around the country. Tellingly, the NNAD training program has been around almost as long as NAGPRA.

The story of the latest objects repatriated to the Navajo under NAGPRA took me 188 miles to the east of Flagstaff, to Window Rock, a dusty town of about 3,000 and the capital of the Navajo Nation. It was January, when much of the high desert south of the Four Corners

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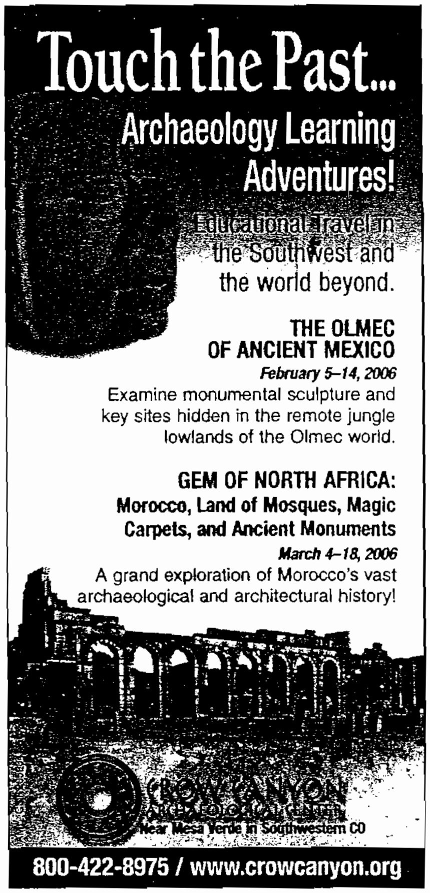

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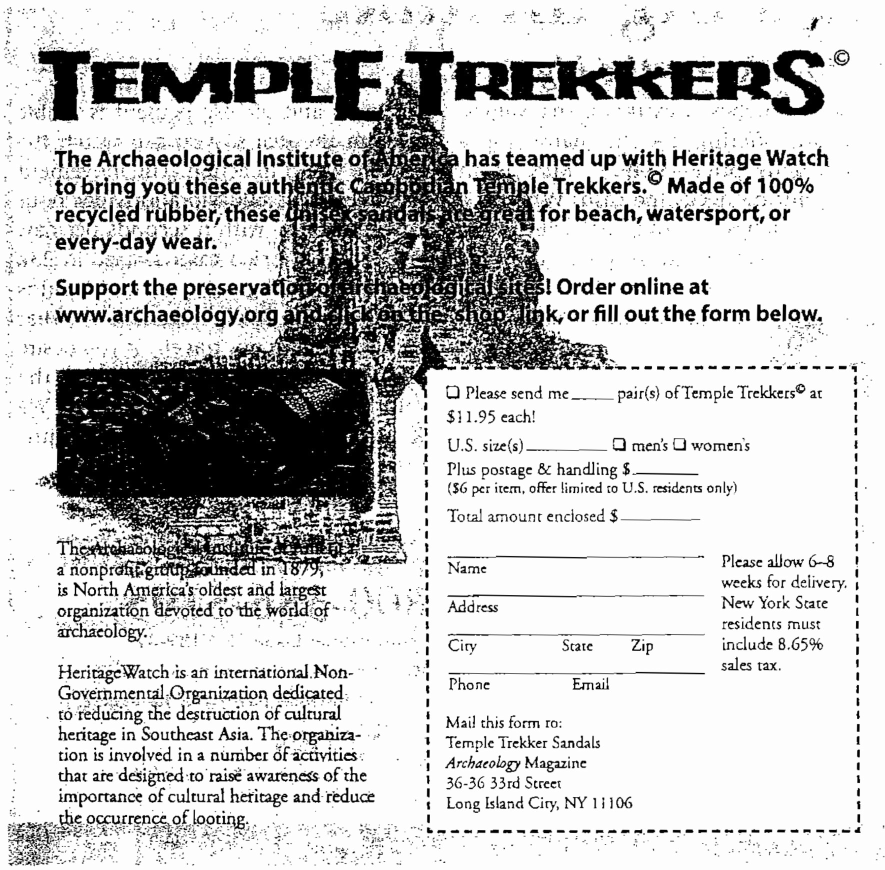

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was still covered in snow. I went there to meet with Marklyn Chee, an officer with the tribe's historic preservation office, and, if all went well, to take a look at three shields sitting behind closed doors in the tribe's museum.

