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“Digging Up Different Kinds of Dirt: Archaeological Espionage during the Great War and Beyond”

Keyword & Terms: Great War, archaeology, Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI), Sylvanus G. Morley, anthropology, espionage, Franz Boas, Margaret Mead, the Minerva Initiative, National Security Agency (NSA)

ABSTRACT

In 1916, an American archaeologist who studied the ancient Maya, Sylvanus G. Morley, narrowly escaped death in the Guatemalan brush. A year later, the Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI) approached him in hopes of recruiting him and some of his willing colleagues as intelligence agents in the areas the scholar knew so well – which were also the areas that had almost killed him. Perhaps filled with a new sense of purpose with his lucky lease on life, or perhaps fueled by patriotism in the midst of the unprecedented Great War raging in Europe, Sylvanus G. Morley would eventually become one of the most effective intelligence operatives in Central America during this time.¹ But what was it about Sylvanus Morley that made him so successful as a spy? In this paper, I examine the ways in which Morley’s profession molded him in uniquely effective ways for the practice of diplomatic espionage. A spy’s goals directly coincide with numerous aspects of anthropology. This answer and more will be explored in the following presentation by dissecting the tenets and goals of anthropology and by analyzing how Morley’s position as an archaeologist played out to his advantage. All of these things come together to display why, even today, government agencies still value and seek anthropologists.

¹ Charles H. Harris III and Louis R. Sadler, *The Archaeologist Was a Spy: Sylvanus G. Morley and the Office of Naval Intelligence*, First (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2003), 43–46.