Not the Usual Suspects. New Directions in Community Archaeology

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EDITOR’S CORNER

Jane Eva Baxter

In this issue of The SAA Archaeological Record, we mark the passing of two prominent and influential members of our discipline: Dr. Lewis Binford and Dr. Robert Dunnell. Both of these scholars entered into archaeology at a time when the relationship between archaeology and anthropology was mostly taken for granted, and their contributions are among the works that are often considered foundational to “anthropological archaeology.”

Coincidentally, the relationship between archaeology and anthropology is the focus of a special forum in this issue as well. Conversations about the relationship between archaeology and anthropology have been ongoing in the discipline for many years. Nine years ago in the May 2002 issue of The SAA Archaeological Record (Volume 2[3]) there was a point/counterpoint on this very topic, and there have been several opinion pieces and articles that have followed. Recent debates on the World Archaeological Congress Listerv have highlighted the passionate stances that individuals have concerning this relationship. Michael Smith’s blog “Publishing Archaeology” (http://publishingarchaeology.blogspot.com) has evaluated new magazines such as Anthropology Now, the very popular anthropology blog “Savage Minds,” and the recent forum on disciplinary futures in the December 2010 issue of American Anthropologist. His writings have revealed a trend where the word “Anthropology” has come to mean “cultural anthropology” to the exclusion of the other traditional subfields.

This forum offers what I hope will be a different perspective on the current relationship between archaeology and anthropology, and add another dimension to these conversations. While those of us reading this magazine are all members of the SAA, most of us also choose to belong to other organizations whether those be local or regional societies, organizations for professional practice (ACRA, AAUP for example), or other national and international organizations where we believe our work finds an audience. For this forum, I asked Anna Agbe-Davies, the program chair for the Archaeology Division of the American Anthropological Association (AAA), to put together a series of papers based on presentations made by archaeologists at the most recent AAA annual meeting (New Orleans 2010). The forum is intended not only to provide a snapshot of the types of works being presented by archaeologists at the AAA, but also potentially consumed (even if simply as titles and abstracts) by non-archaeologists who attend the meetings. Such a snapshot offers an opportunity to contemplate how archaeologists are actively situating their work in the broader discipline of anthropology, and how non-archaeologists interested in maintaining a relationship among the subfields would understand current archaeological research based on the work being offered at this traditionally four-field conference. While an imperfect vehicle, this snapshot of work presented at the AAA meetings is an interesting way to consider many aspects of a rich, passionate, and ongoing conversation.

Finally, I’d like to extend a special thanks to Peter Bleed for his assistance with the Matsui article and to Anna Agbe-Davies for her work as guest editor on the “Archaeology and Anthropology” forum. And, as always, I encourage you to contact me with ideas for articles and forums as well as comments you may have about the magazine.
NOT THE USUAL SUSPECTS

NEW DIRECTIONS IN COMMUNITY ARCHAEOLOGY

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In a discussion that we had regarding our Follow the Pots Project (more on that to follow), we came to the realization that we were: (a) doing an unusual form of community archaeology, and (b) not whom most people would think of first as typical community archaeologists. First, we are prehistorians/Early Bronze Age specialists, and second, we work in the Middle East—not always the first people or the first place that pops into your mind when you think of community archaeology. We are not the usual suspects and our brand of community archaeology was atypical—a double whammy. In deciding on a name for our AAA session on community archaeology we meant and mean no disrespect by the term usual suspects. In fact, we intended to highlight and honor the scholars who paved the way in collaborative processes and community archaeology, and to whom we are indebted in our own research. The very term “community archaeology” conjures up visions of Carol McDaid, Paul Shackel, Nick Shepherd, Chip Chanthaphonh, T.J. Ferguson, Patti Jeppson, Linda Derry, Christopher Matthews, Cheryl LaRoche, Anne Pyburn, Sonja Atalay, Michael Blakely, and places like the African Burial Ground, Harper’s Ferry, Levi Jordan Plantation, and Çatal Höyük (apologies to anyone who has been omitted from the list but there are more usuals than space permits!). Historical archaeologists have been practicing community archaeology since the inception of historical archaeology as a discipline without having to self-identify—it is embedded within their practice, and it is the rare North American historic project that does not involve communities. This framework for practice is not the norm for prehistory in the Middle East, and in our desire to approach our new project on the Dead Sea Plain in a holistic way we started by studying the work of the usual suspects—their projects, their publications, and their practices. This investigation led us to think about other nontraditional community archaeologists and projects, which allowed us to consider colleagues and fellow unusuals who were practicing community archaeology.

