

CHALLENGES IN DISASTER ARCHAEOLOGY: FORENSIC AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL APPROACHES IN THE RESCUE OF HUMAN REMAINS FROM THE BIOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY TECHNICAL RESERVE OF THE NATIONAL MUSEUM/UFRJ (BRAZIL)

DESAFIOS NA ARQUEOLOGIA DO DESASTRE: ABORDAGENS FORENSES E ARQUEOLÓGICAS NO RESGATE DE REMANESCENTES HUMANOS DA RESERVA TÉCNICA DE ANTROPOLOGIA BIOLÓGICA DO MUSEU NACIONAL/UFRJ (BRASIL)

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ABSTRACT

At the fire of September 2018, all the Biological Anthropology collections of the National Museum were deeply affected. Located on the third floor, the technical reserve collapsed and was partially buried by debris. The original location of each human remains was lost and their respective identification, formerly written directly in the bones, was also erased by the burning process. Following the ethical code for human remains, especially those musealized, the rescue efforts employed forensic and archaeological methods to enhance the chances of future identification and, most importantly, to rescue the surviving remains. In this vein, the excavation and documentation process collected the majority of the remains encapsulated and protected by surrounding sediment. Construction debris, furnishings, equipment and specially the cabinet that housed the collections were documented and identified to understand the dynamic of fire and collapse process, and how the remains were affected and scattered.

KEYWORDS:

Disaster archaeology, Museu Nacional, rescue archaeology

RESUMO

No incêndio de setembro de 2018, todas as coleções de Antropologia Biológica do Museu Nacional foram profundamente afetadas. Localizada no terceiro andar, a reserva técnica desabou e foi parcialmente soterrada por escombros. A localização original de cada remanescente humano foi perdida e suas respectivas identificações, anteriormente escritas diretamente nos ossos, também foram apagadas pelo processo de queima. Seguindo o código de ética para remanescentes humanos, especialmente aqueles musealizados, os esforços de resgate empregaram métodos forenses e arqueológicos para aumentar as chances de identificação futura e, mais importante, para resgatar os remanescentes sobreviventes. Nesse sentido, o processo de escavação e documentação coletou a maioria dos remanescentes encapsulados e protegidos pelo sedimento no entorno. Entulhos de construção, mobiliário, equipamentos e, especialmente, o armário que abrigava as coleções foram documentados e identificados para entender a dinâmica do processo de incêndio e colapso, e como os remanescentes foram afetados e espalhados.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Arqueologia do desastre, Museu Nacional, arqueologia do resgate

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Introduction

In the fire of September 2018, all collections, exhibitions and laboratories of the National Museum (Museu Nacional) were deeply affected. This tragedy occurred almost three months after the commemorations of two hundred years of the creation of the originally named Royal Museum (Museu Real). Created by royal decree, on June 6th, 1818, the Museum was established and operated in a building at Campo de Santana, in the central area of Rio de Janeiro, from 1818 to 1892. With the fall of the monarchy in 1889, Ladislau Neto, director of the Museum (1875–1892), negotiated the transfer to the newly vacant Paço de São Cristóvão, former residence of the royal family, stating the need for more space for the institution (DANTAS, 2022, p. 68).

From its creation to “propagate the knowledge and studies of natural sciences in the Kingdom of Brazil, which contain a number of objects worthy of observation and examination, and which can be used to benefit commerce, industry and the arts, (...) as great sources of wealth” (BRASIL, 1818), to the paradigmatic shifts in collection formation, research and extroversion, and after more than one hundred years of occupying the Paço of São Cristóvão, the National Museum is a place of traumatic histories, symbolic and material. As the first Natural History museum of Brazil, its history parallels the national history of acculturation, violence and oppression against indigenous and enslaved populations.

Places of traumatic histories are loaded with emotional and symbolic barriers. According to Plens et al. (2025, p.10), there is a consensus about the “importance of understanding and preserving the collective memory of traumatic events, confronting and reflecting on the past and recognizing its impact on cultural identity and historical narrative.” In this vein, museums are an arena of controversies (DUARTE CÂNDIDO, 2017), with the potential to bring the unspeakable to the surface. When a museum has layers upon layers of traumatic history in its own trajectory, the task is even more urgent. In the last decades, the National Museum brought to exhibitions and educational activities the historical social debt in its trajectory, contextualizing the construction and many lives of Paço de São Cristóvão, the first owner, a slave trader, the silenced workers and enslaved workforce, the formation of material culture and human remains collections mostly taken from indigenous populations in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Up until the first two decades of the 20th century, the human remains collection was formed with a racial and eugenic bias, silencing any ethnic information and dehumanizing them (SÁ et al., 2008).

