

History and Archaeology: Two Regional Approaches

Kathryn Whalen

The United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland will be confronting several contentious centenaries in the coming decades. Concurrently, post-medieval archaeology in the British Isles is gaining traction, despite its previous taboo status. It is possible to draw parallels between this shift and the introduction of slave-archaeology in the United States during the 1960s. Both are the study of recent oppression with ramifications in current cultural, social, and political spheres. This paper discusses the similarities between these two developments in order to better understand the efforts that need to be made in archaeology within the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland in the coming years.

Introduction

The advent of historical archaeology in the United States, and that of Post-Medieval archaeology in Great Britain (and Europe in general) have a similar start date, but divergent developments. While they both have their intellectual historical roots in the Civil Rights movements of the 1960s, and have been operationalized through the development of salvage archaeology and popularized by public archaeology, they have developed their own regional flavor.¹ This paper is not about determining the primo genesis of historical archaeology - the American Society for Historic Archaeology was established in 1967² while the Society for Post-Medieval Archaeology was founded in 1966³ - but rather explore how the two traditions have emerged almost 50 years later.

Historic archaeology in a general sense is the archaeology of literate cultures, but can mean different things to different people. This literature can be either autobiographical- that is produced by the culture, or it can be ethnographic - i.e. produced by literate societies about not literate societies that they encounter. Both categories of historical documents have their own biases and blind spots, but can be utilized by archaeologists to help inform their excavations, analysis, and interpretations.⁴

In the American tradition, “historical archaeology” is used as a short-hand to denote the archaeology of the country after European colonization.⁵ This term is used to differentiate between that time period and the one previous, or “prehistoric archaeology”, which deals in Native American cultures with little or no written history. In America, the difference between these two periods is very drastic, and thus makes it a seemingly natural breaking point for academics. There are several people who have pointed out the racist undertones

of this dichotomy, such as Pauketat and DiPaolo Loren,⁶ as it blatantly ignores the literate cultures of the New World and drastically devalues the oral historical traditions of the “prehistoric” cultures, but these are arguments will not be addressed in this paper directly.

The Post-Medieval Period in history has a coinciding start date with the “historic period” in America, namely with the Columbian Exchange. However, there is more regional variation to the term Post-Medieval Archaeology. Depending on the country of interest’s history, and the academic tradition of the scholar, the Post-Medieval period could start anywhere from the 15th to the 17th century C.E.⁷ In both the American and European tradition, there are subsets of interest within this general time frame, such as Industrial Archaeology, Plantation Archaeology, and the Archaeology of the 20th Century.⁸ Interestingly while Hume⁹ notes in 1968 that Post-Medieval Archaeology gains recognition as an independent area of research around the same time as historical archaeology, West¹⁰ notes that by the 1990s there is a demonstrable lag between the two regional developments.

In this paper I will be using the term “historical archaeology” in the American tradition to reference the archaeology in America focusing on times after European colonization. Concurrent with that decision, “post-medieval archaeology”, when used in the context of the United Kingdom, will denote archaeology focusing on the 15th century C.E to 17th Century. This coincides with the beginning of the Tudor dynasty, which oversaw the beginnings of the English global colonization.

One last point of clarification, the relationship between history and historical archaeology has always been contentious in both intellectual and academic traditions.¹¹ At first many scholars felt that the advent

of historical archaeology was redundant to academic ground already covered by historians, and that it was a waste of time, money, and effort to excavate things we already knew through historical text. Archaeologists, on the other hand, wanted to prove that their work was no “handmaiden to history”.¹² As Stanley South, an eminent figure in American historical archaeology notes:

“Traditionally, historical archaeology in America has been oriented to site-specific goals focused on filling in historical documentation, locating architectural features, recovering and describing artifacts associated with architecture, and correlating archaeological with historical data. Most of this involvement can be termed ‘heritage studies’ from sponsorship by agencies concerned with research founded on a priori beliefs about the past.”¹³

Ultimately, the use of anthropological theory, and anthropologically derived research questions and methods instead of humanities paradigms, has created a distinct difference between the fields of history and historic or Post-Medieval archaeology.

American Historical Archaeology

Historical archaeology became largely crystalized in the United States during the 1960s. Work on places like Colonial Williamsburg and Historic Jamestowne had been conducted in the 1930s, as well as other preservation acts that saved historic structures in places like Boston and Philadelphia, or battle fields like Gettysburg. In America during the 1950s, there was a large emphasis on evolutionary processes in anthropological theory, especially amongst practitioners looking at prehistoric Native American populations, which emphasized change in culture over

time. But the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s brought to the forefront critical elements that are the basis of many historical archaeological studies today: race, class, and gender. These are elements that, up until the 1960s, had been missing from much of academic scholarship of all fields.

These are critical elements in historic archaeology because these groups - slaves, women, and poor people - frequently do not have a voice in historical documents. This shift had two engines- first being a newly found popular interest in the history of what traditional historians might have labeled “the mundane”, but is more appealing to people on a whole. The second major change was the opening up of academia to women, African-Americans and other minorities, and the use of the GI Bill to get more people into college. As academia became less white and male, archaeology began to look at topics related to this newfound diversity. Some of the major scholars of this early time include Ivor Noël Hume, Stanley South, and James Deetz. One similar theme running through all of their work is that historical text, when available and read with a critical eye should not be ignored but instead treated as another data set to be included in research.

