ARCH1900: Archaeology of College Hill
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Critical Response #5

Archaeology aims to study the past, or more specifically the human past, through a thorough examination of material culture. It is then through publication that the discoveries are shared with the audience, often involving multiple groups. This week's readings explored the complex issues arising from the conflicting views of the past and of heritage that different groups have, especially when archaeologists have to deal with a place that has special cultural significance to a particular group or groups of people. In addition, the readings highlighted the importance of taking into account these differences before an excavation as they often times have significant effects on the development of the excavation process and the shaping of the publication.

As Nick Shepherd points out in his paper 'What does it mean 'to give the past back to the people'? Archaeology and Ethics in the Postcolony', before we attempt to give the past back as archaeologists we need to question its ownership and we also have to identify those who have claims on the past. Essentially, we need to be asking who can present the past and who is rightfully entitled to receive it. As clearly evident from Shepherd's account of the controversial excavation of an early colonial burial ground at Prestwich Street in Cape Town, South Africa, failure to acknowledge and resolve any differing views of the past and of heritage before an excavation can ultimately lead to conflicts and biased publications. At Prestwich Street, exhumation of

approximately 500 individuals at the site had already occurred and seven weeks had passed before developers and archaeologists thought to organize a public meeting to discuss the cultural ramifications of their work. As expected, the members of the community were outraged with the fact that 'the needs of archaeology as a science were given precedence over the needs of community socio-cultural history' (Shepherd 105).

Shepherd mentions that it is often argued by archaeologists that excavation of a heritage site can 'democratize the past' (99), yet the Prestwich Street dispute shows that sometimes those who can lay claims on the past that the archaeologists are attempting to recover have no interest in exposing the history of those buried but would much rather protect their 'memories and identities' (105). In this case, the archaeologists ultimately failed to question the purpose of their exhumation and if their work would be welcomed by all the rightful 'stakeholders' (99). Additionally, they failed to include social historians on their team who could provide a cultural view, which meant their discussions of the burial site in the publication 'were consistently framed in terms of the archaeological and physical anatomical value' (107) and thus biased. This leads us to the point that archaeologists need to recognize and accept conflicting views of the context of their excavation in order to successfully produce a publication for multiple audiences.

Shepherd also states that archaeology can uncover ‘hidden histories’ (99), especially those of individuals or populations that usually do not present themselves as conspicuous such as slaves, yet this is not always the case as discussed by Arthur Bankoff and Frederick Winter in their paper. They refer to the archaeological examination of the Van Cortlandt Mansion that was deemed to be ineffective in recovering significant details of its past slave population as the ‘current landscape is an artifact of the urban park movement of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries rather than a remnant of an earlier period’ (Bankoff and Winter 303) and ‘the material manifestations of the slaves’ activities would be limited by the nature of their enslavement’ (304). Moreover, at the conclusion of the excavation process at the site, they found no relevant evidence; the report states that ‘the enslaved population that is known to have inhabited the plantation for 75 years is invisible in the archaeological record’ (306).

As a result, archaeologists had to turn to historical documents to account for the past presence of slaves. However, it’s difficult to present a full picture of the hidden history of these marginalized groups as the documentary evidence only provides fragmented insights into their lives. Additionally, these insights would be biased since most of the documents used would be diaries of owners or newspaper articles that would reflect the prevailing values and opinions of the period during which they were written. Consequently, any bias from the documentary evidence would be carried over to the publication. This highlights an important struggle that archaeologists face today

between allowing bias to craft a publication in order to represent the past of a marginalized group and placing more importance in archaeological data in spite of its tendency to discount less well-known aspects of the history of the site.

As evident from the cases referred to by Shepherd, Bankoff and Winter in their respective papers, archaeologists must take into consideration many issues when shaping their publication for multiple audiences. Perhaps the most critical factor would be to respect the different meanings of culture and heritage the site that they attempt to excavate holds for various groups. Furthermore, archaeologists need to recognize that material culture and documentary evidence can both be flawed and that they need to account for these flaws when presenting their findings.

Works Cited

Bankoff, H. Arthur and F. Winter. 2005. The Archaeology of Slavery at the Van Cortlandt Plantation in the Bronx, New York. International Journal of Historical Archaeology, 9(4): 291-318.

Shepherd, Nick. 2007. What does it mean 'To Give the Past Back to the People'? Archaeology and Ethics in the Postcolony. In Y. Hamalakis and P. Duke, eds. Archaeology and Capitalism, From Ethics to Politics. Left Coast Press; Walnut Creek, 99-114.