Historical Archeology Reports: A Plea for a New Direction

Stanley South
University of South Carolina - Columbia, stansouth@sc.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/sciaa_staffpub

Part of the Anthropology Commons

Publication Info
Published in The Conference on Historic Site Archaeology Papers 1972, Volume 7, 1974, pages 151-156.
http://www.cas.sc.edu/sciaa/
© 1974 by The South Carolina Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology

This Article is brought to you by the Archaeology and Anthropology, South Carolina Institute of at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty & Staff Publications by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact dillarda@mailbox.sc.edu.
HISTORICAL ARCHEOLOGY REPORTS: A PLEA FOR A NEW DIRECTION

Stanley South

The report emerging from any archeological excavation will reflect the theoretical base upon which the archeologist based his research design, and therefore a discussion of archeological reports necessarily involves a consideration of the theoretical base underlying the research. Archeology is increasingly being called on to provide basic data for the interpretation and development of sites considered important enough to warrant scientific investigation. The sponsors of such projects have a right to expect that the result of archeological work will have at least some relation to the questions for which they need some answers. Thus archeologists have two masters, so to speak, the sponsor of their research, and their scientific responsibility to their profession. The fact that the sponsor may require architectural data for the purpose of reconstruction goals for public interpretation, or that his primary concern is with the temporal period represented by an archeological site for purpose of authentication, need not bind the archeologist and prevent him from formulating a valid set of problem oriented research goals of his own relative to the data that might emerge from the site. He does, however, have an obligation to achieve his own scientific as well as his sponsor's developmental goals, and hopefully produce a report that will be of use to archeologists as well as to his sponsor.

Archeologists should clearly spell out to their sponsors in their research proposals what type of information might be expected to emerge from an excavation of an archeological site. Frequently sponsors are expecting from archeology answers that are not going to result from excavation, and it is the archeologist's responsibility to explain where archeology can contribute to our knowledge of the site and those areas where it is likely to produce little. Often the sponsor is looking for some direct parallel between the historical documentation and the archeological record, and such an expectation is highly unrealistic in many cases.

Because the archeologist must satisfy the demands of his sponsor and his professional responsibility he should not neglect either in his report. This being the case the report should clearly and fully outline the research goals of both the sponsor and the archeologist. This should be followed by a statement of the theoretical base from which the search for these goals will be launched. It should then proceed to explain how these goals were sought through the archeological process, with a synthesis of the nature of the observations made being presented. The data recovered should be presented in the form of a synthesis of the various analyses that were conducted on features, distributions, relationships, artifacts, etc. The cultural-historical integration and interpretation emerging from the synthesis should follow, with any resulting processual explanation in terms of hypothesis and theory being presented in synthesis form. Specific suggestions for further work should be made, as well as recommendations for historic site development if such is planned. In other words, the basic scientific procedure should be followed in report.
writing of goal and hypothesis formation, observation and data collection, analysis, interpretation, and synthesis and explanation of the results, with suggestions for new hypothesis formation, future research needs, and recommendations for the stabilization and interpretation of the archeological remains. With this format the goals of the sponsor of archeological projects, and those demanded of the archeologist by his role as a scientist can be met. This basic outline is summarized as follows:

1. outline of research goals and hypotheses
2. theoretical base from which the archeologist is proceeding
3. outline of the archeological process used to attempt to achieve these goals
4. synthesis of the analyses conducted on the various classes of data
5. cultural-historical integration of the data
6. processual explanation in terms of hypothesis and theory
7. suggestions for further archeological research
8. recommendations for stabilization and interpretative development of the archeological remains

When a sponsor of a project wishes to evaluate an archeological report he can refer to this basic outline and see whether or not the report he has in hand meets these basic minimum requirements. If what he has been presented is primarily a description of postholes, pits and potsherds, then he has good reason to complain of its lack of depth. The comments to follow will focus on a plea for a new direction on the part of historical archeologists to orient their efforts toward the scientific, synthesizing format reflected in the above outline.

