The Importance of Historical Archaeology in the United States

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Introduction

In this essay, our charge is to provide an overview of historical archaeology in the eastern United States. There are a variety of possible approaches, including a developmental perspective or an annotated bibliography. Instead, we choose to emphasize the social importance of the discipline and the general approaches taken. While most of our discussion centers in experience from the East, our comments are more broadly relevant to the field within Americanist archaeology in general.

Over the last several decades, historical archaeology has matured into a diverse discipline using a wide range of material culture, historical documents, and theoretical frameworks. The range of issues has broadened and practitioners continue to experiment with the methodologies and theoretical approaches needed to address topics such as ideology, resistance, ethnic and gender identity, power relations, and capitalism in addition to traditional concerns like chronology, subsistence, and land use.

The Importance of Historical Archaeology

For many decades, historical archaeology has played a role in creating and developing America's perceptions of its past. Writing at the time of the American bicentennial, Robert Schuyler (1976:32) comments on the connection between historical archaeology and identity, as he notes the different reactions by English and French Canadians to the Fortress of Louisbourg: "it is such emotional involvement of living peoples with historic sites that, in part, explains the present condition of historical archaeology in America.' He is concerned that many people feel too connected to particular versions of the past to be objective about history. While his concern is that political interests are a barrier that must be surmounted before a legitimate scholarly discipline can be fully established," he also notes that "archaeological research at historic sites may well do much to undermine many of the historical myths on which a nation grounds its existence and ideology" (Schuyler 1976:27). Part of the importance of the discipline, then, may lie in (1) elucidating some connections between objectivity and meaning, and (2) challenging the agenda-laden histories of different groups. Two brief examples demonstrate the connection between historical archaeology and particular versions of history. James Baker (1992) also discusses the powerful role of national mythology in the presentations of history at Plymouth Plantation.
Excavations at Jamestown and Williamsburg provide examples of the role of historical archaeology in support of national mythology. These towns also reflect government and private interest in the historic past. The work done at each and the interpretations offered have greatly influenced the shape of colonial historical archaeology. At Jamestown, the National Park Service has presented the town as not only the first permanent English settlement in the New World, but also as the birthplace of modern democracy. The first representative legislature in America convened at Jamestown from 1619 until it was moved in 1699 to Williamsburg. At Williamsburg, the Rockefeller Foundation celebrates the ideals of the planter elite as being timeless and inevitable American values (Patterson 1986, Wallace 1986). The reconstructed town of Williamsburg commemorated the planter elite, presented as the progenitors of timeless ideals and values, the cradle of that Americanism of which Rockefeller and the corporate elite were the inheritors and custodians. . . . Williamsburg’s order flows from the top down. It is a corporate world: planned, orderly, with no dirt, no smell, no visible signs of exploitation. Intelligent and genteel patrician elites reside over it; respectable craftsmen run production paternalistically and harmoniously; ladies run well-ordered households with well-ordered families in homes filled with tasteful precious objects. The rest of the population—the 90 percent who create the wealth—are nowhere to be seen (Wallace 1986:148-149).

While each site celebrates Anglo-American history, non-European (and other Europeans) peoples, whose histories were inextricably linked with the British, have been largely ignored or glossed over. Neither Native Americans nor African Americans figured in the initial vision of the Jamestown and Williamsburg restorations. However, in the 1980s the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation made substantial strides in incorporating the lives of these ‘others’ (eg slaves, servants, and women) in restoration, archaeology, research designs, and public presentations. There is an increasing awareness among the public, probably through greater exposure to critical histories, that the ideals of the planter elite were not ‘natural’ in the sense of being inevitable, or timeless, but were embedded in their own contemporary social and political realities.

It is also useful to note the role played by historical archaeology in a different way, although certain mythologies come into play locally as well. That role is contribution to community. Archaeology has been valuable in communities in several places. For example, it has lent itself to tourism in cities like Baltimore and Annapolis, Maryland, and to the conscious creation of community identity in Alexandria, Virginia; Weeksville, New York; Toronto, Ontario; and Annapolis (Bridges, Salvin 1980, Brown 1987, Cressey 1983, Little et al 1991, Leene et al in press). The explicit aim in Annapolis, for instance, is local empowerment through awareness of history and the archaeological methods used to create it. The purpose of an outreach program with the present-day African-American community in Annapolis is not simply to present an African-American past to the African-American community. Rather, it is to engage the community in a dialogue so that archaeological research questions are sensitive to the needs and interests of that community. The purpose is to conduct research that is relevant not only to professional archaeologists but also to both black and white Annapolitans.

