

The Past Less Travelled

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Introduction

Excavating at archaeological sites facilitates our engagement with the past, through both imagination and labor. Archaeology is an exciting and romantic pursuit and excavation is, to a large extent, what makes it fun. Excavation allows us physical encounters with the remnants of antiquity, and archaeologists integrate their efforts to offer interpretations of what might have happened in the past based on what they unearth. These accounts form the building blocks of larger explanations of the past. However, grand narratives often blur the role of the archaeological excavator, and the majority of original discoveries are generally forgotten in succeeding publications.

A fundamental element to archaeological methodology is that archaeologists have a primary interest in “stuff.” Material culture is the basis of archaeological investigation, whether of past human behavior or contemporary meanings. Information derived from material culture is archaeology’s commodity, and excavation is where many material culture encounters take place—this is sometimes construed as the “ultimate act of discovery” in archaeology (Edgeworth 2003). Time spent literally uncovering the past becomes part of the process of archaeological interpretation. Studying the social act of excavation is therefore crucial to understanding how archaeological interpretations form.

Since archaeological knowledge is partially based on encounters with objects during excavation and created in written accounts and other forms of media that provide interpretative representations of excavated sites, excavation practices merit investigation to better understand how archaeological interpretations are formed.¹ My interest in this type of inquiry stems from previous fieldwork that addressed how different members of a Zimbabwean community perceive the rock art in a nearby national park. Most informants referred me to the “experts,” or the archaeological accounts. This led to my questioning of how archaeologists perceive materials in an increasingly reflexive era of archaeology, especially when their accounts continue to remain the most authoritative interpretations of the past. These topics shall be explored using ethnographic examples from an archaeological project I participated in and observed during 2002. My objective in this paper is to analyze how the life-histories approach to archaeological interpretation fares in practice.

A Case Study of the Life-histories Approach

Understanding the experience of archaeological excavation contributes to the questioning of how and why archaeologists make archaeological interpretations. This project is a case study of the life-histories approach, which studies the re-uses and re-appropriations of ancient objects (Holtorf 2002a) at Monte da Igreja, Portugal. The site of Monte da Igreja is a small hill, about 15 km south of Évora in the Alentejo region of southern Portugal, with a megalith passage-grave, presumably built during the Neolithic period and enclosed by other mostly stone and earth structures (Holtorf 2002a:178).



Figure 1: Excavation at Monte da Igreja, Portugal.

In 2000, a small team of archaeologists began surveying and excavating this site using the life-histories approach with the objective of understanding the probable interpretations for the structures. The life-histories archaeological approach focuses on the biographies of particular sites and material culture (see Holtorf 2001a, 2001b, 2002a, 2002b). This approach pays particular attention to the re-uses of material culture and sites through time. For instance, Monte da Igreja is a Neolithic monument, but has been visited and used by past generations for thousands of years, and these re-uses are considered equally important to the monument's original use by Neolithic people. This means that the archaeological investigation is another "use" of this site. An ethnographic study of this approach will observe and reveal part of the

process of examining material culture and sites through their life-histories. The life-histories approach is experimental and an example of a theoretical methodology inspired by postprocessualism. Indeed, my own participation on the site as an ethnographer is complementary to this approach because I document a specific period in the site's life-history.

Since the project's direction has a theoretical emphasis on reflexivity as well as broad aims of comprehending the site in many contexts, the approach is nontraditional. For instance, the life-histories approach is not problem-oriented, but object-oriented. There are no testable questions in this object-oriented approach. Rather, the aim is to make sense of the site through the interpretive processes of survey and excavation (Holtorf 2002a:179). Such an interpretive approach uses specific language and conceptual frames that I will examine. In particular, I notice the divergences between the methodological ideals and what actually takes place.

During the 2002 field season (March 20–April 20) I excavated at Monte da Igreja with twelve others: two German, two English, one Argentine, and five Portuguese. Most people knew the project director, and he turned out to be the central person in this “artificial community.”² The director played a crucial role to this excavation because it is his experimental approach that guides the excavators at work, the majority of who have come to the project with some foreknowledge of the methodology. Only a few had participated in the previous season's excavations and were familiar with the director's expectations. Although the majority of excavators were or had been students of archaeology, they possessed diverse excavation styles probably due to regional training and field experience. My analysis of the social dynamics in the interpretive process at this site represents my own views and I know that other excavators interpreted some issues described in this paper differently.

The life-histories approach to excavation is a different style of excavation that the majority of participants were unfamiliar with. As the director made clear, the project was object-oriented and not problem-oriented. At the site, there is a megalith and subsequent occupation remains, but the idea behind the life-histories approach—not to discriminate against any of the materials—caused excavators to keep all types of material culture. For example, excavators recorded and kept everything from more recent broken pens to antiquated pottery-shards.

