An Anthropologist Looks at Historical Archaeology

John R. Cole
University of Massachusetts - Amherst

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The historical archaeology workshop on European settlement and expansion was both more and less than might have been hoped for. On the negative side, except on minor points about technical methods, there was a demonstration of a certain amount of disarray in the field and a clear suggestion that historical archaeologists have a bewildering amount of work to do in order to put their house in order. More positively, the workshop illustrated and explored problems which needed to be examined. It began a reexamination of goals which may help forge a more coherent regional historical archaeology in the future, so even the workshop's negative elements were--or should be--instructive. Rather than a five-year research strategy recommendation, there was a discussion, considered useful by many participants, of the very nature of historical archaeology and its potentials. If the issue was unresolved, it was at least addressed. There was a lack of simple communication among participants, despite exhausting efforts by all concerned--including three successive moderators who struggled with the task of leading discussion among people who spoke different languages. After a period of inconclusive suggestions of possible agendas and agenda items, it was decided that it might be best to start from some common ground of basic agreement. Dropping the erroneous assumption that there existed any consensus about basic research designs or strategies, the group decided to address the question: "What do we study?" Recognizing that categories overlapped and interrelated, there was an effort to identify specific kinds of data and questions in three basic areas of ecology-cum-systems theory: the parameters, causes, effects and constraints of culture relative to:

1. the natural environmental system;
2. the eco-demo-techno-environmental system;
3. the ideological and sociopolitical system.

If our potential subject matter can be divided arbitrarily into these subsystems, what can we learn about each data realm, and how can and should it be done? To what aspects of the system do archaeologists have the best or the least access? What are the relationships among different data realms? Can concepts such as infrastructure, structure and superstructure be applied to historical archaeology's subject matter at this point, thereby fitting it more closely into broader anthropological and archaeological theory? If not, is this because of something unique about historical archaeology or a conscious rejection of the materialist ecological paradigm as inapplicable for theoretical reasons? Or is it an unreadiness to be theoretical? A specific way of looking at culture was proposed in order to give the workshop group a baseline from which to build or disagree. Everyone probably agreed that our basic data were material cultural, but presumably everyone did not agree that our theoretical orientation is or should be materialism.

Unfortunately there did not emerge an impression of several discrete, competing or complementary theoretical schools. Rather, it seemed we shared no common understanding of the general need for or uses of explicit theory, let alone which specific theory or theories. Discussion returned again and again to extreme particularism for efforts to treat concepts such as energy flow, causal relationships and cultural dynamics. "Failure" to reach a consensus about research designs and strategies was predictable, probably desirable and certainly understandable, but consensus should have been possible on the nature and importance of these logical prerequisites to productive research. Instead, there was what might be called a "retrenchment" attitude perceivable at the end of the day. A majority of people seemed to endorse a position of atheoretical particularism calling for more fieldwork, better dissemination of data, and a standardized typology in data reporting; the allegedly simple gathering of more data was suggested by some to be a prerequisite to the tasks of research problems, theory, design and strategy selection and development.

Is this a true reflection of the state of historical archaeology or of that segment of it represented in the workshop?

To some degree, at least, the foregoing assessment of the workshop may be accurate without being complete. I would argue that the group's confusion and frustration were quite real or reflected aspects of reality, caused in considerable measure by a long-term trend towards particularism and a lack of attention to the nature and uses of middle and high level theory in much of our work. The workshop may well have been an accurate simulation-drama or microcosm of our profession. The stresses of the group session could be read on the faces of participants as they left, and to some extent the burnt-out feeling many of us experienced may be a product of real dilemmas, not simply of the tedium and toll of a day-long grueling meeting. After all, the subject which we
had such difficulty organizing into an efficient, coherent package is the
subject most of us have chosen as a significant portion of our careers.
If we cannot explain to ourselves what we are doing, what are we doing?
How can we explain it to others? The simplest approach, in the short
run, may seem to be a reversion to extreme particularism, taking comfort
in methodology.

But this is a partially unfair measure of our practice and potential
for several reasons, none having much to do with our subject matter's
worth and content. Fifteen to twenty people (the number and personnel
varied) were thrown together and told they were a "team" responsible for
producing a report by the end of the day. Yet we were strangers—few of
us had even met more than a couple of the others before, let alone worked
together. We came from very different backgrounds. Undergraduate and
graduate students, CRM contract specialists, college professors,
government preservation administrators, prehistorians, classical
archaeologists, historians, demographers, and perhaps other specialists
comprised the "group." (For melodrama, one might even add class, sex,
and regional differentiations.) We had in common our interest in
"historical archaeology," but it was obvious that one could approach that
topic from a number of perspectives. We were somewhat united by shared
techniques, perhaps, but not by common theory or training in theory.
Even riders in a subway car have a potential common goal and technique
for getting there, but they do not necessarily have much more than those
two things in common—and they may have different destinations using the
same transportation technique. Historical archaeologists are on an
analogous track.

To be blunt, historical archaeology has a reputation of something of
a bastard discipline, accepted less than comfortably by the
anthropologists, historians, classicists, and others among whom it traces
its occasionally uneasy parentage. It is seen by many
observers—including some of its practitioners—as capable of little more
than adding footnotes to historical records. (Was this fort square, as
reported? Is it not interesting that some mass-produced shoes of 125
years ago were identical rather than left or right-footed?) Must we
simply test the accuracy of historical documents, or can we add to them
significantly? Can we shed light on culture as well as trivia?