The mid-20th century brought a new political stance within the Museum, with staff such as Castro Faria (REIS, 2019) working to protect heritage (cultural and archaeological) and Heloisa Fenelon recognizing and advocating for indigenous art (VELOSO JUNIOR, 2024). In the wake of a growing accountability to transform the Museum into a house of memory for the once-silenced and their surviving kin, and as a popular museum for the lower economic classes, the fire that destroyed the interior of the Paço de São Cristóvão affected not only research, history, exhibitions and collections, but also the social imaginary and personal histories. As the childhood museum of many, the widely broadcast fire, live from 7 PM into the night and into the early hours of the

next day, hurt a society already divided by social crisis and the impending presidential election. The day after rose with hundreds of people in front of the Museum in disbelief and sadness. The initial wave of grief and mourning quickly transformed into a fight for survival. The first months were decisive in building a rescue force and showing that the Museum was alive and would rise from the ashes.

Therefore, this paper presents the challenges faced by the team responsible for the excavation and collection of the museum-held human remains housed in the Biological Anthropology Technical Reserve, illustrating the applied general methodology and necessary adaptations through emblematic cases.

Disaster and rescue archaeology

Disaster archaeology gained prominence with the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011. As Okamura et al. (2013) stated, “this new field should be fully utilised for planning and devising disaster prevention measures, and initial and medium- to long-term response frameworks.” In Japan, disaster archaeology brought to light the contemporary state of records and mapping of archaeological sites, preventive archaeology, and, in the aftermath, the consequences of the disaster on their modification and destruction. As a scientific field, disaster archaeology aligns directly with risk management on many levels. The growing efforts to protect museum-held heritage following the disasters of recent decades have taken center stage in risk and collection management planning (IBRAM, 2013, 2021; DIŞLI & BACAK, 2021).

Therefore, the methodological approach in the rescue efforts was based on the principles of disaster archaeology, aiming to produce detailed data to inform future risk management of anthropological and natural history museum collections. Forensic archaeology and anthropology techniques were also applied to record and analyze each scene. Beyond the rescue of the collections, the recording and understanding of a forensic fire scene may improve not only the chances of identifying and reintegrating each specimen and surviving remains into their respective collection, but also the methodological approach for similar future occurrences and prevention. According to Harrison (2019), archaeological methods “may serve to improve the recording and understanding of the complex spatial patterning brought about by the sequential deposition of debris,” increasing the understanding of a forensic fire scene. In this vein, exhaustive photographic recording of each step was applied to document the remains as they were located, their surroundings and context, the debris involved, and any element that could aid in understanding fire and collapse dynamics, especially to produce, in the future, a temperature map and a collapse timeline. The state of burning and melting of various debris was recorded and sampled, noting, in situ, color variation of the human remains (FAIRGRIEVE, 2020).

Different from general rescue archaeology, this case involved professionals working in their own devastated workplace and careers, within a setting where they had to identify the very collections they were sworn to preserve. Given the emotional strain of working in a salvage context with

personal and psychological baggage, simple yet effective rules were established: 1) team members could leave at any moment to recompose themselves, so as not to affect collective moral, when they felt overwhelmed or unable to focus, beyond regular breaks; 2) any methodological question or discussions had to take place outside the building, in a relatively calm environment. While the rescue work served, in many ways, as a coping mechanism to transform grief and frustration into action and resilience, each professional had to carefully evaluate their state of mind and how at any given moment could impair the success of the rescue and future steps.

The fire started at the auditorium, on the ground floor near the main entrance hall, close to or just after closing time on a Sunday. The official cause was an air conditioner malfunction. Firefighters responded quickly but were unable to stop the fire from spreading. The presence of old wooden structures on every floor facilitated the spread, along with flammable substances used in the collections, such as alcohol and formaldehyde. The collapse of parts of the building, such as ornate features, plaster moldings, interior brick walls and the roof, helped to suppress the flames in some areas.

On the second floor, directly above the auditorium, there was a paleontological exhibition (with a *Maxakalisaurus* as the centerpiece). On the third floor, all historical archives were housed in the Memory and Archive Section (Seção de Memória e Arquivo – SEMEAR). The Biological Anthropology Technical Reserve was located directly beside SEMEAR, and thus significantly close to the fire's point of origin.