Another aspect of the life-histories approach at Monte da Igreja was the concept “many sites,” which is a term used to describe embedded sites of re-use and re-appropriation (Holtorf 2002a:178). For instance, a megalith dominates the site but the excavation is not necessarily related to or directed at excavating the megalith. Instead, the director is interested in the re-uses of the site since it was built. Thus, it is difficult to describe the site as either a Neolithic or Roman site, because the director is interested in all time periods and re-uses. This also makes his focus seem broader. As

he tells the excavators, “our task is to collect it all, somehow.” Instead of looking for very particular things, excavators are looking at everything, as though it *all* matters.

During the project, the director reminded excavators about the experimental nature of the site, alluding to one of the project aims: that our ideas should be bigger than the site. Part of the approach, then, was a certain amount of reflexivity during the process, and the director’s central research questions: “what happened at this site?” and “how can we make sense of what happened?” involved everyone in terms of daily journal writing and decision making throughout the excavation. In fact, excavators were regularly consulted at all times by the director who continually asked what excavators thought something was and what excavators thought they should do next. However, there were conflicts in interpretation and I will analyze these incidents to address how knowledge was formed and formalized in those situations.

Interpretative Encounters

Archaeologists have to agree on certain concepts, though not exclusively and not without contestation. For instance, there is a general agreement that the past is real and that it leaves traces people find. Adrian Praetzelis defines the archaeological record as “the artifacts, layers of soil, structural remains, and everything else that one finds on an archaeological site, which put together, enables us to reconstruct past human behavior” (2000:165). For many, this is a rather acceptable definition. However, the ways in which archaeologists go about understanding the archaeological record and reconstructing the past has a lot to do with their discovery and excavation of it (Edgeworth 1992, 2003; Tilley 1999). It also has to do with the way people construct categories in the mind; archaeologists cannot interpret archaeological data without using categorization and analogy (Wylie 1985, 1994).

Archaeologists believe in the concept of the archaeological record and explain past human activity on the basis of the material traces of that activity, even though the materials archaeologists decide to study and comment on are the materials that they simply happen to find interesting for a variety of theoretical and pragmatic reasons. At Monte da Igreja, where the project’s aim was object-centered, excavators were instructed to call assortments of stones and tiles “structures” and not “walls”, until excavators knew with more certainty what they were. The reason for this approach to daily interpretation of the site was to avoid premature explanation before significant data could lead to possible understandings of its objects. But this proved to be more ideal than actual, as excavators regularly wrote in their diaries that things being uncovered were “walls,” et cetera. Even the director could not escape assigning provisional names to things. In his notes he wrote, “(corner?)”, which shows a bit of hesitation in defining the layout of the stones that are excavated, but also shows that he presupposed a corner before the objects revealed visibly showed one.

He also wrote about things using parentheses, quotes, and question marks, as he had not yet decided on their categories for formal use. For instance, he wrote, "After lunch work continues in Trench Orange where [Mia³] continues not to find the 'wall' in her extension." The "wall" was never formally accepted, but does exist as a possibility. Two days earlier, however, the director wrote, "[Mia] . . . extends the trench a little further west where the 'wall' is," and, "in Trench Orange, [Mia] extends the trench westward to follow the wall(?) further." Although the director wanted to move away from these forms of early categorization, the task challenged him and the excavators to communicate their findings in the interim before a formal analysis.

This is an example of how we conceptually categorize "stuff" based on our experience. Much of this experience stems from learning how to *see* the archaeology. It also shows how metaphor works in archaeology. Through our experience we know that we have to follow walls, so when we see stones that may be part of a wall, our tendency is to follow their direction to see if there are more stones. This shows in our archaeological interpretations, as evidenced in the director's diary. The director used the analogy that there would be a structure near Trench Orange based on what he had found in other trenches nearby. Indeed, even though excavators theoretically should escape from prematurely categorizing and interpreting, they cannot.

At Leskernick, Bender et al. state, "crucial to all these studies has been the understanding that people don't just *think* and *see* things, they experience them physically and emotionally, from a particular point of view" (Bender et al. 1997:149). This comment shows how archaeologists and people relate to landscape, but it can also apply to what we excavate. This is because "all excavation, from the identification of a feature, to the manner in which this feature is recorded, and meaning assigned, involves different levels and types of interpretative debate" (Bender et al. 1997:150). This observation has been made in other ethnographies of archaeology (e.g., Edgeworth 1992, 2003; Gero 1996; Hamilton 1996; Hodder 1997,1999; Yarrow 2003).

