


EDITED BY STEPHEN W. SILLIMAN

ENGAGING ARCHAEOLOGY

The lower half of the cover features a silhouette of four people working on a hillside. From left to right: a person in a hat pushing a wheelbarrow, a person standing with a tool, a person walking, and a person crouching to dig. The background is a bright, hazy sky, and the foreground is a dark, silhouetted hillside.

25 CASE
STUDIES IN
RESEARCH
PRACTICE

WILEY Blackwell

Engaging Archaeology

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25 Case Studies in Research Practice

Edited by Stephen W. Silliman

WILEY Blackwell

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1

Engaging Archaeology: An Introduction and a Guide

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Introduction

This book is about how archaeologists actually do research. Don't expect the stories to always be clean, pretty, or graceful; but do expect them to be revealing and beneficial. What you are getting here is the real deal, the rare sighting, the "flaws and all" perspective, the backstage pass. The book presents a cadre of mid-career and senior archaeologists reflecting honestly on major projects in their professional lives that collectively span many regions, periods, and issues. As candid and sometimes gritty reflections, these chapters intentionally diverge from the standard story that one usually encounters in professional publications – elegant research projects devoid of the personal and frequently laid out in a smooth linear sequence of theory-method-data-results-conclusion. These chapters are about what things worked, or didn't, in actual archaeological projects. They are about how to engage archaeological research and how to do so in an engaging manner.

Why do the archaeologists featured in this volume want to reveal the often circuitous routes, false starts, bumpy travels, denied funding, and "things they wish they had known" that characterize their projects? Well, some of them probably didn't and likely preferred to keep such complexities to themselves until I pitched this book idea to them. These "reveals" aren't for their own edification, as the rough patches and personal takes don't tend to offer the same glory and intellectual traction as the otherwise cleaned-up journal articles and successful grant applications do. Rather, they are designed to offer real-world insights and tips for those ready to embark on projects, whether advanced undergraduates, graduate students, early-career professionals, and perhaps even veteran researchers looking for a fresh take.

As anyone who has attempted archaeological research – or any research – knows, making it happen in successful and rewarding ways can be a delicate craft and often involves an unpredictable set of events and discoveries that need reining in to create a reasonable story of interpretation. All know the value of "the research design" that sets up the projects, outlines the process, develops expectations, and charts the way; these remain indispensable foundations to archaeological research. Yet, how often do we get to hear how research designs *really* came about and what archaeologists might have done to correct them mid-stream? How did theory, method, region, place, material, politics, and circumstance actually play out in a given project? What is it like for these intersections of life and the real world to inform actual archaeological practice? Admittedly, many who have already undertaken archaeological research know how this tends to go, but those thinking about research for the first time or those already finding themselves overwhelmed in a new or even ongoing project might find a little reassurance, a bit of advice, or a reality-check useful. Welcome to that rough guide.

Archaeological Practice

To conduct research means to draw together a question needing an answer or a problem needing resolution with a conceptual or theoretical framework to give it meaning, a body of literature that informs the issue, a set of methods to gain access (or rather produce) the necessary information, the data themselves, and the analytical links to pull them all together into reasonable interpretations or conclusions. All of these aspects are required in some form for any research, but projects use components at different strengths and have particular entry points.

Equally important, but frequently left out of anything except perhaps lectures or one-on-one discussions with students and colleagues in the field or over drinks, are the personal and political dimensions of research – the passions that lead archaeologists to the regions that they love, the materials they enjoy, the questions that inspire them, and the politics that concern them or that they try to avoid. Remarkable published exceptions can be found in the Atalay *et al.* (2014) volume on activist archaeology, where “engaging archaeology” takes on yet another meaning as “engaged scholarship,” or in the short reflections in the “Special Forum: I Love Archaeology Because...” in the May 2013 issue of *The Archaeological Record*. Archaeologists are frequently archaeologists because something in the process calls to them or satisfies them in a very personal way, and not because they sought a lucrative career and decided archaeology would do the trick compared to other options like accounting or computer science. We know the flaws in that reasoning! Notably, these passions, politics, and personal aspects are not as secondary to the research process as the overly scientific, aseptic take on them would argue. Doing archaeology, or any kind of intellectual inquiry or research endeavor, is very much a human affair in the present, not just an empirical pursuit of a long-gone past.

