Public Benefits of Archaeological Research

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The benefits of archaeological research are often not directly accessible to the public because the work is highly technical, and research results are generally published in books and articles written primarily for other archaeologists. Many of the papers in this volume are devoted to examining ways in which research results can be made available to the public more readily and rapidly as well as ways for students and other members of the general public to take part in the research process itself. I applaud such efforts to improve public access to archaeological research. In this chapter, I argue, however, that the public benefits of archaeology depend in a very basic way on the success of archaeology as a research field. If archaeological research does not continue to produce improved understandings of the human past, or if archaeological research loses its scientific and scholarly credibility, the public’s attention to and interest in things archaeological will diminish. At worst, it can erode into an antiquarian interest in artifacts merely because they are old or into seeking occasional titillation from archaeological fantasies of the usual "lost tribes and sunken continents" sort (Wauchope 1962; also see Williams 1991).

There are at least two ways in which research serves as an essential basis for public understanding of the human past and public interest in how that past can be studied. First, archaeology enables the public to confront the actual material evidence of the past—the structures, artifacts, and other remains that have survived through the ages. Archaeological research not only discovers such things but authenticates them and provides a context in which they can be understood. Second, archaeological research produces credible accounts of what happened in the past. It is the principal way of gaining knowledge about the very distant past, and it stands with oral histories and historical scholarship as a source of evidence about more recent times as well.

Authenticating the Things of the Past

The archaeological record consists of those objects, structures, deposits, and other remains and traces that were intentionally or unintentionally created by past cultures and that have survived—sometimes almost miraculously—into the present. An artifact or structure that was made and used by people who lived a thousand years ago can also be part of our lives today. The people of the past are gone, as are the words they spoke and the things they did, but the artifact that helped shape their lives is still here and stands as a direct, physical, tangible link between past and present. This is the value of authenticity—it is only the real things of the past that can provide such direct links between greatly different times because they actually participate in both. Contact with the authentic things of the past can spark in the general public an empathy with the past that enhances reflection on the meaning of history and on the connections between now and then. The public understands this and hence values authenticity.

When I take groups of laypeople to Mesa Verde National Park, they commonly want to know whether a particular wall or building is "real" or whether it has been restored. Most of the time, I know enough about the structure in question to be able to point out what has been done to stabilize or protect it and also to show them that much of what they are viewing is unequivocally original. Knowing that they are looking at the original fabric of an ancient building makes a difference in how they experience it. This is not to say that accurate restorations or "virtual" representations cannot be effective in helping visitors learn about and reflect on the past. It is just that authenticity is in a class by itself.

Research plays a vital role in authenticating the things of the past. First, whether something really is old and whether it comes from a particular time and place in the past are central questions. Research by archaeologists, often in conjunction with practitioners from other disciplines, can provide this kind of information. The visitor to a site in Britain may recognize a stone wall as a stone wall, but it makes a huge difference for that person to know that the wall was once part of a Roman fort in the third century A.D. And for many kinds of archaeological material, making a connection with the past depends almost entirely on the associated information acquired through research. The earliest stone tools made by human ancestors are
mere lumps of rough stone from which a few flakes have been struck. But knowing that they are in fact over two million years old and that they represent the beginning stages of humanity's conquest of the environment through technology makes quite a difference in the viewer's experience. That kind of authenticating information is seldom self-evident to the viewer of an archaeological artifact or structure; conveying it depends on the credibility of the associated research.

Second, conserving the authentic surviving archaeological remains of the past depends on increasingly sophisticated research into the nature of various materials and on technologies developed in association with materials research. Much of this research and technology development is not strictly archaeological, but it often requires input from archaeological research regarding the condition of artifacts or structures when they were found and how they might have looked originally.

