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The Archaeology of Immateriality

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Running Title: The Archaeology of Immateriality

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Abstract

Despite changes in archaeological theory and practice over the past 40 years, most archaeologists are still not very good at acknowledging that “significance” is context-dependent and non-material. In this paper I present two cases studies from New England where archaeologists collaborated with Native peoples on sites that had significant preservation concerns. I evaluate to what extent these projects were successful in their goal of decolonizing archaeology. I call for a definition of materiality that acknowledges that tangible objects and their intangible contexts and meanings are inextricable, and that values are continuously created and recreated in the present by a variety of memory communities.

Keywords: intangible heritage, collaborative archaeology, indigenous peoples, cultural resources management.

Introduction

The papers in this issue celebrate and articulate the influence of H. Martin Wobst on understandings of materiality and the connections between those understandings and issues of contemporary cultural heritage, especially indigenous archaeology. Wobst’s profound contributions to archaeological theory include his work on social communication and signaling through objects (1977), on objects as products and precedents of human behavior (Wobst 1978:307), on objects as interference (1999), and more generally “what archaeologists are up to and up against,” as he was so often heard to say in his graduate seminars. Despite the

changes in archaeological theory and practice over the past 40 years, most archaeologists are still not very good at acknowledging that the “significance” of an archaeological site (something they are often asked to assess in a cultural resources context) is context-dependent and non-material. There may be a variety of stakeholders or “memory communities” for whom a site might be considered to be significant. And in their attempt to de-colonize archaeology or to give power and control over interpretation to descendent or indigenous communities, archaeologists have still not come to terms with their own place in the telling/preserving/unearthing of history. In this paper I highlight two case studies in order to demonstrate the complexity and difficulty of attempting to de-colonize archaeology (that is, to move beyond Western knowledge systems and methodologies; Atalay 2010). I also attempt to highlight the immateriality—the intangible meanings and values—of cultural heritage.

I take as a basic premise that the goal of ethical archaeological theory and practice should be to redistribute power and authority in the creation and communication of cultural heritage. It is only possible to do this if we move away from the notion of historiographical experts—or what Pannekoek (1998) calls the “heritage priesthood”—as the ultimate authority on historical truths, values, and significance. But to what extent has the tendency for archaeologists to consult or collaborate with Native Americans or other stakeholders contributed to “decolonizing” archaeological practice? In what ways can attempts at engaging stakeholders actually strengthen the colonial power relationships that exist between archaeologists and their “subjects”? I examine two case studies from New England as a means to explore how collaborative praxis can or cannot be used for building decolonizing theory. These two case studies represent my own attempt to engage with Native peoples in conducting archaeology in a site preservation context. While these projects involved other archaeologists and a diverse array of stakeholders (please see

acknowledgements), I hasten to note that the views expressed here reflect only my own.

Lucy Vincent Beach

The Lucy Vincent Beach site is located on the western end of the island of Martha's Vineyard, in the traditional homeland of the Wampanoag Tribe at Gayhead (Aquinnah). The site is on a 40-foot cliff overlooking the ocean and is eroding at a rate of approximately two meters per year (Chilton and Doucette 2002). The project has been discussed more fully elsewhere, so I will only summarize here (Chilton 2006; Chilton and Doucette 2002; Chilton and Hart 2009).

The site was first recorded by the Massachusetts Historical Commission (MHC) in the winter of 1995, when beachcombers encountered human remains on the town beach, and then a tribal member discovered human remains in the cliff face in 1996. In both cases the human remains were salvaged by the MHC, but very little else was known about the site. Early in 1997, I made inquiries with the Aquinnah Tribe, to see if they would be supportive of an archaeological survey and, possibly, a future field school at the site. Because there was no Tribal Historic Preservation Office (THPO) at that time, I dealt almost exclusively with the Aquinnah's Natural Resources Department. Eventually a full proposal was submitted to and approved by the Tribal Council, as well as the Town Board of Selectmen (because the site is located on town land), and the MHC.

