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Out of Site, Out of Mind?

Once upon a time in archaeology, grizzled, field-hardened professors told their students that "you aren't a real archaeologist unless you die with at least one unfinished site report." The press of salvage archaeology and the heady, money-dripping days of early CRM projects hardly left time to do more than get artifacts out of the ground and dash on to survey the next sewage lagoon or bridge replacement. An awful truth exacerbated these time pressures: Many of us who got into archaeology did so because it was the fieldwork and its discoveries that excited us more than anything else. The lab was always a distant second choice for us and mostly boring. The rare exception came when some new technology became available to allow us bit of analytical or interpretive wizardry.

When it came to actually writing up the project, the pain really started. Writing was a cold bucket of water dousing the flames of passion for the field. To be sure, some proved bold and daring enough to throw together a conference paper, usually outlined on the plane on the way to the conference or in the hotel room the night before a "yawner" of an 8 a.m. session. A few brazenly went so far as to turn their work into a monograph read by a few dozen colleagues or a journal article skimmed by a few hundred, provoking envy from many and establishing celebrity for some.

Accountability to a range of publics changed all that. Pesky contract managers who paid the bills for some federal or state agency started to hound us for reports so that they could jump through legislative and regulatory hoops. Deep down, we knew that the reports just lined a bookshelf or engorged a file drawer in some minion's office. Were the deadlines really all that important? To make matters worse, somebody came up with the bright idea that the folks who really paid the bills—taxpayers or shareholders—might actually be interested in what we were finding with the contract dollars their congressional delegates or CEOs always seemed so hesitant to spend. They wanted us to write public reports and articles for popular magazines, set up traveling exhibits, and present agency-sponsored projects in a way the public could understand.

To top it all off, modern archaeology, with its emphasis on multidisciplinary approaches, brought with it the complexities of collaborative projects. Single-authored, jargon-laden, mostly descriptive reports were no longer acceptable even to colleagues, let alone CRM bureaucrats. Our professional organizations went so far as to codify the idea that we ought to write up our fieldwork.

Unfortunately, the truth of the matter is that many archaeological projects do go unreported, for a variety of reasons, including a lack of time and funding, difficulties interpreting complex cultural remains, and fear of professional criticism. British archaeologist Peter Addyman claims that up to 60 percent of modern excavations go unpublished after ten years, and only 10 percent of excavations funded by the National Science Foundation since 1950 ever reached print. In Israel the problems are worse, with about 39 percent of the excavations from the 1960s, 75 percent in the 1970s, and 87 percent in the 1980s going unreported (Renfrew and Bahn 1996:535–36).

Most of us also learned along the way that archaeology is a destructive process. Our excavations can wreck a site as completely as a bulldozer or chisel plow. That's why most of us fully realize the need to report our excavations. If we don't, and the artifacts just sit on a shelf in our labs, we've just contributed to site destruction. If we think carefully about it, we should fully understand the problem and have a profoundly guilty conscience about any sites we've dug that we haven't reported.

If the past is a public heritage, as many archaeologists consider it to be, when we don't report a site we've dug, we commit a double theft. We've first stolen from the people paying the bills and then from the public of whose heritage we say we are the stewards. We become little different from the looters we condemn who dig up artifacts to sell for profit in the lucrative antiquities market.

Making Excuses

The reasons we don't get the work written up can be many, starting with our own attitudes toward writing, but often, we just don't allow ourselves time or budget to get the job done. We can make excuses about how tough it is to convince a contract manager whose eye is always on the bottom line that it really does take about triple or greater the amount of time in the lab as it does in the field to get analysis, interpretation, and write-up done. We constantly tell our students this in textbooks and lectures, but why don't we make the same effort to educate the bean counters?

We also make excuses about how our labs don't have the best equipment or the latest version of our favorite word-processing software, but we ought to be ashamed of ourselves. Ludmila Koryakova of the Laboratory of Archaeological Researches at Ural State University told me of how Russian archaeologists often struggle to stay ahead of rampant site destruction, with relatively few resources at their disposal. Site reports often get handwritten in pencil, with only one copy of the report in existence because they don't have copiers! She lives in fear that the single copies will somehow be lost and all records of important sites destroyed forever. When I gave her an old laptop computer, she was ecstatic!

If we put aside our own lethargy and excuse making, we may notice something we might truly lack, and that is adequate training to prepare our reports. Although many archaeology texts describe the need to report our work, they rarely give any

clue as to how difficult this task is or to the tools or strategies for actually doing it. Few of us can recall any courses specifically geared to writing our reports or presenting our materials. Although we probably took part in field and lab methods classes, studied topical issues or culture areas, and lived and slept theory, almost no one was taught anything about presenting the past. We were somehow to learn this by reading other reports, or by listening to colleagues give conference papers, or by figuring it all out by osmosis. This may be a major failing of our educational system in archaeology.

Another problem for us is that at least since the 1950s, archaeology very much has been a multidisciplinary, team effort. For our excavations and analyses, we require many specialists, as noted in the other books in this series. We need our geomorphologists and archaeobiologists in the field with us. We need them in the lab, too, where they might handle analysis on everything from sediment particle size to gas chromatography on charred residue in pottery. Although we know full well that the days of a professor, three graduate students, and a cloud of dust are over, many of us still see what we do as a more or less solitary venture. Some of us work in very small CRM firms, and we rely on contracting out much of our specialty labor. We might get a report from our consultant, but it's up to us to massage it into our final reports. Others of us work in a university system where joint publications are unfortunately not given the same weight toward tenure and promotion that single-authored books, monographs, and papers might be. The result is that we tend to see production of our reports as a mostly solitary chore when it should often be a team production.

Finally, and paradoxically, archaeologists are prodigious borrowers. We can bend almost any theoretical approach to our wishes, and we easily latch onto new technologies for field and laboratory work. However, when it comes to preparing and presenting our reports, we have been slow to adjust to new media. Many of us are still firmly hooked on hard copy when more appropriate media are readily available for everything from site reports to books like this one!

Plan of the Book

The intent of this book is to provide you with basic tools you'll need to present the past. Topics will be wide-ranging, sometimes reading like a primer but also providing resources if you have already mastered the basics. Chapter 2 considers archaeology's audiences and how to recognize them. Chapter 3 is geared toward helping you decide on the media you'll use to meet audience, personal, and budgetary needs for your presentation. Chapter 4 looks at basic writing skills and how to develop them, and it also considers some of the complexities of writing such as style, jargon, and dealing with references. Chapter 5 takes a brief look at computers and software, more about their use than the specifics of hardware and software. Chapter 6 considers visual archaeology, the creation and use of images in our presentations, from drawings to video. Chapter 7 examines team approaches to presenting the past. Chapters 8 and 9 essentially start with presentations of various

kinds, from conference papers and luncheon talks, and move to the world of publishing, from peer review to working with editors. Chapter 10 looks at alternative ways to bring the past to life, from exhibits and events to cartoons and movies. Chapter 11 shows how you can work with the media to publicize the past. Chapter 12 deals with new technologies and how we will present the past in the future.

There is structure to this. In one sense, the book follows what might be considered the processes of presenting the past; that is, the text moves from looking at audiences to selecting materials for them, to preparing and delivering the materials. Another thread linking chapters is the kinds of presentations or media available to us, from presentations to digital technologies. As complex as this approach might seem, much derives from a few key issues.

The starting point for the rest of this book is a single question: For whom do we do archaeology? However you answer the question, your answer(s) dictate how you present the past. Archaeology has a wide range of constituencies, including both colleagues and the public, so effective presentation of the past needs to begin with the differences in audiences.