The Biological Anthropology Technical Reserve occupied approximately 70 m² on the third floor, with a maneuver room and a sliding cabinet composed of fourteen sections divided into four modules. Each cabinet corridor was dedicated to a region or provenance: corridors for national and international cranial collections (acquired during the 19th century); for historical cemetery collections (early 20th century); for archaeological sites from the Lagoa Santa region; other archaeological sites from the same region or state; and corridors for shell mound sites. In the maneuver room, there was a wooden table, a desktop computer, a metal bookcase for temporary placement of selected collections for research access, and the collection of anthropological plaster busts from the 19th century, recently restored. The fire tore through the wooden floors and ceiling lining from the maneuver room to the sliding cabinet. The metal beams, installed in the mid-20th century to reinforce the building's structure, remained in place and helped to section the sliding cabinet as it fell to the ground floor. The roof collapsed entirely, leaving all the remains and debris exposed to the elements.

Into the excavation and its challenges

Pursuant to the anticolonial principles guiding curatorial practices for the collections of human remains, all efforts were undertaken to rescue the surviving remains, including fragments smaller than 5 mm. With all floors collapsed to the ground level, including the roof, the excavation had to address not only the rescue of the human remains but also the identification of debris

from each floor and other collections. The ground floor at this specific location featured an internal corridor connecting the exhibition area with the offices and laboratories, as well as one of the Teaching Assistance Section (SAE - Seção de Assistência ao Ensino) offices. Therefore, regarding this floor, we expected to find working desks, computers, archives, teaching materials (mostly paper), and personal belongings (such as mugs and trinkets).

The second floor housed an ethnological exhibition dedicated to indigenous cultures, featuring heavy showcases and a variety of material culture, from ritual vestments to pottery, feathers, weaving, and wooden items. The majority of the items were expected to have low chances of survival. The third floor housed our Technical Reserve in a large room with partitions. The other half of the room contained the second Technical Reserve of the Ethnology and Ethnography Section (SEE - Seção de Etnologia e Etnografia). As seen in Figure 1, the rooms on the second and third floors had the same layout, whereas the first floor had been divided into three rooms, used as work quarters. Following the architecture mapping of the building, our Technical Reserve fell in room 13, registered as PAV 1-13 (pavement 1, room 13). The other partitions of the aforementioned open rooms at the second and third floors fell in the 14 and 15 partitions (PAV 1-14 and PAV 1-15). The SEE Technical Reserve fell mainly in the 1-14 partition, with one third falling in the 1-15 partition. At the end of partition 1-15, cabinets temporarily housed the glass negatives that had been selected and separated for future restoration.

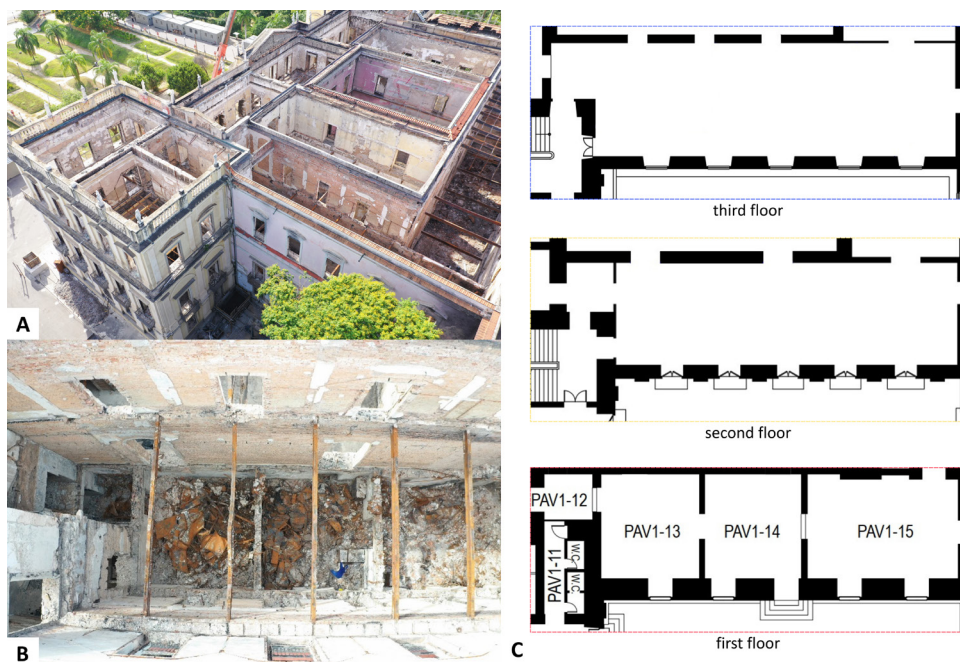


Figure 1: (A) Upper photo of the north façade of Paço de São Cristóvão and (B) upper photo of the excavation area (source: Orlando Grillo, Gabriel Cardoso and Victor Bittar, Núcleo de Resgate de Acervos). (C) floor plan of each building level and ground floor labeling (source: Núcleo de Resgate de Acervos).