We decided that the best way to get usuals and unusuals in the same room to talk, argue, agree, better understand and perhaps even to better define community archaeology was to organize a session at the AAAs. We invited a number of people we knew and some we didn’t but all of whom are practitioners of collaborative archaeology as it has been variously defined but most adroitly by Colwell-Chanthaphonh and Ferguson (2008:1): “not one uniform idea or practice, but a range of strategies that seek to link the archaeological enterprise with different publics by WORKING TOGETHER.” We gathered together researchers who actively involve communities with their archaeological projects with differing degrees of togetherness and success. In a flash of brilliance we also asked two (Carol McDaid and Anne Pyburn) of the usual subjects to act as discussants, hoping that we would learn from their wisdom and insights and in return they might be energized by the breadth and scope of community archaeology being practiced by unusuals.

Over the last decade, many archaeologists have forged diverse pathways and methodologies under the rubric of community archaeology. But what is community archaeology? How do we define it? Can we define it? How do we practice it? Is there a template, a guide to best practice, and a standard set of principles? Are there as many types of community archaeology as there are archaeologists? As prehistorians who work in the Middle East we feel that we can speak for the majority of “our people” when we say that we often conceptualize community archaeology as giving the odd tour to interested individuals, schools groups, and colleagues. We prehistorians rarely incorporate collaboration and interaction with communities into our research designs and we rarely consult with local partners in the initial planning stages of our projects. In putting together this session we started thinking about the idea of community and what we actually mean by the interchangeable terms of community archaeology, public archaeology, indigenous archaeology,
outreach, community-based, collaborative archaeology, participatory archaeology, and the current favorite, postcolonial archaeology. Effective community involvement in archaeological research can take on a variety of practices, often following traditional educational models but sometimes employing creative initiatives, with unexpected audiences. In her fascinating critique of community collaboration, Marina La Salle (2010) suggests that while there is a broad spectrum of approaches to collaboration, often discrepancies exist between conceptualization and actual practice. The majority of archaeologists want to collaborate in meaningful ways: perhaps to atone for past imbalances in treatment of locals, and to share and gain knowledge. But as La Salle (2010:405) warns we must be mindful of a legacy of exploitation rather than true collaboration.

Our intent in organizing this session was not only to gather participants together for an oyster and hurricane fest at the home of Meredith’s parents in New Orleans, but to bring together researchers actively involved in community archaeology projects that expand the traditional approaches and scopes outlined by Tully (2007); ones which—warts and all—attempt to be truly collaborative. The projects highlighted in this session share a common theme: they all have pushed researchers to address issues and challenges that they never dreamed could be involved in archaeological practice, forcing them to think ‘outside the box’ when engaging with their communities. If one of the underlying principles of community archaeology rests in the belief that forging partnerships in communities makes for better archaeology, then all of these projects have found themselves cultivating and encouraging partnerships with unlikely groups of stakeholders, battling the pressures of politics and natural disaster, embracing the involvement of varying skilled and aged workers, and striving to negotiate worldviews and belief systems that attribute negative consequences to the very practice of archaeology. Participants in this session explored the diversity of what community archaeology means in as wide a variety as possible in order to offer new insights and new voices into this dynamic and increasingly integral part of archaeology.

The Unusuals

In the “traumascape” of the volcanic landscape of Montserrat, Krysta Ryzewski, John Cherry, Thomas Leppard, and Elizabeth Murphy vividly depicted the issue of engaging a community with archaeology when their very homes, livelihoods, and lives are under threat. Through images of the encroaching volcanic exclusion zone we were made aware of the challenges of not having a site with which to engage locals. In her comments usual suspect Carol McDavid sug-

Figure 1. School outreach by the Survey and Landscape Archaeology on Montserrat, West Indies (SLAM) project team members Emanuela Bocanegra and Katherine Harrington.
challenged when the interpretations and findings from the excavation were used to further social agendas and advocate for policy changes with which Williams did not always agree. The intersection of policy and archaeology and community, which include governmental representatives, is often overlooked in community archaeology, but as William Doelle and Douglas Gann illustrated in their work in Tucson—politics and politicians should not be underestimated in discussions of heritage. Termed an “apple pie issue” by Doelle and Gann—heritage is something everyone can love, that is, until a project goes awry. The Rio Nuevo project, handsomely funded in a revitalization ballot issue, became the object of scorn when the issues of long-term sustainability measures arose. What happens to the community when the archaeological excavations stop? Archaeologists enter an area, engage and collaborate with local communities, and then leave when the project ends. Does the collaborative community aspect have to end at the same time? In her reaction to this paper McDavid asked, “should we devise ethical exit strategies as part of our engagement?” How do we stop collaborating? Should we?