To engage research, archaeologists mobilize theory, method, and data in innumerable configurations to practice their craft, but understanding those requires a sense of where archaeologists draw their inspiration, why they chose a particular approach, how they frame various project components, and whom they hope to impact with the results. As a consequence, routes into archaeological research are numerous. Some archaeologists and their projects are driven by theory, dedicated to finding the best way to engage a cherished or troublesome model, whereas others are grounded in the development and application of methods that can draw out new data. Some thrive on empirical and physical sciences, some are drawn to evolutionary frameworks, and some find their grounding in the social sciences and humanities. Some have a burning question to answer and will seek whatever data or methods they can to address it; others may have a site or a collection that needs study, and they must figure out what they can learn from available materials. Some work in regions that have inspired them for as long as they can remember, some chose areas of the world that could answer their most exciting research questions, and some developed expertise in geographic regions due to the vagaries of their graduate school experiences. In addition, some seek to acknowledge and often impact the politics of the present, whereas some try to focus mainly on a good-faith rendering of the past.

Similarly, some archaeologists have a real affection for certain kinds of materials (e.g., projectile points, pottery vessels, dirt itself) and can follow them from project to project, and might even have a hobby built around them such as flintknapping or pottery making, while others delve into whatever materials are necessary to produce the desired outcome and might require the incorporation of specialists. Some projects span many years and multiple sites, whereas others may be completed in relatively short order and concern only one site or even only one set of materials (e.g., animal bones, ceramic sherds, lithic objects) recently excavated or long-held in a collection. Some projects lend themselves to multiple articles and a book or two, others might generate just enough information for a thesis or an article, and others still might produce a technical report on file in a state archive read mainly by the occasional professional.

And, finally, some projects require time in the field with extensive survey or excavation, but others are entirely based in laboratories or museum collections.

All of these are valid ways to practice archaeology. Some may have heard the adage from Sir Mortimer Wheeler (1954: 1): “There is no one right way of digging but there are many wrong ways.” The contributions to this book make this point poignantly (and also demonstrate that archaeology is way more than just digging), but thankfully by representing the former rather than the latter half of that maxim. In addition, these various entry points into archaeology should put to rest any concerns that a recent arrival to the joys of archaeology might feel. Are the best archaeologists those who have known their “calling” since they were five years old and enjoyed digging in a sandbox for their lost toys? Are the most successful archaeologists those who love everything about the geographic region in which they work and have felt that affinity for most of their lives? The answer to both of these is no, contrary to what some personal statements written for graduate school applications might lead you to believe. It is easy to look back in our childhoods to find something to presage our future directions because it is even easier to not include in that story all of the things that lead us nowhere close to our careers. You may have stacked up blocks as a child, but didn’t become an engineer, and you likely wrote on someone’s wall with a colored pencil but never became an artist.

How someone reaches archaeology as an educational or professional pursuit remains highly significant, especially for the personal connections and sustainable ambitions, but the time of arrival is not as important as what one does with it upon arrival. The key is to produce high-quality research, both in the process and in the product, and to make that research useful to other archaeologists, descendent communities, the general public, and/or students trying to make their way to becoming archaeologists themselves. This book explores that process with a bit of flair.

Finding and Filling a Gap

For those wanting to understand how archaeologists conduct research and practice their craft and especially for those ready to attempt it themselves in a senior project, a master’s thesis, a PhD dissertation, a major grant proposal, a bid for a contract, or even a post-PhD major new project, few real guides exist. One can read a host of textbooks or more advanced handbooks on research methods to gain a sense of how the techniques work – survey methods, radiocarbon dating, soil analysis, Geographic Information Systems (GIS), petrography, statistics – and when one might apply them (e.g., Banning 2007; Maschner and Chippindale 2005; Sutton and Arkush 2014; see also the “Manuals in Archaeological Method, Theory, and Technique” now published by Springer). Similarly, one can consult a variety of highly-recommended, quality treatments of theory in archaeology and how it is developed and applied (e.g. Bentley, Maschner, and Chippindeale 2009; Cipolla and Harris 2017; Johnson 2010; Praetzellis 2015). These kinds of resources remain indispensable when teaching students (and often reminding ourselves) about method and theory. However, where does a reader, especially an eager student, turn to see how archaeologists link together methods, theories, practices, and passions in a project?