Third, while restorations, reproductions, and virtual representations of the things of the past are not a substitute for authenticity, they can provide an effective way to help the public "connect" with the past in a tangible way. They will be effective to the extent that people believe them to be credible representations of the original. This credibility can be provided by archaeological research, often supplemented by other types of study. Paradoxically, public confidence in the accuracy of a reproduction seems to be enhanced if there also is confidence that reproductions are labeled for what they are.

Fourth, and most important, research can provide authentication not only in the narrow sense of verifying age and cultural provenance but by establishing connections to a larger historical context. Thus, interpreters can use the appeal of authenticity to promote a truly historical, rather than a narrowly antiquarian, interest on the part of the visitor to a site or museum display. The "things of the past" can serve as a tangible bridge between the visitor's experience and a past world reconstructed from numerous lines of evidence, including but not limited to evidence from the particular artifact, site, or monument that provides a focal point for attention. Relatively few artifacts or sites can be displayed in order to focus public attention, but many aspects of the archaeological record and numerous lines of research can be brought to bear in placing those particular sites or artifacts in larger historical, cultural, and environmental contexts. Developing those larger contexts is the subject of my next set of comments.

Telling Stories about the Past

There are several sources of evidence about the human past, including but not necessarily limited to written texts; oral traditions; the geographic pattern of cultural, linguistic, and genetic traits; and the archaeological record. Archaeology is the only discipline that can offer accounts of what happened in the human past that are based on systematic study of this last type of evidence—the archaeological record. This is a peculiar kind of record and one that archaeologists and affiliated scientists and scholars have only begun to learn how to read. Yet in the relatively short time since formal archaeological studies began, remarkable progress has been made. One need only consider the understandings of the distant human past that were current seventy-five or a hundred years ago compared with those available today.

Having said this, I must admit that constructing credible human histories on the basis of studies of the archaeological record is a daunting task. The strength of archaeological research is that the accounts of the past it provides are anchored in the physical reality of the remains and traces left by real people in a real past. Its weakness is that multiple interpretations of that record are generally possible, and the ambiguity of interpretation increases as one moves away from technology, the economy, and settlement patterns into the more abstract aspects of culture and human cognition. Nevertheless, for much of human history, the archaeological record is the primary or the only record left by the peoples of the past, and the methods of investigation developed by archaeologists are the primary means by which we can begin to understand that record.

As already noted, when members of the public seek an encounter with the past, they often visit sites, parks, monuments, or museums devoted to displaying authentic archaeological remains. In addition, however, there seems to be a never-ending public appetite for classes, lectures, articles, books, films, and video productions devoted to the archaeological history of particular times and places or to particular archaeological questions and issues. These often are not focused on particular artifacts or sites but are the result of assembling archaeological evidence and interpretations from a variety of sources.

Of course, the individuals who make up the public bring to these various encounters with "public archaeology" their own expectations and preconceptions about what the past was like and what various aspects of the archaeological record might mean. Most, however, are also receptive to being exposed to new information and perspectives based on the work and
insights of others. Hence most serious attempts to display archaeological artifacts and sites, or to present information about particular archaeological topics, rely on a broad base of information and perspectives to establish contexts. This base necessarily includes research in archaeology, history, and related fields and is increasingly likely to incorporate traditional interpretations from Native Americans or members of other ethnic groups with connections to the archaeological material being interpreted. The goal of interpretation becomes persuading members of the public to consider these broader perspectives as they pursue their interests in the past. The stories about the past that archaeologists tell based on their research not only help enrich the public's encounters with the authentic things of the past but can become a public interest in and of themselves.

Archaeological research is of necessity a contentious and dynamic endeavor. Hence the stories of the past that emerge from it change as new evidence and ideas are introduced. Consensus among researchers about particular issues is often difficult to achieve or is short lived when it does emerge. The dynamic character of archaeological research has the potential to help make archaeology more interesting to the public. New findings, new ideas, and new controversies based in research can reinvigorate and renew public interpretation in museums and parks, in the classroom, and in media treatments of archaeological materials, questions, and issues. The process of seeking knowledge through research can be as interesting as the provisional stories that result from that process. Through immersion in the research process—either as spectators or as volunteer participants—members of the public can gain a deeper, more reflective, and often more skeptical understanding of how accounts of the past are constructed through study of the archaeological record.