At Monte da Igreja there was a debate over the significance of a "feature" in Trench Pink. One excavator (an English undergraduate and first-timer to this excavation) wanted to know what to do with the feature she found near ceramic tile-shards, but the director did not *see* it.⁴ She showed him the different colors in dirt--one dark, one light--and asked, "What *is* archaeology about if it's not about 'unexplainable blobs like this'?" The director said *he* would be doing all post-excavation so what the group keeps as a record has to do with what was significant to him, and the feature was not. The excavator was agitated and suggested that the director might only be concerned about the tiles and stones. He agreed that he was interested in the tiles and the stones because they "look good" on the map images and that she should write about the soil discoloration in the diary, but that it was not worth a picture--though he did finally take one--because it would not show up clearly. He mentioned that his project was pursued with resultant publications in mind. The

excavator, on the other hand, wanted the feature to receive more attention because it was "archaeology" to her.

I interviewed both the director and the excavator after the incident. She told me the "blob" was archaeology: "It's there! You can't just forget about it." She argued for her idea of what archaeology was and what types of objects she found significant. The director wrote in his journal, "[Melanie]'s 'feature' is invisible on the photo but she can sense it when digging out some of the large tiles . . ." The director did acknowledge that Melanie saw and felt a feature. However, he was not convinced, as it was not important for the archaeology he intended to complete at Monte da Igreja. Although interested in material culture from all times, he was less interested in less-tangible "stuff" like features.

The excavator understood that this, as she explained to me, was a "very theoretical site, dug on theoretical grounds," but she was upset because no scientific techniques were employed. She remarked, "[It] doesn't mean you're being any less theoretical if you use these techniques. There's a lot more we could use if we looked at things other than the stones and pottery." She had larger issues with this site, as well, such as "the records we are using no one else will ever use because we are not using contract sites. Recording is a main thing . . . it will mean that his database won't be as successful for other people." Indeed, this is one of the tensions in the Monte da Igreja project, where a person had developed skills and cultural values from other types of excavation and expected them to be present at this site.

One of her biggest concerns was a lack of interest in archeological features. As the excavator described to me how she views doing archaeology: "Open area, you dig the features, you plan them, you section them, you contact sheet them all, you bag the finds all separately." She made the distinction that "here we are digging walls and not digging features. We are just opening an area where we know there to be some archaeology, which is a different approach. Other sites you open a large area, take all the topsoil off, and you dig what you can see. Here we know what we're digging, where all the structures are, so in a way we are just unrevealing what we already know is there." The object-oriented life-histories approach challenged the excavator's understanding of what archaeology should be and how it should be practiced. This contrasts with the problem-oriented approach to archaeology that remains the most common method since the debut of processual archaeology in the 1960s.

This incident demonstrates that different excavation styles and interests result in varied interpretations of the archaeology being accomplished. It also demonstrates that people *see* different things when they excavate. The day after the incident, I overheard an excavator from Portugal asking the excavator (from England) who found the feature what a "feature" is. This is an example which demonstrates that excavators generally only categorize what they know.

Later in the excavation season, I worked in another trench with a second-season excavator. He told me that he was less interested in objects, but had an on-going interest in the landscape. He would remove many of the small finds and trowel down to the geological layers. He put these small finds in a pile outside the trench, and when it came time for recording, he would scatter them in the area where they had been found. This upset the director because his object-oriented approach relied heavily on electronic representation, i.e., mapping with a Total Station. The director wanted pictures and geographic points for all the objects *in situ* for his report. This is another example of how members of the excavation team viewed archaeology differently, and how this subsequently influenced interpretation.

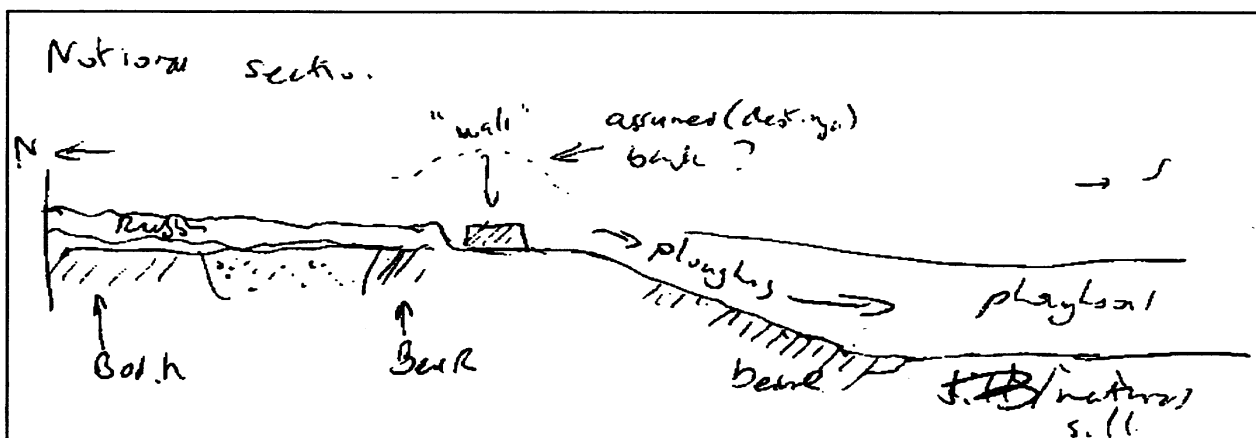


Figure 2: Director's interpretation found in Trench Orange diary.

