

## Theory and Historical Archaeology

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Historical archaeology is a relatively new specialty within the realm of archaeology, and is still struggling to fulfill its full potential as a credible field of study. For many of its formative years, historical archaeology was termed “atheoretical,” simply a presentation of historical facts developed by documentary research based upon the archaeological record (Johnson 1999: 150; Orser 1996: 12). However, as the field has grown and developed, historical archaeologists are becoming more open to the idea of possessing their own theoretical perspectives and assumptions without having to rely on other subfields of archaeology for acceptance or shared theories (Wilkie 2005: 338). This paper is a broad survey of the development of historical archaeologists’ ideas regarding the birth and development of the field, as well as the purpose, the theory, and the scope of historical archaeology.

In the 1930s, historical archaeology was born. At the time it was considered a triumph primarily for the field of history. Its birth came about when the federal government developed an interest in the conservation of national historic sites in the United States. Soon the government passed a series of legislative acts requiring a degree of expertise in both excavation and interpretation of artifacts that were to be collected during archaeological investigations at historical sites; this was done in order to provide the best opportunity for success in preserving the nation’s history (Little 2007: 24-25; Orser 2001: 622). This mandatory level of expertise also allowed for more efficient excavations. The premise was that someone trained in both fields—history and archaeology—would be better equipped to determine where sites were most and least likely to be found and also to understand the functions of the exposed sites or features when excavating within their realm of knowledge (Hume 1968: 17).

Following the acts of legislation enacted by the government, the field of historical archaeology grew increasingly popular. However, at the same time a battle between the fields of history and archaeology erupted (Orser 1996: 11). Practitioners were experiencing a sort of identity crisis: historians were digging and archaeologists were reading—it was all very traumatic (Johnson 1999: 154). In addition, prehistoric archaeology balked at the emergence of historical archaeology, deeming the efforts and abilities of this new field unscientific and trivial, confusing and obscuring the definition and focus of historical archaeology. New questions emerged: when exactly does “history” delineate from “prehistory,” and what does a historical archaeologist study in contrast to a prehistoric archaeologist? This confusion among the ranks of those practicing historical archaeology led to the period of atheoretical study (Orser 1996: 11). The dynamics of the history-archaeology debate and the confusion concerning the definition and purpose of historical archaeology led to the theoretical perspectives that formulate the nucleus of historical archaeological theory today. However, the very spirit of the field seeks to encourage nonconformity and new ideas (Orser 2001: 625).

First, what is the definition of historical archaeology? In short, historical archaeology is the efficient utilization of all possible remains of material culture to reconstruct and better understand how the modern world developed into its present state. As Little (2007: 20, 59) explains, material culture used in this context refers to

...all things that are somehow influenced by the culture that created them. Therefore it not only includes objects excavated from below ground, but also written and printed documents, artwork, gardens, landscapes, the built environment of structures and streets, and objects that survive in public and private collections.

These nuances of material culture are explored with the goal of establishing a dialogue between the past and present that will help in planning “a considered and intentional future” (Little 2007: 20, 59; Orser 2008: 184).

Now that we know how it is defined in general terms, we can look at what historical archaeology is in terms of practice. Orser (1996) presents three potential approaches to historical archaeology: “a study of a time period,” “a research method,” or “a study of the modern world” (Orser 1996: 23). Viewing historical archaeology as the study of a time period would result in the study of all time from the end of “prehistory” to the present. History’s starting place within the realm of historical archaeology could be defined by multiple events: the emergence of written records or the spread of Europe—about 1492. As a research method, historical archaeology would focus on preparing for archaeological excavation by intensive study of texts and documents until sufficient familiarity or expertise is achieved (Hume 1968: 24). The use of historical archaeology as the study of the modern world is a multidisciplinary, holistic look at the spread of European influence—beginning in the fifteenth century—and the social, economic, political and cognitive evolution that has resulted in what is known as the developed, “modern” world (Johnson 1999: 150; Lightfoot 1995: 199). This approach looks at the spread of European culture, what sparked the spread, and how the spread affected and continues to affect the world on a global scale. This knowledge comes by careful examination of a wide range of material culture brought to light by excavation or research (Little 2007: 14; Orser 1996: 24-26, 2008: 183-184; Wilkie 2005: 340). The majority of historical archaeologists use something similar to this third approach.

Building upon our new knowledge that historical archaeology is the comprehensive study of all possible material culture in the scheme of understanding the modern world, we can examine historical archaeology for itself, its premises and perspectives. There are numerous ways in which a historical archaeologist can apply theory in the practice of his trade. In fact, Andrén (1998) proposed a five-fold multidisciplinary module for historical archaeology, each premise belonging to a specialty or field of study in itself, furthering the interdisciplinary character of historical archaeology.

First, in the field of aesthetics, “historicizing styles” is one component of historical archaeology. This involves acquiring a depth of knowledge in artwork, art pieces, styles and types, which gives the archaeologist the background needed to create new art. Aesthetic historical archaeology places its emphasis on actual material objects rather than on the

documentary resources and enables not only inspiration for new art, but also restoration opportunities and reconstructions (Andrén 1998: 108-110).