These uses and the identity-creating and confirming importance of historical archaeology are not always apparent or acknowledged within the discipline. It takes temporal or social distance to gain perspective on such uses. We think it is useful to look at the varieties of theoretical orientations in the field. Writing of archaeology in general, Ian Hodder (1986:x) declared his hope that the discipline has gained enough maturity to allow diversity, controversy, and uncertainty. We believe that historical archaeology has become diverse enough as a discipline that it is now able to accept and approach diversity as a social issue both in its subject matter and in its stance as a social science.

**Approaches to Historical Archaeology**

We can divide the discipline of historical archaeology into several general paradigms in order of their chronological appearance: particularistic, nomothetic or generalizing, symbolically-structuralist, and a variety of recent critical approaches. Overarching all except the first, and in some cases standing separately as an ethnographic approach, is an anthropological theme that originally developed in reaction to historical particularism, but which has taken on different forms since the 1960s. Each of these models is characterized by particular goals and questions and by assumptions about the uses and meanings of artifacts. Each may be associated with particular influential workers and each continues to make important contributions to the discipline.

All of the above types of historical archaeology co-exist. We offer the above model to suggest that the field is growing in diversity and complexity. Several recent publications provide an overview of the status of historical archaeology (Beaudry 1988, Leene, Potter 1988, Little 1992, 1994a, Shackel, Little 1994, Yentsch, Beaudry 1992). Like archaeology as a whole, historical archaeology is an additive social science: goals and questions tend to remain even as new ones are added.

The first approach, traditionally represented by work such as that done by Ivor Noel Hume (1964, 1969) views archaeology as ‘handmaiden to history’. Archaeology is used for particularistic, historically specific aims and archaeologically recovered data is intended to verify history or to provide the details left out of written accounts (Harrington 1955, Noel Hume 1983). Artifacts assume the role of illustration of a history essentially well known but
represent quantifiable data that may be systematically analyzed and compared. In pattern recognition of different groups' behaviors, artifact patterns are used in traditional archaeological ways to indicate identifiable 'cultures' in the archaeological record. These groups are then understood and described by benefit of the documentary record.

The symbolic-structuralist approach is concerned with adapting Levi-Strauss' descriptions of binary oppositions to the analysis of material things. Labeled as 'cognitive studies' by Kathleen Deagan (1982:168), such approaches use world view to focus on artifacts as reflections of abstract human culture. Changing world view is confirmed through changing artifact styles and uses. Structuralist analysis became particularly influential in the field after the publication of Deetz's *In Small Things Forgotten* (1977, also see 1973), but was being developed in folklore by Henry Glassie (1975), and by other archaeologists (Leone 1977). In this approach, material culture is broadly conceptualized as all physical manifestations of culture. All types of material are expected to reflect culture in a coherent and consistent way. That is, abstract culture is thought to be reflected redundantly with the same message—for example, symmetry—seen in such diverse artifacts as houses, gardens, dinner services, furniture, and cemeteries. Artifacts also may be symbolic of particular cultural meanings such as achieved status and desired or emulated status. None of the theoretical stances in the field have been without their critics. For example, Russell Handsman (1983) argues that South's approach to historical archaeology, embedded as it is in positivism, is ill-equipped to address questions that Handsman identifies as the purpose of the field: questions of culture, and the development of modern individualism (also see Orser 1989). South (1993:17) has expressed dismay at the 'anti-science briar' which he sees as threatening objective scientific historical archaeology. He contrasts the objective questions 'posed by the archaeologists' against questions 'posed by the community with no necessary connection to the truth of the past human condition' (South 1993:17, emphasis in original).

