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From Cardboard Signs to Holograms:

The Effect of Presentation in Archaeology

Despite the intricate processes of excavation and analysis, perhaps the most widely experienced element of archaeology is its final presentation. Excluding all archaeological professionals and students, the vast majority of the population primarily interacts with archaeological remains through museums, historical societies, and site tours. However, as Hodder (2003), McManamon (2003), and Silberman (2008) describe, the presentation of ancient artifacts and structures is more than just the addition of a tour guide and a cardboard sign. The three authors recognize that with the growing complexity of the “Digital Age,” presentation has changed to allow for a more involved and personal process of understanding the past. Even more so, Hodder (2003), McManamon (2003), and Silberman (2008) also demonstrate that archaeological presentation is inseparable from greater political factors such as nationalism, ethics, and ownership. Thus, in considering how we present the past to the public, on both a local and global scale, we must acknowledge these elements during all stages of archaeology. The John Brown House (JBH) site in Providence, RI serves as an example that effectively highlights the politics behind presentation. Therefore, by analyzing the JBH site, we see that archaeological presentation in this age is more than just a display case, but that it has much larger implications that shape the general perception of the past.

Recently, the basic nature of the tourist experience at an archaeological site or museum has shifted drastically. With the emergence of new technologies, Silberman describes the replacement of “museum-type text displays” with “more creative and energetic interpretive solutions” designed to “appeal to personal involvement and promise a memorable experience” (2008: 139-40). In essence, at any well-funded exhibit, visitors no longer simply walk around and read signs, but they are confronted with everything from interactive applications and virtual reality to costumed characters and numerous special-interest activities. Silberman states that these sites have been reconfigured and personalized so that “large numbers of visitors will be attracted” and the sites can become “engines of local economic activity” (2008: 139). Hodder calls this process “time tourism,” the idea that archaeological presentations now mimic a sort of theme park experience (2003: 141). Thus, with the introduction of new technologies, we see a massive shift towards a more complex and involved form of archaeological presentation.

However, Hodder (2003), McManamon (2003), and Silberman (2008) further demonstrate that this new type of presentation also incorporates much larger issues of nationalism, ethics, and ownership. As the three authors conclude, because these elements directly contribute to how a site is presented, they should be actively considered throughout the entire archaeological process. McManamon, for instance, describes how, historically in the United States, archaeological sites “came to serve as national symbols for a new country,” legitimizing both the nation and “individual ethnic heritages” (2003: 119). Thus, because archaeological sites contribute to civic and ethnic identities, in many ways the presentation of a site greatly represents a sort of nationalism. Furthermore, Silberman discusses the ethical issue of “multivocality,” the representation of “potentially conflicting approaches and perceptions of a site” (2008: 141). Silberman argues that this too is a factor in archaeological presentation because, while it is ethical to introduce all possible site interpretations, sometimes in presentation it is much easier to create a single, easy to follow narrative that is perhaps less accurate (2008: 141). Finally, Hodder describes how presentation also displays issues of ownership. Because no one truly “owns” the past, Hodder argues that archaeological excavation should be more of a collaborative effort and that presentation should promote local interests, rather than simply focusing on broader research questions (2003: 143). Thus, the three authors show that presentation also involves issues of nationalism, ethics, and ownership. Because presentation is one of the most vital steps in archaeology, we must always consider these political elements.

The John Brown House site is a great example of an excavation that acknowledges issues of nationalism, ethics, and ownership not only during presentation, but also during fieldwork. In general, the major stakeholders at the JBH site are Brown University, the Rhode Island Historical Society, and the JBH Museum. Findings at the JBH site are presented in a variety of ways including online journals, written reports, physical case displays, and both virtual and walking tours. Because the JBH site is an important representation of historical America and the early colonization of Rhode Island, it is a particular source of state and national pride. Thus, excavators at the JBH site are careful to provide an unbiased account that accurately presents the past as opposed to promoting other interests. In addition, recognizing the inherent multivocality of the site, students recognize possibly conflicting narratives and interpretations through their personal field blogs and in the final site report. Finally, in order to include the greater community at large, the JBH site opens for special events when anyone can participate in excavations. The JBH site also promotes local organizations, such as the JBH Museum and RI Historical Society, by attempting to answer their individual research questions. Thus, the JBH sites serves as a perfect model that takes into account the inherent inseparability of larger issues from excavation and final presentation.

Because of the drastic shift in archaeology in general, we can now see increasing technology and the direct representation of nationalism, ethics, and ownership in the presentation of a site. However, if we conclude that the John Brown House site does a good job acknowledging these issues, we must ask another question: can we successfully implement these practices at another site? Unfortunately, the answer to this question may be somewhat conditional. Many of the events and the structure of the JBH site only work because of its relatively small size. Therefore, perhaps we should instead focus on ways of improving the methods at the JBH site. By perhaps opening up a forum for suggestions from the public, adding the excavation site to the JBH Museum tour, and continuing to outline all possible interpretations in publications, we can enhance our presentation and our understanding of the past as a whole.

Works Cited

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