Of course, one can read any major research article and see the cleaned-up narrative of how an idea led to a method, which led to some data that could then feed back to the original issue, but how many of those articles provide insight into how that project *really* worked ... or didn’t? Or how many publications talk about how one actually formulated a doable project from the very beginning? Admittedly, major monographs often, but certainly not consistently, have the page space and some of the honesty necessary to recount how a research endeavor came together, but these are widely dispersed, often costly, and not packaged well for conveying

take-away messages about the research process. Some notable, affordable, and very readable exceptions do exist, though (Newman 2014; Spector 1993).

Otherwise, only two published resources have come close to offering the full picture of research process. First, the only offering similar to what the current volume attempts is *Archaeology: Original Readings in Method and Practice* commissioned by Peregrine *et al.* (2002) at the turn of the millennium. This is still an invaluable resource for undergraduates relatively new to the discipline trying to learn about theories, methods, and issues, but the very expensive book only offers seven case studies and hasn't been updated since the original publication. Second, undergraduate and casual readers could refer to books in the now-defunct (as of 2005) but useful "Case Studies in Archaeology" series, edited by Jeffrey Quilter (e.g., Hayden 1997; Sheets 2005). These offered some important and readable insights, but a student in an archaeology course could never be assigned more than one, or maybe two, of these to provide an example of research process. These case studies also require a bit of commitment to specific projects for even a short book-length treatment. In the end, though, both of these teaching resources outlined here were written more for a relatively novice undergraduate audience and likely haven't served graduate students or even advanced undergraduates when they begin to think about how to do a project of their own.

I have become acutely aware of this missing piece of the archaeological puzzle after almost two decades of teaching and advising undergraduate and graduate students. I have regularly felt disappointed that I couldn't find readings to cover the research process, from inspiration to development through implementation to completion. In the undergraduate archaeological method and theory course I offer, it has been easy enough to teach students about methods for finding, excavating, dating, and analyzing sites and about the historical development of theory to interpret them, but I have wanted something else to anchor those components in real projects by real archaeologists. In addition, I craved these in a language that was accessible, revelatory, and directed not at peers who evaluate published research but rather at the next generation of archaeologists who are trying to figure out where to start and what to do. Original research articles can do the former, but rarely the latter. Similarly, after many years of assisting with and evaluating master's thesis proposals, I began to realize that the same gap in undergraduate education exists in graduate education as well, especially at that moment when students need a project of their own.

Students, in particular, need to hear more about how research was inspired, conceptualized, implemented, altered, analyzed, revised, and disseminated in cases that may mirror some of their own challenges and potentials. One of the biggest difficulties for both advanced undergraduates and beginning graduate students is figuring out how a project even begins, much less how it is carried out and ultimately ends. Some students recognize major concepts or issues that they would like to study, but cannot quite grasp the ways that methods and data might be mobilized to address them. In other words, they can "talk the talk" with the right references and buzzwords, but they often assume that data will just fall into place once they start a laboratory or field project. Other students have a particular artifact category such as ceramics, stone tools, or plant remains, or a specific analytical technique like GIS (Geographic Information Systems), remote sensing, or chemistry that they want to engage, but sometimes need guidance in finding the larger research issue in which to situate those. They tend to think that once they have examined artifacts or quantitative data, they can just inductively build up an interpretation without much theoretical accountability or, worse, that they need not (or cannot) aim for the "bigger questions." Finally, some students are handed a collection from their advisor, or boss in a cultural resource management firm or government agency, or local museum curator to pursue as a project, and they struggle with how to develop a viable research question for the materials. How much do they need to understand the collection to formulate that question, and how