We conducted an initial survey in the summer of 1997, followed by archaeological field schools offered through Harvard University in the summers of 1998 and 1999. The overall goal of the field schools was to obtain as much information as we could about the site in order to assist the tribe and the state in their attempts to protect and/or to salvage the site. Each year the Tribal Council, and then the town and state authorities reviewed the proposal. Each year changes

were made to both field and lab methods after receiving feedback from all parties. Some of the changes to our project design included changes in the location of test units (in particular to mitigate against further soil erosion), the articulation of protocols for the discovery of human remains, an agreement on the disposition of artifacts and human remains, and a protocol for the publicity associated with the excavation.

Over the course of the two field schools, human burials were discovered during the last week of each excavation. In each case the Tribe and the MHC were notified at once and decisions were made about the excavation and later reburials of the remains by the tribe, in conversation with MHC and with our assistance. The few visits to the site by Wampanoag tribal members after the discovery of the burials were emotional, spiritually charged, uncomfortable, and somber, and these interactions set the stage for the rest of our work there.

Since 2001 when we excavated the second burial, both the Tribe and the MHC have taken a monitoring approach to the site. Remains have been excavated only on an emergency basis. We have occasionally been consulted by tribal members about the continued erosion of the site. Changeover in tribal governance and the THPO has meant that some continuity has been lost in our relationships and communications. I think overall I would describe this project as one of consultation rather than collaboration. We were in close communication with tribal members while we were there actively working, but not so much in the interim. The situation was so emotionally and politically charged that I would hardly say that the Tribe *wanted* the work done. It was more that they felt that it needed to be done, and we were there and offering to do it.

Area D Site

Since 2004 the UMass Archaeological field school has been investigating a site that has played an important role in the historical erasure of Native peoples in Deerfield, Massachusetts. The collaborative archaeology project associated with this site was the subject of Siobhan Hart's dissertation (2009), and the site and collaborative project have been discussed elsewhere (Hart 2011; Chilton and Hart 2009; Chilton and Hart 2008). Historic records indicate that the Pocumtuck, the Native peoples who lived in and around what is today Deerfield, constructed a fort in the 1640s. Subsequent colonial accounts relate that the Mohawk attacked the Pocumtuck Fort in 1665. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century historians point to this raid as the primary reason that the area was "empty" of Native peoples when the English came to establish a settlement the following year.

This site was the subject of four field schools between 2004-2011, as part of the Pocumtuck Fort Archaeology Project directed by Siobhan Hart. Deerfield, and the middle Connecticut River Valley in general, is an area where there are no resident federally recognized tribes, tribally held lands, or sole descendant community. Several regional tribes trace ancestry to the Pocumtuck people. Non-descendant communities of property owners and local residents also have interests in interpretations of the past and stewardship in the present. Therefore, an approach that engages all of these stakeholders in the planning, excavation, interpretation, and stewardship for this site was, and continues to be crucial (Hart 2009).

Over the years we have worked with stakeholder groups that include representatives of descendant communities through the Massachusetts Commission on Indian Affairs (MCIA), landowners, avocational archaeologists, historians, and local institutions such as Historic Deerfield, Inc. Our goal from the start has been to protect and preserve the Pocumtuck Fort,

while using what we learn from the archeology and collaboration to combat the historical erasure of New England Native peoples, past and present.

The MCIA has been a particularly important stakeholder throughout this project. The Commission was created by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts in 1974 to assist Native American individuals and groups in their relationship with state and local government agencies and to advise the Commonwealth in matters pertaining to Native Americans. Representatives of the MCIA reviewed and commented on project proposals, visited the site before, during, and after fieldwork. We made it clear from the start that we would not proceed with the project without their support, and they in turn acknowledged their desire to (1) learn more about 17th cultural transformations for Native peoples in western Massachusetts, and (2) document the site for the longer term purpose of preservation and stewardship.