PAV 1-13 was divided into 1x1 m squares, considering the primary entrance starting from 1-14. The floor was considered as zero, with debris and remains piled up to approximately 2.5 m high. All human remains and sampled debris were registered using three variables, x - y - z,

representing North-South and East-West distances within the square boundaries, and height. Considering the fragmented state of many remains and the fragility of those that still preserved their original form but possibly had unseen fractures, most human remains were collected together with the surrounding sediment. Hence, the location records also defined packs or collection areas. All interventions and collection processes were photographed, showing the limits of the packs or areas, sole remains, debris, and structures. Decisions and changes in strategy were also photographed, recording progress as sometimes the initial setup of an area required a different approach as collection progressed. Therefore, given the urgency of working as quickly as possible to rescue the remains and preserve the necessary data to understand the disaster and maximize the chances of identifying the remains, the construction of a photographic report was the chosen approach to avoid later written reports or loss of information.

The excavation was conducted in three phases. Considering the exposure to the elements, the excavation was initiated after a provisional roof was installed and the path to 1-13 was cleared. The first phase was carried out from June 24 to July 6, 2019, almost ten months after the fire. The excavation was interrupted when the contract for building stabilization ended and the university did not renew it. Only museum staff remained on site. Due to the presence of metal structures from the sliding cabinet, debris, and exhibition showcases, the work was halted because there was no support to cut through and remove them. The second phase proceeded at a slow pace, with only two members of the museum staff working on site, as most of the rescue efforts were stretched thin attending to the remaining rooms, alongside an external collaborator and, in the last two months, a former student contracted through a project funded by FAPERJ (Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado do Rio de Janeiro - Rio de Janeiro State Research Support Foundation) and a doctoral student. During this phase, the excavation focused on the borders of the room, opening trails to access the larger structures in the middle in a future phase. The work was interrupted again, this time due to the pandemic emergency. Thus, the second phase lasted from August 2019 to March 2020.

With the urgency of initiating the stabilization of the building's ornaments and the exterior restoration, including the definitive roof of the frontal area, the third phase was carried out amidst the pandemic, still before vaccines were available. Following sanitary protocols, the team worked safely from October 10 to December 16, 2020, and then from January 18 to 29, 2021. Considering the unhealthy innate conditions of the transformed materials (debris and assorted over two hundred years of substances used to treat collections and the installations), since the beginning, the rescue team faced bouts of low fever, bronchitis, idiopathic inflammation and allergies (respiratory and skin). The same symptoms occurred sporadically during the third phase, leading to suspensions of work to test for COVID-19. All results were negative in every case. An infestation of fleas was the only new occurrence and was addressed within two days, suspending work for safely disinfestation.

In the Technical Reserve, the human remains were stored in a sliding cabinet inside polypropylene (corrugated plastic) boxes. After the fall, the cabinet sections were found mainly in

the middle of the room; no residual material from the boxes was found upon first inspection. The range of different colors found in the bones most likely shows how they were exposed to different temperatures. Shades of light blue, yellow, and white were sometimes found in the same bone fragment or in fragments next to each other (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Bone fragments, with different colors, stuck in metal from the sliding cabinet (source: Luísa Faria).

A surprising discovery during the rescue was bones that had absorbed metal. Due to the high temperatures, the metal from the cabinet melted and was fully absorbed by the bones in contact with it. Once the metal cooled, the bones retained their shape, although their color and weight had changed, as they were now infused with metal. Most fragments that absorbed the metal only showed a few stains, while others became heavy and completely darkened. It was not possible to determine, just by looking, how deeply the metal had penetrated the bone—we could only estimate based on its weight.

The unusual conditions in which the human remains were found made it difficult to collect and at times even identify the material as osteological. Most of the remains were in poor condition, broken into small pieces or falling apart. Although those conditions are commonly found in archaeological sites, here, other materials such as layers of wall paint fused together and plaster from the ceilings were often confused with osteological material. A closer look was needed until the distinction was clear.