If interpreters of archaeology make poor or clumsy use of the dynamic and contentious aspects of research, however, the public may be left with little more than confusion—or with the notion that because archaeologists disagree about some things, “anything goes” in interpreting the archaeological record. The latest New Age theory may thus gain the same standing as interpretation anchored in systematic study of physical evidence from the archaeological record. Alternatively, public interpretation of archaeology may display a “research lag”—that is, it may be based on research results abandoned or modified years or decades earlier. Such lags are sure indicators of poor communication between researchers and those engaged in public interpretation. Stagnant interpretations in archaeological parks, museums, and media treatments contribute to the false perception that the archaeological past is a known quantity and that there is no room for further questioning or research.

The interface between archaeological research and public encounters with archaeology is thus an important and often complex one. Research archaeologists are sometimes directly involved in making archaeology accessible to the public, through roles as lecturers, popular writers, exhibit designers, and so forth. But for the most part, the interface between research archaeologists and the public is occupied by specialists in interpretation—journalists, television producers, museum exhibitors, schoolteachers, park interpreters, etc. There is much work to be done to improve the amount, kind, and quality of interaction between research archaeologists and these various kinds of interpretive specialists. Much is in fact being done to improve this interface—for example, the Public Education Committee of the Society for American Archaeology has developed a number of effective programs for kindergarten through twelfth grade teachers, and the SAA Media Relations Committee works to bring research archaeologists together with members of the press.

This is not the place for a lengthy discourse on ways to strengthen the interface between researchers and interpretive specialists. I offer just three comments. First, research archaeologists need to understand that they can get help in making their research results more accessible to the general public. Some researchers are good at communicating directly with the public, and more power to them. But the primary job of a researcher is to put his or her specialized knowledge and experience to good use in learning about the past through systematic study of the archaeological record. On the other hand, there are numerous professional specialists in various interpretive fields who make a living by helping laypeople understand what is happening in technical areas, including archaeology. By spending relatively brief amounts of time with professional writers, video producers, educators, or the like, researchers can greatly multiply their ability to disseminate research results to the general public.

Second, the profession of archaeology must assign greater credit and status to successful efforts by archaeological researchers to engage with the general public, whether directly or by collaborating with interpretive specialists. It is ultimately the members of the general public who pay the bill for archaeological research. As our part of the bargain, archaeologists must not only do a good job of learning from the archaeological record; we must take at least part of the responsibility for ensuring that significant research results become available to the public. In doing so, research ar-
chaologists must take care to focus on the aspects of their work that have general—as opposed to narrowly technical—relevance. And we must be prepared to explain the importance and relevance of our results in general terms, either to members of the public directly or to professional interpreters. (This exercise in itself may have healthy consequences for the archaeologist’s decisions regarding what topics are important in future research.)

Finally, research archaeologists need to do a better job of helping the public (or the interpreters with whom they work) understand the research process. Likewise, interpretive specialists who take on archaeological topics also need to educate themselves about how research gets done. Lack of good communication about the nature of research often results in missed opportunities to provide the public with a deeper understanding of what archaeologists have learned and how that knowledge has been obtained.

For example, popular accounts often overemphasize unresolved controversies or mysteries left by archaeological questions that remain unanswered. On the first point, it is too little recognized that controversy is an essential part of the research process—not evidence of its failure. Like other scientifically oriented inquiries, archaeology has as its driving force the attempt to replace existing interpretations with new ones that better account for the available evidence or that reflect new evidence. As part of that process, the evidence itself may be questioned, as may the interpretive models and the arguments that link the evidence with the models. Eventually, some evidence and interpretations come to be accepted by the relevant community of researchers, and some are discarded. But that often fragile consensus then becomes the target for the next round of questioning and revision. It is a messy process but one that works better than any of the alternatives. It would be good to see more public discussions of archaeological research that show how controversy can productively focus and drive inquiry, rather than presenting it as some kind of anomalous breakdown in a presumably monolithic consensus of experts.