In 1923, a collector named Ephraim Pectol found three buffalo-hide shields in a cave near Capitol Reef National Park in southern Utah. Because they were found on federal land, the shields ended up in the park's collection and were put on display in the museum there. The circular shields are huge—each almost three feet across—and each is elaborately decorated in green, black, and red pigments.

They're also old. Carbon-dating studies conducted in 1993 indicate the shields were constructed between 1420 and 1640, making them the oldest leather shields known in the U.S. But despite decades of study, archaeologists remained divided on who made them. Different experts have cited groups ranging from the Pueblo and Apache to even older influences, like the Fremont.

In 1998, a Pueblo elder visiting the park suggested that the shields might be sacred. The statement prompted the park to start a NAGPRA review process, sending dozens of tribes an announcement. The Navajo were just one of the groups interested: two different Ute tribal groups and the Kaibab Paiutes all filed claims as well. Adding to the confusion, there was no evidence the Navajo had ever lived in the area around Capitol Reef. I had been in touch with Chee for months. He refused to talk until the Navajo claim was finalized and the shields were in the tribe's possession.

Ultimately, the shields' fate turned not on geography or archaeological evidence but on oral history provided by the Navajo. According to a notice posted by the National Park Service in the Federal Register on December 7, 2001, Chee and a Navajo *haataali*, or medicine man, named Jon Holiday gave a taped description of the shields, tracing them back generations to their origins. According to the information the Navajo gave the NAGPRA commission, the three shields were created as part of *Naayee* (or Protection Way) ceremonies, which "provides individuals with a protective barrier behind which they may regain strength, harmony, and balance after a physical or mental illness." Chee told me the shields were hidden by Holiday's great-grandfather during a cavalry roundup of

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Navajo people in the early 1860s. It was this oral testimony that ultimately settled the repatriation claim, despite challenges raised by other tribes and the strong objections of the descendants of Pectol.

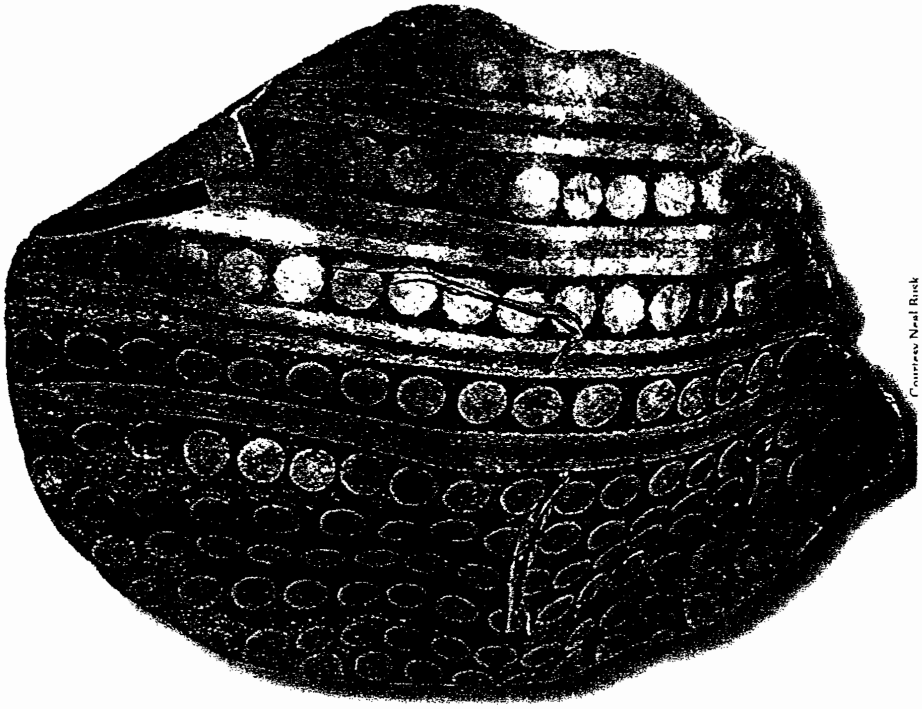
"There is no historical or archaeological evidence to indicate the shields are of Navajo origin, or any other tribe, for that matter," says Neal Busk, the chairman of the Ephraim Portman and Dorothy Hickman Pectol Family Organization. "Oral tradition is a valid part of the process but taken alone is not sufficient evidence on which to base a repatriation decision. There should be other evidence such as design." Busk would have preferred a different outcome. "We did not claim them, but felt they should have been held in common by all five Utah tribes if and until a sufficient claim was made."