Thus far we have tested just about 2% of this 2-acre site. We have uncovered evidence of intensive, and most likely seasonal domestic use of the site from the late 16th to early 17th centuries. We are still working on the laboratory analysis and interpretation of the site, and we are working towards a long-term preservation plan.

De-Colonizing Archaeology

So how do we measure the relative success or failure of these attempts in collaboration and consultation with respect to the goal of de-colonizing archaeology? Categories or labels such as decolonizing theory and indigenous archaeology have the potential to create a rather binary understanding of relationships among various stakeholders: the colonized and the colonizers, the indigenous and the foreigners. Early on I would say that for both of these projects we tended to

think of our stakeholders as either native or non-native. Native peoples were our clear priority in terms of stakeholder communications because of the team's commitment to social justice, but these values or priorities were often couched to the non-Native stakeholders as protection of the archaeological record itself. In this sense Native peoples were our (often silent) "ethical client" (Blakey 2007). We often privileged the Native voice in ways that I fear sometimes had an alienating effect on other stakeholders, some of whom also lack access to power and authority in the present and who feel that their heritage has also been erased or at least undervalued. For the Deerfield site, I am thinking here of farmers, avocational archaeologists (many of whom are veterans), and landowners of largely eastern European or Irish descent whose ancestors came to Massachusetts in the 19th and early 20th C, often not completely by choice.

As the stakeholder meetings progressed in Deerfield, I found that our somewhat post-processual, multi-vocal approach to collaboration did not allow us to adequately break through the complex power relations. The complex power relations were exacerbated by the fact that in this case the land is owned by an elite, private boy's school. The fact that the goal of the project was largely to protect the site from development or other destruction meant that we needed to try to maintain—at least to some degree—our position as historiographical experts. Thus, our position as stakeholders as well as project directors did not allow us to—to my taste—break through the existing colonial power relationships. I fear that while we may have effectively decolonized archaeology in our own thinking and in our teaching, we were not as effective in that vein in terms of our non-academic stakeholders.

The most vocal and frequent contacts were from avocational archaeologists, landowners, and local historical societies members. With Native Americans as our fairly quiet ethical client, my sense is that our local stakeholders felt we were not meeting *their* heritage needs. While that

does not necessarily mean we failed, I do not think we were all that successful in brokering a new perspective on Native American heritage in Deerfield, which was in retrospect our implicit goal. As Siobhan Hart (2009:160-161) put it

I conceived of all stakeholders having an equal say in heritage matters and in the collective work that we would pursue. This changed when I saw that the stakeholders who had significant social, political, and economic power outside of the heritage community assumed that they had as much within it, and as a result, paid little attention to those who did not. I realized that we were simply reproducing the same power structure that existed in other projects and it became clear that *power really matters in heritage work*. As a result, I shifted my conception of the poly-communal model so that redistributing power is at the core.

Siobhan and I continue grapple with issues of power and memory as we work on this project in Deerfield.

For the site on Martha's Vineyard, while the stakeholders were different, the relationships among them were remarkably similar. Like Deerfield, local landowners and non-tribal institutions generally fail to recognize the legitimacy and sovereignty of Native American Tribes. The local residents and town officials were more disturbed by the fact that the archaeologists might harm the viewscape than they were about the fact that an ancient cemetery and sacred site was eroding and being looted. Like Area D, we were only allowed legally to conduct archaeology with landowner permission, in this case a private organization that permanently leases to the town a very exclusive beach. Similar to Area D, we needed to maintain our position as experts in the eyes of the town and state in order to be able to conduct work at the site. But I do not think that the archaeology itself was able to, in any serious way, challenge the colonial

relationships among native and non-native peoples on Martha's Vineyard. If anything, having archaeology out in the open—right there on the beach, in the press, presented in the town hall—may have proven to be a wedge between the native and non-native residents on the Island. There is also a long and politically charged relationship between relatively wealthy landowners on the island and the Aquinnah Tribe. The Aquinnah Tribe sought federal recognition for many years, and there is a lingering fear among non-Native people on the island that the Tribe is interested in making land claims and building casinos.