Philology and archaeology create a historical archaeology that focuses on textual concepts. The goal is to be able to locate, excavate and translate historic texts from past cultures. In this way the historical archaeologist not only studies the texts to gain knowledge himself/herself, but also makes the text available for the general public. In regard to linguistic aspects, the historical archaeologist is able to use the discovered texts in comparisons and to serve as reference points in the mapping of linguistic chronologies (Andrén 1998: 113-114).

Another concept presented by Andrén (1998) includes the attempt to establish knowledge of artifact histories, accomplished by the use of anthropological and ethnographic means. Also, the study of analogies would be relevant and helpful in archaeological discourse in order to draw conclusions and establish hypotheses (Andrén 1998: 127, 131). Finally, using history in conjunction with material objects—whether a book, a garden or a monument—allows historical archaeology to build upon the knowledge gathered from documentary or material sources to provide a more comprehensive knowledge and better understanding of the past (Andrén 1998: 120-121).

For a large part, the bulk of historical archaeological theory builds upon this last premise—combining history and the study of material objects to create a comprehensive, multidisciplinary wealth of knowledge. The function of this theory is to act as blinders—to help concentrate on the most important bits of information gathered and ignore the irrelevant, to aid in understanding and comprehension of the information as the pieces relate to one another, and finally to help “transform information into knowledge” (Hegmon 2003: 213). To apply “theory” to historical archaeology, we gather information from the archaeological record, documentary, or other material sources. We examine our archaeological findings in the context of information found in documentary sources, then formulate linking arguments or hypotheses to build upon the historical foundation (Orser 2008: 184, 1996: 8-9, 17).

When we can successfully apply theory to historical archaeology, the possibilities are endless. Orser (2001) outlines some of the distinct research opportunities within the reach of a historical archaeologist. Due to the interplay between textual or documentary sources and the archaeological record, historical archaeologists have a rare opportunity to observe the bias or subjectivity of recorded history. In such a way, historical archaeology, while relying heavily on “modern” history, still serves as a critique of the discipline. Capitalism is much studied in this vein along with other ideas of politics and resistance (Orser 2001: 625).

Another important research interest is “trans-temporal study of broad cultural trends and processes” (Orser 2001: 625). This is related to the idea of *longue durée* of the Annales School—study of the long-term processes, such as in geography or climate (Johnson 1999: 151). The researcher should perform these studies on a global level. When executing such investigations, the temporal starting point should be placed at the date of the site being studied, but research should be carried out “bidirectionally”—both back in time and forward in time from the site’s starting point—creating a timeline in context for the site, enabling full understanding of

the changes that had to occur to both create and destroy the site being excavated (Orser 2008: 187).

The third research opportunity outlined involves what is termed as “particularistic” archaeology—when emphasis is placed on a specific place (Orser 2001: 626). Today this is one of the most common forms of research carried out in historical archaeology. Cultural resource management (CRM) is one manifestation of this research—the archaeologist is tasked to excavate a site of some importance or relevance (Orser 2001: 626). However, this form of research has its origin early in the field of historical archaeology. Most other types of archaeology have what is referred to as a “heroic age” and American historical archaeologists felt that the field of historical archaeology needed a heroic age—when sites of great importance should be excavated—to garner goodwill and publicity for the field. The “heroic age” of historical archaeology included excavations of the homes and properties of the elites of United States’ history (Orser 2001: 622).

Historical archaeology has come a long way from being the “stepchild” of archaeological method and theory, though some camps do not yet accept it completely. However, the future of historical archaeology is looking bright. Recent developments in the field have encouraged a more anthropological basis. Already a multidisciplinary field, a strengthened focus on anthropological methods would make historical archaeology the single most diverse, holistic, and cross-cultural approach to the study of the past, its cultures, and its evolution.

With an anthropological approach, historical archaeology could find ways to examine ideas and experiences such as acculturation, spatial use, religion and theories of magic, and much more (Orser 2001: 623). Also, areas of overlap with prehistory would be possible, perhaps leading to the incorporation of a temporal continuum with a deepened understanding of social and cultural evolution. One such area is referred to as “contact archaeology” which studies the impact of European influence on indigenous cultures. Lightfoot (1995) supports this possibility, saying:

Culture contact studies may revitalize holistic anthropological approaches that consider multiple lines of evidence from ethnohistorical accounts, ethnographic observations, linguistic data, native oral traditions, archaeological materials and biological remains (Lightfoot 1995: 199).

Historical archaeology is proving to be an exciting and increasingly popular field of work and study. Despite getting off to a rough start in the 1930s, historical archaeology has managed to reconcile the two disciplines of history and archaeology to form a framework of theoretical perspectives carried out by a workforce of knowledgeable and expert historians and archaeologists. The scope of historical archaeology encompasses the study of the modern world and its development, beginning in the fifteenth century with the spread of European influence. Several specializations within the field of historical archaeology have emerged. The most widely accepted are those that relate to American colonization, Americanist archaeology, and the more specialized focus incorporating Marxist thought, Marxist archaeology. In general, the basis of historical archaeological theory relies on the incorporation of material culture from archaeological sources with historical accounts and material resources to form a comprehensive,

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multidisciplinary, historic narrative with laudable temporal depth. With perseverance and continued research, further incorporation of anthropological methods will extend the reach of historical archaeology into unprecedented realms, answer more questions, and provide even more avenues of inquiry into study of the modern world and her history.

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