Even though the director advocated a reflexive approach, his excavation project was carried out using a military model that hierarchically structures how archaeological phenomena should be interpreted, and what views of archaeological methods will be practiced and tolerated (see Joyce and Preucel 2002 for a discussion of the military model in archaeological excavation). The military model is ubiquitous to archaeological excavations: there are directors and supervisors that manage groups of excavators and specialists similarly to the way a sergeant commands a platoon. The dilemma is that while the life-histories approach implies a collaborative agenda, in actuality it proves difficult to successfully enact.

Archaeological interpretations are not generally collaborative, at least not within the military model. Rosemary Joyce and Robert Preucel (2002:31) write, "accounts of the past created by archaeologists are utterances, social acts of communication oriented towards an addressee whose evaluation of the utterance is crucial to its realization as a meaningful action." At Monte da Igreja, the director ran

the project with the intention of producing archaeological knowledge oriented toward his peers and not necessarily the excavators. This is why his authority as director and his view of archaeology produced a hegemonic situation that limited a collaborative mode of producing knowledge. He ultimately dictated which types of phenomena were worth recording and was not always interested in including those excavators' on-site interpretations which contradicted his own.

All project directors of archaeological excavations face a similar situation. Even the most open-minded archaeological director has difficulty relinquishing authority of excavation and interpretation. The director at Monte da Igreja is very reasonable and open to a collaborative understanding of his site. The determining factor in how the life-histories approach fares, then, rests in ensuring that the director maintains a responsibility for the interpretation but surrenders some control of his "expert" interpretive skills.

Discussion

In this case study, I have discussed some of the experiences of the excavators of the Monte da Igreja archaeological project. Many excavators mentioned they liked the intellectual element of thinking about *how* and *why* they were excavating, but depending on their personal experiences, the excavators had different things to say about *what* they were excavating. These multiple interpretations were encouraged in the life-histories approach on-site. However, the tension in the interpretative process emerges from the fact that ultimately the director decides what knowledge is worth publishing in his reports. The reflexive approach is important for understanding the dynamics that contribute to archaeological interpretations, and in the case of the life-histories approach, I have shown that particular interpretations are not clearly self-evident.

The director's interest in an interpretative, life-histories approach reflected the group interpretative process through multiple diaries and involvement by the participants' in-site discussion and interpretation. This approach was almost too ideal, however, and ultimately the director instructed other excavators and made decisions about methodology. If there were disagreements, excavators were encouraged to write their views and opinions in one or more of the diaries. At the end, though, it was the director's decision as to how to present the knowledge construction of these trench performances to larger academic and public audiences.

The fact that excavation is an interpretive process is generally accepted. However, the epistemic "machinery of knowledge" that Knorr Cetina (1999) introduces is likely to provide a better assessment of how culturally involved our knowledge production is in all types of scientific and other professional practices. Archaeology is a cultural practice and its knowledge construction is rooted in its social environment. Interpretations of archaeological material are therefore limited to

claims accepted by particular power groups (e.g., the discipline, social science philosophical paradigms).

Reflexivity on archaeological excavations is a useful method, and it has been helpful in promoting ethnographic presence at sites (e.g., Hamilton 2005, Hodder 2000). While the practice of excavation may be a shared experience in which primary interpretations occur, it is valuable for further studies to incorporate elements, or at least acknowledge the “machinery of knowledge” for which site directors intend their publications. This will situate the role of excavation a bit more clearly within the demands of a knowledge society.

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Notes

¹It is important to note that excavation is one of many ways in which archaeological knowledge is generated. Other methods, such as survey techniques and remote sensing, are also used to create understandings of the past.

²See Bender 2005 for a discussion on the “artificial community” of the archaeology team at Leskernick. Barbara Bender states on this website: “I guess we use the phrase because we're not a community bound by kin ties or by living together for a long time but, rather, that we've almost accidentally come together. Rather like being on a boat. And because we work closely together, and live closely together, we do become a sort of community. But, being 'artificial' there's no particular reason why it should go on once the excavation is over.”

³Mia and Melanie are pseudonyms.

⁴The director later told me that he did notice that there was slightly more charcoal on one side of the trench, but that there were no clear boundaries to suggest a feature. Based on my understanding of what an archaeological feature is, I believed it to be a feature.

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