To conclude, I would like to suggest that decolonizing archaeology not start with archaeology or an archaeological site at all. As Atalay (2007) puts it: “the discipline of archaeology was built around and relies upon Western knowledge systems and methodologies, and its practice has a strongly colonial history.” It tends to privilege “the material, scientific, observable world over the spiritual, experiential, and unquantifiable aspects of archaeological sites, ancient peoples, and artifacts” (Atalay 2007). Thus, I would argue that when we start from the sites, the artifacts, the purely tangible forms of heritage, then no matter how much collaboration or consultation there is, we are still not really decolonizing our relationships at all. We have not necessarily changed the position of ancient Native Americans as subject and the heritage professional as actor.

One way forward is to turn to a definition of materiality that acknowledges that tangible and intangible heritage are inextricable, and meanings and values are continuously created and recreated in the present by a variety of stakeholders. This gets us back to Wobst's notion of artifacts as products and precedents of behavior (1978), which underlies his notion of style in archaeology (1977). Perhaps we need to think about decolonizing *heritage* more than decolonizing *archaeology*, since archaeology is really just one way of exploring, interpreting,

and telling the past. Archaeologists learn in their training “the site” is sacred, that it must be protected, recorded, studied, and curated in perpetuity—as Avrami et al. (2000) put it “the benefits of cultural heritage have been taken as a matter of faith.” Smith and Wobst (2005:5) rightly point out that archaeologists often take it as self-evident that archaeology is useful, but perhaps the appropriate response in some situations is to NOT do archaeology at all. I am not suggesting that we abandon archaeology—only that we acknowledge that things such as significance, values, and relevance (even ethics) can themselves be a continuation of the colonial legacy. In the case of Lucy Vincent Beach, while my own inclination was to invoke archaeology as the answer to a significant archaeological site eroding into the ocean, in the end the site has continued to erode at a steady rate—mostly without the interference of archaeologists. In this case the value of quietly allowing the site to be taken by the ocean is apparently, to the Tribe, more important than the preservation of the artifacts or recording of information about the site. In this sense an approach to sites as subjects of cultural resource “management” fails to get at the complexities of sometimes-painful histories and long legacies of colonial approaches by archaeologists.

Conclusion

To conclude, I am very aware of the effect that Martin Wobst has had on my thinking as I highlight a definition of materiality that highlights the intangibility of values, interpretations, and ethics. In fact, I think it might be time to call for the central role of immateriality studies: the study of the ever-changing intangible meanings and values associated with tangible objects and sites. Archaeology as a discipline has long focused on “material

culture” and in recent decades most archaeologists take a management perspective on the archaeological record—that is towards sites and artifacts. The UNESCO World Heritage Convention (1972) emphasized the preservation of properties, with an emphasis on sites that were considered to be of “universal value.” Over time a growing dissatisfaction with the focus on material sites and a lack of connection to contemporary cultural traditions prompted the UNSECO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003). This distinction between “tangible” and “intangible” heritage has made its way into the archaeological lexicon.

However, in many ways the distinction between tangible and intangible heritage is a false one, because of course judgments of “universal value” are made on the basis of intangible cultural values or power relationships in the present. Conversely, intangible heritage will always have intangible or material products and precedents, *à la* Wobst (1977). The notion of safeguarding intangible heritage—something that by its very definition is in a state of constant change—is an awkward one for a UNESCO convention, and it has stirred a lot of health discussion and debate internationally. Certainly archaeology—and anthropological archaeology in particular—has much to contribute in this discussion. In the end, immateriality is not something you can preserve—as in a site or behind glass in a museum—but it is something you can respect, attempt to de-colonize, safeguard, and, of course, try to understand in contemporary historical and cultural context.

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