The historical archeologist has an increasingly expanding responsibility to inquire beyond the mere validation of an historic site through correlation with documentary evidence; beyond merely listing the presence or absence of artifact types for establishing the temporal position of the site; beyond the revealing of architectural features for the purpose of reconstruction and restoration; beyond exposing ruins for the entertainment of the visiting public to historic sites; and beyond the process of recovery and preservation of relics from the past hoarded into repositories and museums! His view must be as broad as the questions being asked by archeologists, sociologists, anthropologists, ecologists, biologists, archaeo-parasitologists and other scientists who are increasingly turning to historical archeology to reflect some light on their special problems and spheres of interest. However, although archeology is broadening its scope, the primary emphasis will continue to be in the area of material culture where so much must still be explored... (South 1968;1970: 54).

The demonstration of patterning of the material remains from archeological sites, and the integrative synthesis of these data in terms of the explanation of progenital cultural patterns, is the direction historical archeology must take to emerge from the sterility of purely
In historical archeology there is a present emphasis on goals aimed at greater accuracy, authenticity, validity, correlation, personalization, and public interpretation of "historical reality". This emphasis places the focus on history, with archeology acting as a literal handmaiden to the written record. This situation stems from the fact that historical archeology is stimulated and supported by our national historic site preservation-restoration-reconstruction-nostalgia phenomenon. Archeology does make a contribution toward goals dictated by this phenomenon, but these goals are secondary by-products of its primary function, the integrative explication of patterned material remains of culture stemming from human occupation.

The usual emphasis of historical archeology site reports is one of the following:

1. Archeology is used to "fill in" historical documentation.
2. Archeology is used to locate architectural features.
3. Archeology is used to recover artifacts which are then described in great detail, often to no apparent end (psuedo-analysis).
4. Archeology is "correlated" with historical documentation.

Historical archeology site reports seldom rise above one of these levels of presentation, and the reason lies, in this writer's opinion, in the absence of a concentration on the discovery and synthesis of patterned material remains of culture stemming from human occupation. With such a guideline the emphasis must be on synthesis based on detailed analysis. Site reports must be firmly anchored in archeological data, with emphasis on integrative synthesis rather than on the analytical description of data, unless such analysis makes a useful contribution to our knowledge!

Therefore, to conduct an analysis of six gunflints or six projectile points from an archeological site, or an analysis of anything, requires a research hypothesis under which certain attributes are called for in relation to the design. The recording of no more involved an attribute than "feather-edging" on creamware is on the same level as the multi-attribute recording of a complex set of data for the purpose of determining pattern through sophisticated statistical analysis, provided both statements are made within the framework of the postulates and hypotheses of a research design. The meticulous recording of attributes as an exercise contributes nothing new to our knowledge without the explanation for such data-recording within our research design. Thus the illustration of artifacts simply as a matter of record is a useless procedure if better illustrations of the objects have been published elsewhere, since such illustration does not add to our accumulation of knowledge.

In 1955, J. C. Harrington recognized that historic site archeologists had a compulsion to illustrate every object recovered from a site, and unfortunately such is still often the case.
Unfamiliar as he is with the cultural material encountered, the reporter on historic site excavations feels that he must describe and illustrate every object. This procedure was often necessary with his Indian materials, for he had not been privileged to work with ceramic types which could be neatly characterized by such simple phrases as, for example "Wedgwood creamware" or "Lambeth delftware". He is inclined, therefore, to devote unnecessary space in his report to lengthy objective descriptions when a single word or phrase would suffice. In some cases, however, careful descriptions are needed, as of, for example, the products of local craftsmen. Here, as in field methods, the necessary judgment and selectivity can be acquired only from training and experience (Harrington 1955:1127).

Harrington's statement about "training and experience" might lead one to infer that only through experience could you acquire a sufficient grasp of the historic site materials to successfully avoid the description and illustration of masses of artifact data, but this is just not so for the scientific archeologist. With the numerous sources available for research of historic site materials, with illustrated examples of ceramics, glassware, etc., often in color plates, an archeologist with a scientific frame of reference can, through a careful study of attributes, etc., write a cogent synthesis of his data at least as good as the usual descriptive reports, and considerably more useful.