The "direct historical approach" added serious questions about
archaeological interpretations to anthropological archaeology, but by and
large the reverse has not happened reciprocally: the strengths of
prehistoric and historic archaeology have seldom challenged and
invigorated history as much as they should have. Before World War I,
Boas, Gamio and Sterns demonstrated with stratigraphic studies that
history had not recorded the totality of America's past even in barest
outline, but sometimes it seems that in historic archaeology their lesson
has not been absorbed. Our view of the relatively recent past still
tends to be based upon ethnography and documents rather than historical
archaeology and ethnoarchaeology; often-comfortable paradigms are seldom
shaken by the footnotes we are too often content to provide. Yet the
processes of history cry out for the greater explication and
interpretation archaeologists could provide if they capitalized upon
their strengths rather than self-consciously bemoaned their weaknesses.
Good historical archaeology transcends this stereotype. However, there is needed an explicit confrontation of the questions, "What can people usefully learn from the past? How can archaeologists contribute to solving these problems?" Problems must be delineated and ways of solving them devised before we simply "collect more data." Data about what? "Data" do not exist except as constructs of theory and purposeful analytical procedures. The comments of Dinauze elsewhere in this volume need to be absorbed by all Northeastern scholars, but in no area are they more urgently applicable than in historical archaeology. We need to have the refined technical standards we have already achieved honed by the brash Binfordian blasts which challenge us to live up to our potential!

An example in extremis of the dilemma and potential of historical archaeology can be seen in the amazingly popular "King Tut" museum exhibit/phenomenon. A touring Pompeii exhibit is similar. A handful of artifacts with virtually no cultural interpretation has caught the public fancy, but their unprecedented appeal has given the public access not to archaeology but to particularistic trivia. As in some North American historical archaeology, there is little access to culture in these exhibits in the anthropological (as opposed to the fine-arts) sense despite the "colorful Goodies" shown to wonderful advantage. Too often historical archaeology is guilty of the mistake of opting for particulars rather than explanations, forfeiting the advantages of immense public interest in artifacts and particularistic reconstructions which could be capitalized upon to generate excitement about and support for meaningful processual information.

I see no difference between history and prehistory as subjects relevant to the understanding of cultural processes. Other "times" should be part of our comparative cultural data base as much as other ethnographic cultures, but we have more to offer than paleoethnography because we and ethnographers study partially different things. If archaeologists have something to offer the world, it lies in the unique perspective they have upon material culture unfiltered by mental culture biases and native-culture emic perceptions of meaningfulness. I still subscribe to Willey and Phillip's dictum that "archaeology is anthropology or it is nothing," but I would also suggest a slight reversal of this by arguing that anthropology (and history) must have a developmental, evolutionary, and materialist perspective often accessible only through archaeology if it is to be meaningfully predictive. The inferiority complex exhibited by archaeologists who worry that their research is inferior ethnography which can add little to historical records, is dictated by a hesitancy to confront theoretical questions rather than by the supposedly limited potentials of their subject matter and analytical techniques. It is unfortunate but probably typical that the workshop returned repeatedly to the question of whether archaeology can "add anything to history." The question was raised several times as a nervous joke. Written in a far corner of the blackboard as a basic issue too sensitive to be addressed actively, it hung as an accusing pall over the entire proceedings—a spectre haunting other discussion which should have been exorcised decades ago. But as long as historical archaeology deals with historical particulars without confronting theory and the questions of what archaeology can do which history and
ethnography cannot, this doubt will nag the profession as a figurative footnote: "P.S.—we do really know that our enterprise is fairly insignificant." Funding agencies and politicians are not so easily fooled, at least in the long run. If we secretly "know" we have little to offer, we will be found out—deservedly.

We have the technical power "to praise famous men," in James Agee's ironic phrase, illuminating processes of history and seemingly mundane events beyond the purview of history and other disciplines. We can show and interpret the adaptive shifts and continuities up to the present time of literally millions of years of human and infrahuman experience; we can limn trends of culture outside the bounds of written records or even in contradiction of them with our combination of a broader perspective and a different data base. How often do we succeed?

How unique is historical archaeology? Is it a discipline—or more a subject matter translatable as the archaeology of a time period which has a certain amount of written documentation which can often add data to what prehistoric archaeologist routinely study? I would argue the latter, and I would argue the desirability of that perspective. "Holism" is often just a catchphrase, but it need not be. It is the advantage in perspective which historical archaeologists can bring to their partially common subject matter shared with historians, folklorists and other scholars concerned with the past three centuries in North America, four centuries in Latin America, and millennia in much of the Old World. We can and should be inter-disciplinary, not just multi-disciplinary, recognizing, capitalizing upon and explaining the advantages of a holistic perspective integrating (rather than adding together in figuratively separate chapters) fields or topics as varied as history, ethnohistory, prehistory, ethnography, folklore, geology, technology, religion, ecology, demography, forestry, agronomy, climatology, and ideology, among others. In other words, we can be (and often are) anthropologists rather than pigeon-holing disciplinarians. Or we can treat the subjects of different disciplines as rivals and competing viewpoints, thus sacrificing potential strengths, alienating potential allies, and making historical archaeology but one more rather esoteric claimant upon scholarly respectability and popular support already split amongst dozens of narrower, non-holistic fields.

The subject matter of historical archaeology is not unique, and only an ambitious effort to develop productive theory can prove its worth as more than one more footnote to scholarship. The subject matter is almost unlimited, and doing exciting, productive things with it is far from inevitable even though exciting things have already been accomplished. Its success depends upon continuing to develop rigorous theory and beginning to do so where it has not been developed adequately heretofore. To prosper in the long run, it needs to demonstrate better its relevance to contemporary issues and the basic research issues of anthropology, history, and other disciplines. Perhaps the meeting workshop session will contribute to a better understanding among practitioners of these issues. It at least highlighted the challenges.