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Section Response 2

The readings from this week were all related to documentary archaeology. Within the articles we read this week, we were introduced to the idea of considering oral traditions and, especially, written records when working to reconstruct and understand the past. Wilkie claims that the job of an archaeologist is to use his or her sources to construct meaningful and fuller understandings of the past (14). To do so accurately, it’s important to take into consideration the accounts of people who actually witnessed and experienced the areas in question.

It’s easy to see how oral traditions can help us insert people into our interpretations of the past. By having a visual of a tangible human body recounting a story, whether an eyewitness account or retelling of a story, it becomes a whole lot simpler to remember that the past we are investigating is the remnant of human activity versus just a series of artifacts and features.

Written records are another source, that when properly utilized, can reveal a lot about the past. Archaeologists can use everything from maps to newspaper ads to help give them a more accurate reconstruction. Types of maps, especially when different varieties are examined side-by-side, can give us a clear picture of land usage. Seasholes gave countless examples of how maps and records can be used to paint a picture of spatial layout, building construction, population distribution etc. Things like newspaper ads are also telling. They’re not only a visual representation or reminder of the ideas once circulated throughout society, but by interpreting them, we can better reconstruct, as seen in the Mrozowski “Archaeology of Colonial Newspapers” article and his overarching example of fleshing out gender perceptions of the era, societal trends and thought processes.

While examining and interpreting written records and oral histories, it is also important to keep in mind that these sources can also have their inaccuracies. Just as nature can disrupt the context of a find and lead to an incorrect interpretation, humans can make mistakes in their recordings. Written records can be extremely useful sources, but they should always be checked with other types of evidence in order to avoid fully relying on an inaccurate source.

I think that if we had documents indicating the lawn housed servants, our interpretations of our finds would definitely change. Archaeologists, or anybody attempting to understand the past, inevitably bring their biases and preconceived notions into their interpretations. For instance, in Unit 5 of the JBH site we see remnants of some sort of stone feature and we think we are beginning to uncover some sort of brick structure in the larger context of Unit 6. Our initial reaction was to interpret those remains as some sort of ornamental garden pathway. Knowing that servants might have been housed in that area, we now might think of those remains as some sort of porch or other housing feature. If servants were in fact housed on the lawn, it would also change our interpretation of whatever small artifacts we discovered or whatever features we encountered or will encounter. Instead of having to make educated guesses as to how the land was used and determine from there the significance of remaining evidence, we already have an informed starting point for our interpretations.

Archaeologists don’t necessarily need documents to make informed interpretations. To be an archaeologist, one has to already have a certain amount of knowledge about a topic before they can begin excavating and conducting research on a site. An archaeologist is also trained how to make educated guesses based on reasoning and what is relevant to a space. Therefore, I think that without documents an archaeologist is still equipped to make informed interpretations about lived spaces. Still, nobody could ever say that documents are detrimental to an archaeologist’s interpretation of a site. The more information one can gather about a subject, the better informed one will be. And documents are a great way to not only gain more factual information, but gain another perspective, and one from someone who has more connections to the space than the archaeologist ever could.

Documents can be “read” in countless ways. The way a document is interpreted depends not only on the biases of the interpreter, but also the information it is examined in tandem with. Documents are a valuable source of information and the archaeologist should always be eager to use the opportunity to consult as many different types of sources as possible, whether that means sitting in the dirt or sitting in a library.

Bibliography

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