The other point—the emphasis on what remains mysterious instead of on what has been learned—is also related to a lack of understanding of the process of scientific research in general and of archaeological research in particular. Mathematics and logic often permit problems to be definitively solved, and religious faith is said to induce certainty, but empirical research of the sort that archaeologists do seldom results in the final, unconditional resolution of questions. Instead, conclusions are always provisional and ordinarily probabilistic, based on the best evidence to date and the best ideas thought up so far as to what that evidence might mean. In some fields of physical science, law-like certainties can be assigned to a few relationships among real-world phenomena. In truly complex areas such as ecology and human history, however, the best we can ordinarily do is to recognize some of the recurring processes that account for an essentially endless variety of outcomes, and to infer how a particular outcome came about, in terms of the probabilistic effects of both events and processes. Despite these limitations, the application of scientific modes of inquiry to empirical questions has resulted in an enormous expansion of knowledge about how aspects of the world work and about how they got to be the way they are today. The field of archaeology is no exception.

Therefore, to say that some historical problem has not been “solved” in some definitive way, and therefore remains a “mystery,” sets up a false dichotomy between “answered” and “unanswered” questions and ensures that most of the really interesting issues will be glossed over or misunderstood. In fact, our understanding of most historical problems resides in the very large middle ground—where some aspects of the question are well understood, some are partially understood, and some remain intractable.

For example, the question of why there was a series of rapid, large-scale migrations of Pueblo peoples out of the Four Corners area of the southwestern United States in the late 1200s has not been “solved” in some simple, ultimate, final-cause way, and it probably never will be. This is a typically large, complex historical issue, in that the migrations must have involved decisions made by thousands of people from many culturally variable communities during several decades in an environmentally complex area covering thousands of square miles. Because of an enormous amount of archaeological and paleoenvironmental research, we now know a tremendous amount about how this demographic and cultural change happened, and we can eliminate a number of the plausible hypotheses about various aspects of why it happened. Chances are good that further study of the archaeological and paleoenvironmental record, as well as of the oral histories of present-day Pueblo people, will continue to improve our understanding of this interesting and historically important event. But there is unlikely ever to be a smoking gun—a single piece of definitive evidence pointing to a single “culprit” that “caused” the migrations.

If, as a result, we continue to treat this problem as a mystery because it has not been conclusively resolved to the satisfaction of all researchers, we are implicitly adopting simplistic and unrealistic models of historical causation and explanation. If this kind of thinking underlies public interpretation of research on complex phenomena, it will continue to inhibit public
engagement with what has in fact been learned. It will also inhibit intelligent reflection on complex historical processes—both those that took place in the past and those even less well understood ones that are affecting our lives today.

In conclusion, the temporal scale and physical reality of the archaeological record forces us to recognize that our current lives are linked with the lives of others both past and present, as part of a deep and wide river of human experience moving through time. The archaeological record is made up of real things left by real people in a real past. Systematic archaeological study of that record is the primary avenue to gaining an understanding—however imperfect—of much of the human past. The story of the human past, as revealed by archaeological research, is a marvelously complex tale, yet one that returns—often in surprising ways—to a few basic themes. Fantasy and fiction are poor substitutes for the real thing, however dimly that real past might be perceived. Archaeological research is usually a major source, and often the primary source, of the contexts on which the public must rely to arrive at some understanding of particular archaeological sites and artifacts or, more generally, to understand some particular era or episode of the distant past. Hence archaeological research—as well as archaeological things—can and should play essential roles in helping connect us with that deep human history that underlies and can provide perspective on our lives today.

References


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