

Asensio, Raúl H. *Señores del pasado: arqueólogos, museos y huaqueros en el Perú*. Lima: Instituto de Estudios Peruanos, 2018, 580 pp.

«One trouble with archaeology in Peru», the anthropologist Alfred Kroeber wrote confidentially in 1942, «is that the subject is too popular». For those familiar with more accepted troubles of Peruvian archaeology —the fickle ignorance of the government, *huaqueros*, and sometimes North Americans like Kroeber— the unexpected claim that what is unique about Peru is its *surplus* of interest in its material past, clarifies the challenges of its practitioners. As Raúl Asensio's searching *Señores del Pasado* argues, to collect and study the material past, Peruvian archaeologists after Julio C. Tello had to claim it—seducing, coercing, and competing with not just elite collectors, but rural people whose *huacos*, in niches above their doorways, stake their own priority to the *huacas* outside. To ease their way, Asensio argues, Peruvian archaeologists crafted or invented —per Hobsbawm— a national cult to the ancestors, in which they serve as principal priests: the «único colectivo profesional autorizado a manipular físicamente y a articular discursos legítimos» regarding the remains of the pre-Hispanic past, whose «único propietario legítimo» is the State (15).

This is a fascinating book. As much a sociology of scientific practice as it is a social and intellectual history, *Señores del Pasado* tries to follow archaeologists through Peruvian society with great sensitivity, exploring the achievements of their «pacto patrimonial» with the State, but also its conflicts, disappointments, and compromises. In recent years, we have enjoyed some excellent histories of Peruvian archaeology and its antecedents —by Henry Tantaleán, César Astuhuamán, Stefanie Gänger, Gabriel Ramón Joffré, and others Asensio cites— but what distinguishes his book is its commitment to two chief axes of «poner en valor»: the rural ruins worked and interpreted by regional grave-openers,



both subaltern and elite; and the state-sponsored museums that seek to fulfill their «cuádruple promesa fundacional»: conservation, education, identity-formation, and development (15). Metropolitan collectors and foreign archaeologists get their due; but in training our critical eye on how Peruvian archaeologists mobilize museums not just as sites of study, but of social uplift and discipline of the *huaqueros* they seek to convert, Asensio asks us to question our assumptions regarding the «pacto patrimonial». Archaeologists have protested histories that take their field as a *function* of ideology: imperialism, nationalism, etc. Asensio demonstrates how *through* the field—through its labor, infrastructure, and alliances—society and its ideologies are formed.

Señores del Pasado's wide temporal scope—stretching from the first Museo Nacional, opened in 1826, to the status of regional museums on the northern coast in 2015—makes for a long book, but its nine chapters are well spent away from the older critical literature of *indigenismo*, Cusco and Machu Picchu, and towards the Peruvian coast. The first three chapters take us to and through Julio C. Tello, whom Asensio takes as creator of the *arqueólogo peruano* archetype: a rural scientist, agent of the state, and pseudo-shaman, who could also be a (self-proclaimed) «luchador social, defensor de los oprimidos y agente de desarrollo local» (28). Asensio treats Tello fairly, celebrating his insights in spite of his challenges—discriminated against for his Andean descent, his training in the United States, and the contradictions of his employment by the Peruvian government—while making clear how he and his heirs used those challenges to mythologize the field. Asensio argues that Tello's alliance with Augusto B. Leguía, and his role in the development of patrimony law, defined the *arqueólogo peruano's* nationalism; condemning *huaqueros* for their use of ruins as «una doble trasgresión: contra la ley y contra la nación», while also employing their prior knowledge (119).

Chapter Three details Tello's contribution to this book's other great theme: the erection of rural archaeological museums to value remains and surveil, «coerce and seduce» the communities surrounding them. Asensio's treatment of Chavín de Huantar is excellent, detailing the local actors whose own collections and narratives of the site preceded Tello,

whose museum was wiped out by the avalanche of 1945. Chapter Four digs into the precarity of Tello's «pacto patrimonial»—that Peruvian archaeology in the 1950s through 1980s struggled to make ends meet in the face of waxing and waning state support during a period of incredible strife. Even as heirs, like Luis Lumbreras, rose by becoming still more politically explicit, more localist archaeologists, like the fascinating Lorenzo Samaniego at Cerro Sechín, had to fight for museums at places that confounded national narratives.

Chapters Five through Seven retrace the effects of what is arguably, after Tello, the second great event in the history of the field: the discovery, looting, and *puesta en valor* of the Señor de Sipán. That event set Walter Alva against international traffickers—as Asensio notes, this was an important event in patrimonial law worldwide—but also against some members of Sipán's community who understood its *huaqueros* as digging for justifiable traditional and economic reasons. Hernández reads the resulting Museo Tumbas Reales de Sipán as a stupendous museographical intervention that also occluded the site's community. Chapters Six and Seven explore the ensuing rise of archaeological museums on the north coast by more internationally connected and media-aware archaeologists, comparing their rising discourses of local development to community expectations, and the reality of outcomes. Chapter Eight shows how the *arqueólogo peruano* and *arqueóloga peruana* remake themselves in the present, meditating on Ruth Shady's projects at Caral—fighting foreign scholars' appropriations of her labor and insight while interpreting a nationalist vision of a site for nearby communities. Chapter Nine looks at the rise of regionalist indigenous identity on the north coast, allowing people claiming *muchik* descent—local businessmen and opportunistic politicians among them—to dispute the *pacto patrimonial*. While some in its pages (many of his subjects are still living) may feel ambivalent about its engagement with critical or indigenous archaeology, which calls for sharing or conceding ownership or interpretation of sites to local peoples, Asensio also provides some evidence that it is already happening.

It is hard to do justice to Asensio's 580 pages in a short review. This prolific *Investigador Principal* at the Instituto de Estudios Peruanos

notes that he is no archaeologist, but his delineation of the conceptual shifts of the «master narrative» of Peruvian archaeology is enlightening. He also leaves spaces for other researchers—this book is mostly based upon printed sources and nearly a decade of interviews; there’s far more waiting in the archives—to dig into specific cases where archaeologists’ concerns don’t reign supreme (for examples of when cultures of tourism and money can drive the car, see Mark Rice’s recent *Making Machu Picchu*, and Chinchero, right now). Asensio nonetheless sets a standard for the critical history of this particularly Peruvian science. Especially exciting, to this researcher, is how Asensio’s book puts to rest narratives of «failure». If anything, *Señores del Pasado* shows how a *pacto patrimonial* can be *too* successful; and how by staying with the trouble of Peruvian archaeology’s popularity, better futures are being written.

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