The manual excavation between PAV 1-12 and 1-13 aimed to recover human remains scattered by the collapse of the upper floors: the maneuver room (1-12) and Technical Reserve (1-13). PAV 1-12 and 1-13 are separated by a door, with a gap between them covered by a two-step staircase. PAV 1-12 lies below PAV 1-13. The excavation focused on this area, close to the space between the two PAVs. As a result, we observed a scenario in which human remains and building materials were 'escaping' into another room. This phenomenon has been noticed in other rooms, but never in an environment of this size with such a significant amount of building debris and

human remains. One notable find was the shelves of cabinets and compact shelving units that had become completely twisted and impregnated with bone fragments. Whenever a large quantity of bone remains was found, the shelves were removed and preserved for in-depth laboratory analysis. Figure 3, which depicts this area, shows the identified shelves and building materials, providing a valuable methodological record. Conventional manual archaeological excavation methods were employed.



Figure 3: Identification of shelves for subsequent extraction and excavation (source: Marina Buffa César).

In addition, an attempt was made to use a vibrating belt built by PhD student Marcos Davi Duarte. This device was used to sieve sediment into transport boxes. This machine proved effective during the initial stages of the rescue operation. However, as the vibrating belt approached the floor, its inclination decreased, and this made it impossible to slide the material. Therefore, excavation had to be done manually instead. As the bone fragments were collected, they were placed in bags, and the bags were numbered. The aim of this procedure was to preserve the context by placing a numbered label inside the bags, which would later be sifted. This methodology was important as the sieving work would take place several months later at the UFRJ National Museum Teaching and Research Campus. It is also important to note that alternating between conventional excavation methods and the use of a vibrating belt was consistent with the area's particularities, the quantity and fragility of the archaeological remains, and the time available for excavation.

Hence, the applied methods were adapted to achieve the same results in every case, always

aiming to postpone any decision that might impact the materials and human remains as much as possible, to preserve their integrity, the small fragments not yet seen (only locatable at a later stage in the inventory process), and information.

And the work continues

The excavation and collecting resulted in a volume of over three thousand boxes, sixteen blocks, and assorted compacted amalgams, housed first inside the building and then in the annex area and construction shed until being moved to facilities prepared at the new Campus. In 2021 and again in 2024, the boxes were transported by a moving company specializing in art and cultural items (RODRIGUES-CARVALHO et al., 2022). Two rooms of 30m² each and one room of 15m² were designed as new Technical Reserves exclusively for the rescued collections from room 1-13. The rescued human remains from laboratories and exhibitions are housed in one 15m² room.

The inventory process started in the second semester of 2023, and involved sifting through each box, carefully searching for every fragment, and collecting samples of each type of debris present to characterize the surrounding sediment (Figure 4). Analysis of the remains and mapping of heat modification started in 2024, being conducted in parallel to the inventory.



Figure 4: Example of detailed processing of collected fragments encased in debris and sediment (source: Mônica Dias).

The inventory is being conducted with two major objectives: 1) to organize and record the rescued remains, estimating how much was lost and/or cannot be identified; 2) to organize all excavation and laboratory data, consolidating them into an additional information layer. By achieving these objectives, at the end of the inventory it will be possible to enhance the identification process for the remains yet to be identified and, for those impossible to identify due to their severely mischaracterized state and lack of sufficient contextual elements, to create a new collection

that documents the fire of September 2nd. Therefore, even the identified remains will be part of a secondary collection of historical and forensic interest, with their context and collection process recorded, debris samples available for future additional analysis, and photographic reports documenting all steps.

Considering the social and historical debt, it is of utmost importance to preserve and highlight the voices once silenced by state policies of acculturation, othering, and the subsequent neglect of their unchosen resting places. The future still presents itself as unsure: how can the curatorial team continue its efforts to honor the responsibility of bringing to light the traumatic history embedded within the collection of human remains? Over more than one century, paradigmatic shifts have transformed the logic and foundations behind such collections, moving from practices of othering and objectification to a more critical perspective, wherein human remains are collected and housed only when recovered from endangered archaeological contexts or with the consent of the individuals or their families. In this vein, a Technical Reserve is more than a scientific space for the preservation of collections: it is also a different space apart, a memorial resting place that should be respected as such. It holds symbolic layers, some of which may remain beyond our full understanding.

The rescue excavation was conducted with simple yet challenging objectives: to preserve as much as possible any information that might enhance or enable the identification of the rescued human remains, and to save all the surviving remains, even unseen in loco. Avoiding utilitarian goals and designing/applying a methodology without knowing the full potential of future identification and its success, in a context of grief and trauma, was a scientific as well as an emotional challenge to the working team, that continues through the inventory work.

As the memory of traumatic events must be talked about and preserved, the future new exhibition will include specific rooms as time capsules of the aftermath of the fire. To those who enjoyed the museum in their childhood and to future generations who will know only the renovated museum, it will be a pause in space and time within the exhibitions to reflect upon this tragedy and the layers of trauma that haunts the anthropological collections.

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