The shields, I thought, were important: Important to the Navajo as sacred objects, of course, but also as a symbol of how dramatically the power balance between archaeologists and Native people has shifted. So when I met Chee and his colleague Robert Begay, the preservation office's Traditional Cultural Program Manager (a graduate of the NNAD training program who has since been named its head), I was disappointed to be led not to the museum but to a cluttered conference room in the back of the historic preservation department's office. Chee wasted no time. "You know we're not showing you those shields, right?"

The two men were friendly but firm. "The public just has to understand. The cultural objects we consider sacred, they're not for the general public. They're not for scientific inquiry," Begay told me. "They have to respect that it might be an interesting object to them, but it's sacred to us. It's a living being that's there to help the Navajo people."

In August 2003, Chee and Holiday, both members of the Bitter Water Clan, drove to a Park Service repository in Arizona to bring the shields home. Chee described it as an emotional journey. On the drive back, the medicine man sang and prayed over the sacred objects to bring them out of a long sleep. "The songs were to revive them and tell them 'You're home,'" Chee says. "To me these shields hold the meaning of what the Navajo people were put here for. It felt like a good thing to bring them back."

Since we met last year, the shields have been removed from storage at the tribal museum and returned to Holiday to be used privately in traditional ceremonies. When I asked about the different tribes



Two of three buffalo-hide shields, dated to between 1420 and 1640, that the Navajo Nation was able to claim on the strength of oral history related by a tribal member

Courtesy Neal Busk

Courtesy Neal Busk

who had filed claims, and the arguments made by the archaeologists commissioned by the Park Service suggesting the Navajo claim wasn't definitive, Begay was quick to remind me of the particulars of the NAGPRA law. Written with extensive input from tribal groups, NAGPRA considers oral history as compelling as scientific evidence. "Strict archaeologists say that according to scientific data our claims aren't valid," Begay says. "We respect that, but we have our traditions too. At some point you have to compromise, and we try to use the NAGPRA process to our advantage."

To Chee and Begay, archaeologists' fixation on studying ancient artifacts to understand a living culture is baffling and frustrating. "All you get in scientific measurement is numbers," Chee said. "Who's a better person to teach what these mean? The people who used them since before written time, or scientists whose theories have only been around a little while?"

I wasn't sure whether or not I agreed. As the NNAD program shows, Native involvement in archaeology isn't just about repatriating objects like the shields. Changing the way human remains are studied—in effect, forbidding any study—could fundamentally alter the way archaeology is done in America. Yet the work the NNAD does with fellow Navajo who might not trust an outsider brings an added depth to how archaeology is practiced in the Southwest.

In a society that places tremendous value on tolerance, respecting the values of the continent's oldest religions makes sense. The tribes' determination to assert their rights is entirely understandable, not just in light of centuries of exploitation and exclusion but on a purely human level. As I reported this story and listened to people like Robert Begay and Ezekiel Yazzie, I tried to keep my own grandparents in mind. They're buried in the Idaho panhandle, and I haven't visited their graves in well over a decade. But I'd still want to know if they were going to be dug up.

As we struggle to find a balance between Native rights and the interests of science in the years to come, archaeology in America is sure to get even more complicated. ■

ANDREW CURRY, *formerly general editor of* SMITHSONIAN, *is currently a Fulbright Fellow in Germany.*

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