Diana Dyste Anzures presented qualitative data gathered during oral interviews with Salinan Tribal Members and people of color that document the ways in which race and gender intersect with the practice of archaeology in central California. In producing a collaborative Ph.D. dissertation, Anzures makes use of the contributions of the Salinan tribal groups to what she refers to as “the tedious process of constructing past and present social identities in what we so fondly call ‘archaeology.’” Anzures’s contribution to community archaeology reminds us that people are not just data to be mined or work forces to be employed as manual labor, but can and are active collaborators in understanding our collective past. At Collier Lodge, a historic hunting lodge on the Kankakee River in Indiana, Mark Schurr directs the ongoing collaborative project between the Kankakee Valley Historical Society and the University of Notre Dame. Students from Notre Dame and local archaeological enthusiasts work together to uncover the past and raise public awareness about this archaeological site. As part of his AAA presentation, Schurr screened a short video, which depicted talking heads from both communities (professional and avocational archaeologists) presenting their different but often complementary views on the almost ten-year-old ongoing project. This idea of community partnerships and successful collaboration was echoed in the InisAirc, Co. Galway project presented by Ian Kuijt. Interested in documenting the island of InisAirc, now abandoned after locals were forced to move to the mainland by the Irish government in 1960, the project includes taking former residents back to the island to help archaeologists reconstruct the past. Collaboration of the locals and University of Notre Dame students in the oral histories has resulted in a rich compendium of information, which includes local narratives, archival research, and archaeological investigation. The result is a successful melding of young and old, local, and global—an excellent example of community archaeology in action.

Our own project in the Dead Sea Plain, Jordan cannot claim such success, but we persevere. In conceptualizing our Follow the Pots project as community archaeology we began by consulting the usual suspects for help with definitions and scenarios into which we could slot our research. Working in the Middle East led us to seek models and definitions that included that area of the world. We first turned to the groundbreaking working of Stephanie Moser and her colleagues (Moser et al. 2002) working at the site of Quseir, Egypt. We used this as a guide for a working definition of community and best practice for engaging with local communities in the Middle East. What we found most helpful was their assertion that collaborative practice is inevitably fraught with tension, disagreement, and conflict—aspects that often pervade our relationships with the various communities with which we engage. This aptly describes our work at the looted Early Bronze Age site of Fifa in Jordan. In January-March of 2011 we embarked on our Wenner-Gren supported project, which embodied a two-part approach to recording the landscape: archaeological and ethnographic. The project refuted La Salle’s warning—there was a disconnect between concept and practice. We had no problem at all carrying out the archaeological groundtruthing and mapping of the looted cemetery at Fifa—we produced detailed maps and successfully tested a theory about the uses of Google Earth in monitoring looting (Figure 2). In addition to the groundtruthing we also wanted to interview the various communities who have an interest in the looting of this Early Bronze Age site. Through a series of town hall meetings, input from locals, government employees, archaeologists, museum professionals, and other interested communities, who may be directly or indirectly associated with the looting of the area, we hoped to move beyond a privileging of archaeological knowledge (typically produced by foreign archaeologists) over local constructions of the past.

Ah, the naïveté of the archaeologist. While we scheduled our field season to work with Morag’s academic schedule and our surveyor’s work schedule, it was tomato season: no one had any time to talk to us about their “perceptions of landscape” or the “effects of looting.” In the area of Ghor es-Safi we were spectacularly unsuccessful at engaging with local communities—we couldn’t even get people to come by for
tea to chat: they were all busy harvesting tomatoes (Figure 3), something we had not factored into our collaboration. Had we consulted with the locals at the initial planning stages of this research we would have known that the winter was tomato season. Further complicating the situation, we arrived just after another researcher, investigating the nature of looting in the Four Corners region of the U.S. and on the Dead Sea Plain in Jordan, had just left the town of Safi. He stayed two weeks in the area, paying local community members to speak with him about looting in the region. We were placed in the uncomfortable position of following in his wake: our project’s IRB protocol prevented us from paying for information, and yet the precedent had been set. We decided to hold off on the ethnographic portion of our fieldwork and return in the future, at a time better situated in the yearly seasonal calendar, to follow up on the whys, wheres, whens, and hows of looting in the region. We now know that full collaboration is essential in the future success of the project. Meredith’s father often says “It’s better to be lucky than good.” In the case of Follow the Pots, we clearly have to learn how to be both lucky and good.

We are sure that both usuals and unusuals would agree that every day is an adventure in community archaeology. Our take-home message from this session is that community engagement is situational, context dependent, and a negotiated process between equal partners. Perhaps a secret to community archaeology is similar to a best-known secret in archaeology—flexibility is key. In her comments on the session, usual Anne Pyburn suggested that she approached being the respondent with some trepidation, thinking that the projects might be the “same old, same old,” but she was invigorated by the variety of practice, projects, and practitioners thinking outside the box. Successes and failures are common to all of these collaborative projects, but challenging circumstances, situations, and even communities has resulted in a more robust, fulfilling, and meaningful practice of archaeology.

References Cited