Critiques such as these are part of the broader questioning in archaeology. The current crisis of theory in archaeology as a whole has been discussed by several authors (Earle, Preucel 1987, Hodder 1985, 1986, Leone 1986, Miller, Tilley 1984, Patterson 1990a, 1990b, Preucel 1991, Shanks, Tilley 1987, Watson, Folanis 1990). The 'post-processual' impact on historical archaeology has been reviewed as well (Shackel, Little 1992). Post-structuralist, feminist, and critical theory approaches are having an increasing influence on the field, particularly in the kinds of issues that are addressed. Power relations, inequality, and the dynamic relationships that create and substantiate subordinate and dominant groups defined by class, gender, and ethnicity are particular topics of interest in these approaches (Little, Shackel 1992, McGuire, Paynter 1991). Gender is rapidly becoming a well-defined issue in historical archaeology (Little 1994b, Seifert 1991, Spector 1993, Spencer-Wood 1991, Walde, Willows 1991, ...
influenced colonial material production and the material remains found in the archaeological record. Ferguson uses the concept of 'creolization' to analyze various forms of material culture, including pottery, houses, and foodways. From the mid-1970s, he has redefined a mid-20th century stereotype that "colonial ware," a course earthenware with European form, was solely a Native American product. He provides evidence for the cultural interaction between African Americans, Native Americans, and European Americans, and demonstrates that colonial ware also has a strong African-American connection.

Spector writes about the Eastern Dakota (Sioux) people in the early to mid-1800s in Minnesota. Instead of relying on traditional styles of archaeological analysis, she constructs a story about a decorated bone awl handle lost in the 19th century by a Dakota woman as an evocative entry into the Dakota experience. Spector interprets community life by combining information from archaeological features, artifacts, documentary descriptions, and input from descendants of the group she studied.

For Spector, feminist archaeology requires more than breaking down simplistic notions about gender-based division of labor; it requires changing the practice and authority structure of the discipline itself. Sensing a dissonance between feminist insight and archaeology as it is practiced, she questions the power and the privilege of producing knowledge about other people and their histories. In that context, she discusses tensions within archaeology as it restructures theory and practice, explicit connections between histories as they are created and the present, and ongoing tensions between archaeologists and native peoples.

Alison Wylie (1992) discusses the implications of feminist research in archaeology for objectivity and relativism, explaining that feminist research will lead to more rigorous and responsive archaeological science. She points out that the 'antiscience' and post-processual critiques have opened up the space needed for valid consideration of gender and other ethnographic variables. The refinement of a feminist critical approach serves to coalesce and strengthen many aspects of various critical approaches. Because all data are theory-laden, external interests have a legitimate place in both formulating and evaluating claims of empirical knowledge. Interpretation of data is not, however, open-ended, but clearly is subject to the constraints of evidence.

Wylie's argument should allay South's fears, cited above, about the dangers of antiscience relativism. It also disputes some rigid assumptions of the processual school: a narrow vision of objectivity and the arrogance in presuming that the only questions that might lead to truth must be formed and posed by an enlightened inner circle of objective historical archaeologists.

We return to the importance of the discipline and to the thread of material culture. The interpretations that historical archaeology offers are significant in
both reflecting and influencing what public and academic communities think about the past and the contributions of peoples of different ethnicity, race, class, and gender. We believe that historical archaeology is important because it can respond to questions and issues from the community, however that community is defined. The ability of historical archaeology to challenge the agenda-laden histories of all sorts of different groups depends upon the discipline’s integrity in formulating and evaluating knowledge claims and upon the ways we understand our evidence, which includes text and material culture. Each of the approaches we have reviewed views material culture somewhat differently, but there is no question that our understanding of this crucial category of evidence must be continually refined.

In beginning to reinvent how historical archaeology considers all the various ‘others’ in the past, practitioners are starting to develop new methodologies as well as new theoretical orientations. For example, archaeologists must consider how particular techniques of data recovery and classification promote certain, currently held assumptions. Anne Yeutsch (1991:140-5) makes the important point, for instance, that current analytic techniques make it difficult to see gender in the archaeological record. The field needs innovative ways of considering artifacts and of making material culture speak to the questions we ask.

Historical archaeology is a diverse field dealing with numerous research questions. Held together by a common concern with the modern world, it is a discipline with a unique perspective aimed at the unique world situation of global European expansion and resulting intercultural contact (Deagan 1988). Developing methods that take advantage of the unique perspective requires attention to the complex meanings and uses of material culture. This approach will allow us to pursue an anthropological discipline concerned with people and their social and cultural conditions.

Acknowledgments

We are grateful to Charles Oster for inviting us to participate in this volume.

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The figure on the front cover is Man on horseback pursuing bushman from Beersheba, Southern Drakensberg, South Africa.

This issue of the World Archaeological Bulletin has been typeset and produced by Steve Stead. With thanks to Larry Zimmerman and Brian Molyneaux.

Printed and bound by Short Run Press Ltd., Exeter.