

Archaeology without Boundaries

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ABSTRACT

Authors in this issue give examples of archaeologists learning to see the socio-political and economic frames of their research and show how we can begin to expand the limits of our comprehension of heritage.

Resumen: En esta edición los autores proporcionan ejemplos de arqueólogos que aprenden a ver los marcos sociopolíticos y económicos de su investigación y muestran como podemos empezar a ampliar los límites de nuestra comprensión del patrimonio.

Résumé: Les auteurs de ce numéro donnent des exemples d'archéologues qui apprennent à percevoir les cadres sociopolitique et économique de leur recherche et montrent comment on peut élargir les limites de notre compréhension du patrimoine.

“The sad truth is that most evil is done by people who never make up their minds to be good or evil.” Hannah Arendt

When I was in graduate school at the University of Arizona I had the tremendous pleasure and privilege of working with William (Bill) Rathje of “garbology” fame. Bill is one of the most intellectually energetic and exciting people I have ever met. He was full of new ideas and had an original perspective on every issue. Like all my professors at Arizona, he was a New Archaeologist, in fact he was one of the founders of the movement, but he was different in a way that it has taken me years to understand and appreciate.

The project we worked on together was a re-assessment of the data he had used for his Harvard dissertation. For his PhD he had culled everything he could find about ancient Maya burial practices from archaeological site reports. He was trying to see if there was a consistent patterned correlation between social status and treatment of the dead, so he recorded

grave goods and tomb types and orientation of the body along with time period and sex if possible. Out of about 1000 burials from sites all over the Maya Lowlands only about 100 had been sexed and reported in site reports by 1984.

Bill had not been interested in sex or gender differences for his dissertation, but he thought his data might be reanalyzed to shed light on ancient Maya ideas about men and women. It was not really my area of interest, but the data were just lying there on punch cards (very high tech in those days) so I let him convince me to look for gender related patterns. There were none, which is interesting in itself, since other types of distinction were patterned and easy to spot, and we wrote a paper together which I did a dismal job of presenting at my first professional meeting.

Bill was already deep into his garbage research being interviewed by Johnny Carson on the *Tonight Show* and showing up on the celebrity page of *Parade Magazine*. My fellow grad students and I teased him for being trendy and swayed by public attention rather than the stark objectivity of “pure science”. I can encapsulate the error of our attitude in an incident I will remember until my dying day.

One afternoon when I was returning a pile of data to Bill’s office (punch cards are heavy) Bill invited me to sit down for a minute. He had an idea he thought might interest me. He said he thought I should consider making gender the subject of my dissertation, that I could go beyond the limitations of the inadequate data set then available on the ancient Maya and turn the issue into “a soapbox”—I think he actually used that word, but my memory may be faulty. He had just been reading Margaret Conkey and Janet Spector and he was excited about what he saw as the “next big thing”. Basically he was suggesting that I become an activist to promote a feminist approach to doing archaeology and to understanding the past.

I was incensed. Without any hesitation I responded that such a “bias” was not good for “science” (and archaeology was definitely a very positivist science to me at the time) and not good for feminism. If there were feminist lessons to be had from the past, they would be revealed as a by-product of objective research into important issues like the origin of agriculture and the rise of cities.

What an idiot I was! Even then I knew data would never speak unless they were tortured by theory; I even realized that no human perception can be without bias. But it took me years to realize that the best way to cope with bias is to make it visible, and that in some cases an overt bias can be a virtue. And it took even longer for me to realize that (with apologies to my processualist ancestors) “archaeology is *activism* or it is nothing”.

Very shortly thereafter, many archaeologists realized (with a little help from Alison Wylie) that the biases built into archaeological practice and naturalized in archaeological interpretation were not going to be visible unless we explicitly pointed them out, that admonishing each other to “be objective” was not succeeding. Getting women down in the trenches with men and collecting more and more “scientific data” was not going to cause the sexist scales to fall from everyone’s eyes.

It took me 20 years to understand how right Bill Rathje was to hop on to that soapbox, which I am pleased to say is rather crowded these days. And I am also pleased to say that my colleagues have found many ways to do feminist archaeology. So for example, we looked hard at “man the tool maker” and “man the hunter” models of the human past and found that the assumptions were bad. But this is not a triumph for feminism, it’s a triumph for archaeology. Because we looked hard at the sexist assumptions, we got a better understanding of the past.

The articles in this volume are part of the legacy of feminist science. All of them look at the borders of archaeology; these authors have found that by crossing into new territory, the existing boundaries of the archaeologist’s perspective become visible. So Onuki strayed away from traditional research to be respectful and ultimately helpful to people where he was living and working in Peru, and in so doing felt the limitations of standard methods of research and changed the course of his career and the lives and work of countless others. Korstanje and Azcárate provide the perspective of “local archaeologists” working on an international team, showing how such large scale projects may sacrifice consensus in order to reach global goals, when the sustainability they seek rests precisely on the local agreements and collaborations they have failed to realize.

Gorman’s thoughtful paper shows how “the very conception of empty land is an artifact of colonial processes” and by giving historical context to places treated as empty space she shows how a focus on the past distracts from the heavily populated political present. Mortensen reviews borders that shape the social conditions of archaeology at the Maya site of Copán in western Honduras to reveal structural tensions in the overlapping registers of academia, public history and popular culture.

Kersel describes how borders among Israel, Jordan, and Palestine actually operate to promote trade in looted artifacts through reification of notions of nationalism, the forces of globalism, conflicting preservation and management plans, colonialism, and long-entrenched traditional practices.

The issue closes with a paper by the Najjars who discuss the role of archaeologists as public intellectuals in Brazil, with implications for archaeologists everywhere. Originally scheduled to appear in the issue devoted to the revolutionary potential of teaching archaeology, the Najjars paper

provides a suitable conclusion to the concept of archaeologists without borders, as it delves into what it means to do archaeology, not as a Brazilian or as a scholar and scientists or as an educator, but as a citizen of a global community with ties to the past but responsibilities to the present and future. Finding the boundaries that hem in our perceptions and consequently our research agendas and our potential to make a positive impact on the world while we do archaeology well is what this issue of archaeologies is about: the conscious decision to do good.