Ivor Noël Hume has recently emphasized the need for archeologists to rid their reports of unnecessary descriptive weight:

...the illustration of a few rim sherds of common 18th-century ceramic forms that are already on record as having been found from southern Australia to northern Canada, contributes virtually nothing—unless they happen to be incorrectly described, and so warn the reader to beware of the whole report. I am not saying that this material should not be recorded or that any detail should be omitted from the final manuscript. But I am saying that a small number of copies of that report, cheaply duplicated, and housed in safe, known repositories, is all that is needed. Much more valuable to fellow archeologists, curators, and social historians, are research studies on specific topics, stemming from excavations and which have something new and useful to say. When money and publishing outlets are scarce, it is these studies that will be of the greatest practical value. (Noel Hume 1973: 7)

The phrase "research studies...which have something new and useful to say" is the critical one for reflecting the attitude that can be used as the basic yardstick for evaluating the contribution made by an archeological report.

In 1955 the field of historical archeology was not ready for Harrington's advice. Only Harrington and a handful of colleagues...
were around to listen, and fewer still have heeded his remarks, as emphasized by Noël Hume's recent reiteration of the same point. However, within a decade, historical archeology will be flooded with young minds bringing to the field the best of theory, statistics, and a scientific base of operation. Hopefully their reports will not be merely descriptions of artifact attributes, but will be within a framework of a research design anchored in a firm theoretical base of scientific analysis and synthesis.

As archeologists we must depend on our archeological tools for our interpretive statements of archeological data, and not resort to the easy expedient of superimposing our historical data onto the archeological record. In our final interpretive statements we do, of course, use both the archeological and the historical data, but we should not use the documented history of the site as an interpretive crutch to prop up our statements purporting to be archeological in nature. If we develop such habits, and then find ourselves in a situation where there is no documentation to lean on, we may well find that our archeological tool kit is empty, or that we do not know how to use the tools we have available with which to make interpretive statements of archeological data. Such a leaning-on-the-arms-of-history approach to historical archeology is rendering a disservice to archeology by not utilizing to the fullest the patterned data it is capable of producing.

There is apparently an assumption in historic site archeology that archeological data must have a direct historical counterpart. There is, of course, nothing wrong with archeological-historical connections, but this is certainly not the primary archeological goal for the historic site archeologist. As archeologists we are dealing primarily with material culture, the patterning in the archeological record reflecting the cultural patterning responsible for that record, with the forces creating that patterning very likely not recognized at all by the individuals or the society from which the patterns emerged. Therefore, archeologists should focus their efforts toward the discovery and explication of patterns of material culture (See Harris 1968: 359, for a statement of this position). The patterning he discovers may well have absolutely no historical counterpart, and indeed mutually exclusive data sets between the historical and archeological documents almost appear to be the rule rather than the exception.

Our appeal here has been to urge historic site archeologists to become more selective in their presentation of their data. This admonition is aimed at the goal of making archeological data from historic sites more useable not only by the sponsors of the excavations, but by historic site archeologists themselves. The presentation of data is always a selective process. We cannot possibly list all the attributes conceivably of use to someone someday, and attempts at this have often led to heights of absurdity that would be laughable if they were not so tragic. This is admirably exemplified by one writer by the measuring in millimeters of the size and thickness of the broken sherds of English ceramics! (Krause 1972: 82).
In our efforts at interpreting patterns of culture let us not engage in pseudo-science mis-directed toward meaninglessly translating a potsherd into a series of mathematically expressed numbers; or pseudo-history attempting to discover archeological equivalents to historical events; or pseudo-archeology involving endless descriptions of artifacts and features to no apparent end. Rather, let us systematize our selectivity, and direct our efforts toward synthesizing patterns of material culture from our archeological data, and in doing so reveal the patterns resulting from cultural activity. Such patterning may well allow us to gain insight into the behavior patterns of the people responsible for the archeological record, and allow us to make explanatory interpretations relating to culture process.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BINFORD, SALLY R. AND LEWIS R. BINFORD

HARRINGTON, JEAN C.

HARRIS, MARVIN

KRAUSE, RICHARD
1972 The Leavenworth Site: Archaeology of an Historic Arikara Community. University of Kansas Publications in Anthropology, Number 3, Lawrence.

NŒL HUME, IVOR

SOUTH, STANLEY

July 4, 1974

156