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Response 4

Interpretations – where should it happen?

In the past few decades, one of the most important archaeological debates revolves around interpretation during excavation. Interpretation can be affected by many various reasons in fieldwork, but the two main reasons of a disruption of interpretation in the archaeological data presented in Jones and Lucas are due to fragmentation and hierarchy. Jones (2003) discusses various degrees of fragmentation, the main being the “linear process that moves in an orderly series of stages from excavation to post-excavation to publication”(40). While hierarchy as Jones also mentions “manifests itself in the organization, management, and dissemination of archaeological information”(40). This means that information is being processed strictly horizontally from excavation to publication, but also strictly vertically from fieldworkers to site directors, with little to no intermixing in the different stages. By looking at the John Brown House and our excavation there for the past seasons, I will hope to examine our excavation practices and determine our level of interpretation.

In Jones’ chapter on ‘archaeology observed’, he mentions that excavation and publication have been highly analyzed in recent years, however post-excavation has received little to no attention (39). Post-excavation is where the site in contextualized and re-interpreted for publication. This is where the material and data recorded during an excavation is analyzed and interpreted, which is done by specialists. It is then very problematic for post-excavation or the ‘black box’ to be hidden behind excavation and then mysteriously make it way into publications (46). Therefore, Jones states at the end of his chapter that archaeologist must employ ‘double subjectivity’, where archaeologist must attempt to understand the context of the artifact, while still taking a neutral and more methodological stance (60), and this can happen only if there is a flow between our observations and theories.

In Lucas’ chapter on ‘archaeology and the field’, he mentions the hierarchy and politics of archaeology and how that has affected our interpretations. Lucas mentions that early archaeology was not made by advancements in the field, but by scholars at home – meaning there has always been a “division between the fieldworkers and the intellectual elite”(5). This division is clearly seen on most archaeological excavation from the field (fieldworkers to supervisors) to the lab (specialists) – there is still a division between the fieldworkers and intellectual elite. Therefore, it is the fieldworkers who are most active in the excavation, but it is the site director who has interprets this information. Overall, as seen by Jones and Lucas there are many faults to this seemingly perfect process of archaeology.

The excavations at the John Brown House are good examples as to how these situations apply and don’t apply. First and foremost, this site serves educational purposes to understand the history of the owners of this house, which helps the John Brown Museum and the RI Historical society to better interpret the many phases of construction, and change. Second, we are helping to connect the public with archaeology and the purpose we serve, take for example this past weekend when the public came to dig with us. Finally, we are helping to better educate ourselves, meaning that this class is giving us the fundamental methodologies of fieldwork. Therefore, the purpose of our excavation is education of the public and of us.

It is due to this reason that our interpretation is fundamental. We, as excavators, need to understand exactly what we are doing and why to better educate the public. Each new context, artifact, soil sample etc. needs to be explained as to why we interpreted our information a certain way and what are reasoning is behind this. This will help us to become better archaeologist, but also better at contextualizing information and how that plays into the larger picture of the site. And there are many ways that we are able to and not able to accomplish this goal.

There are three reasons why we are not able to accomplish this goal. First, there is not enough time in the class, especially with the constraints of the fall season, which does not allow us to flow outside of the rigid structure of excavation, post-excavation, and publication. The ideal would be for us to freely flow from excavation to examination – therefore we can better understand what to look for in our site. Second, we are the ones who are analyzing the artifacts, which means that there are no specialists currently involved in our project except for GPR work, which could limit our discovery. Third, there is still some hierarchy to the site, meaning that there is still a distinct division between the intellectuals aka the experience that Jessica and Muge possess and the fieldworkers aka us as students who have little to no experience in the field.

There are three reasons as to why we are able to accomplish ours goals. First, we are constantly keeping each other posted on what is happening from our own perspectives each day of excavation and from our unit through our field blogs and unit summaries. This means that we, as excavators, are aware the whole site, and not just our own unit. Second, through context sheet and flip videos, we are able to better understand the practices as to why we switch a context and verify our reasons, helping us to understand our interpretations. Third, even though I mentioned above there was some hierarchy, we still have more liberties than a larger excavation, and we are also able to better interpret our site, because we are the ones who are doing the fieldwork, analyzing, and then publishing.

In conclusion, our excavation is successful at helping us to better integrate interpretation into our fieldwork now instead of later. We are able to accomplish this through our methodologies, but also through reading discussions, where we are able to critically examine archaeology and our own excavation techniques. In the end, these articles have helped me to question my interpretations at my unit more easily than before.

Bibliography:

* Lucas, Gavin. 2001 "Introduction", pgs. 1-17, In *Critical Approaches to Fieldwork*. Routledge: London.
* Jones, Andrew. 2002 "Archaeology observed", pgs. 39-62, In *Archaeological theory and scientific practice*. CUP: Cambridge.