Ivor Noël Hume started his archaeological career at the London Guildhall Museum in 1949 and ultimately became the director of the Colonial Williamsburg dig in Virginia. In this regards, Hume’s career is intrinsically linked with the disciplines of both historical and post-medieval archaeology, salvage archaeology, and public archaeology, which he used to excite the public imagination about the past.¹⁴ Stanley South’s contribution to historical archaeology hinges more on the methodological, than the public interest. His interest in pattern recognition, which lead to the development of the mean

ceramic date method for identifying the likely occupation date of a site, helps us to understand the lifeways of a structure that may not have historical contextual data for us to use.¹⁵ James Deetz's contribution to historical archaeology, much like Humes', includes working at an iconic colonial site, Jamestown, but also appealing to popular interest. His book, *In Small Things Forgotten*,¹⁶ is one of the seminal books for historical archaeologists, but is also employed by historians and scholars of American Studies. The cross-disciplinary nature of his work helped to show how seamlessly history and archaeology could work together to produce fruitful, and not redundant, research.¹⁷

The appeal of sites like Colonial Williamsburg or Fort Dobbs, is easy to see for both researchers and the public. The lives of the inhabitants of these places were different for our lives in the present; they represent a familiar yet still exotic past. They capture the patriotic imagination as sites of national pride, the places where our country took root. It is from a current stand point to understand how these places were forgotten, and can be reclaimed with enthusiasm. In many ways sites like Williamsburg and Jamestown could be considered natural environments to give rise to public archaeology- another aspect of archaeology that is frequently associated with historic archaeology.¹⁸ Public archaeology means the sites are open to the public, with educational outreach elements such as placards explaining site interpretations, archaeologist tour guides who can answer questions, and activities that simulate archaeological methods. Many historical archaeological destination sites in the United States specialize in public archaeology in conjunction with national parks, museum and living history elements.

British Post-Medieval Archaeology

Much like historical archaeology, British Post-Medieval Archaeology had its start in the 1930s and 1940s but did not come into its own until the 1960s with the British version of the Civil Rights movement. In Northern Ireland, in particular, the 1960s and 1970s were a major period of both violent and non-violent civil unrest.¹⁹ Most famously, this is the beginning of the Troubles in this region, an ethnic-nationalist sectarian conflict that still sees action today. In this era, popular attention was brought to the discrimination against Roman Catholics in Northern Ireland, rampant gerrymandering which swayed elections in the small polity, civil discourse between opposing sides of home rule and unionist factions, and the plight of the Irish Travellers, a minority group of itinerant workers in Ireland, the United Kingdom, and the United States who faced harsh prejudice due to their ethnic identity.

Much like in America, British archaeology began to look at historical texts as an important source of archaeological data. As salvage archaeology and cultural resource management began to take root as a modus operandi of public policy, historical sites began to be preserved, or at least excavated at a greater rate. Unlike American historical archaeology, however, post-medieval archaeology was slower to gain popularity as a specialty, especially in Ireland.²⁰

There are several theories as to why there was less academic enthusiasm initially for post-medieval archaeology. The two I will discuss are related and are adapted from Matthew Johnson's *Archaeology of Capitalism*²¹ but are also echoed in West's introduction²², and Gaimster.²³ First is an embarrassment of riches. As many an American tourist will note, there is "a lot" of history in European countries, so seeing castles and palaces might seem mundane or too recent to be worthy of

study. The second is that the Post-Medieval period may represent to some an era that is uncomfortable for many to intellectually address or digest. And, of course, much like historical archaeology, there were some academic turf wars between historians and archaeologist which might have inhibited the careers of young scholars.

Regardless of the why, post-medieval archaeology has come into its own during the post-processual era of archaeology,²⁴ which contrasts strongly with American historic archaeology's "founding fathers" location within the processual schools of thought. In the post-processual paradigm, a strong emphasis is placed on the interpretive elements of archaeology, instead of the evolutionary or change in patterns over time like in processual archaeology. Historical texts contribute greatly to the interpretive voice for archaeologists, even when they are researching people who may not have had a voice in texts. In the 1990s and early 2000s many archaeological departments created new teaching lines and programs that specialized in Post-Medieval archaeology, which signaled the acceptance of this niche within the larger academic community.²⁵

Three major post-medieval archaeologists include, but are no means limited to, Matthew Johnson, Audrey Horning, and Charles Orser. Matthew Johnson is an eminent archaeologist who specializes in the Late Medieval and Early Modern period. His work emphasizes interdisciplinary interpretive approaches to cultural change over time. Textural and contextual understanding is evident in all his work, especially his work on architectural forms like Bodiam Castle in southeastern England. Horning and Orser represent one of the more exciting aspects of the burgeoning Post-Medieval field in that their research interests look at globalization, and the Transatlantic world of the modern period. Both have worked

in Ireland and Colonial North America, colonial and Irish Diaspora setting on either side of the ocean, and have looked at the beginnings of our modern global economic systems.

The African Burial Grounds and the Battle of the Boyne

The following are two case studies of historical and post-medieval archaeology that illustrate not only value of interdisciplinary research, but also outline why these fields of study are often difficult for both researchers and the public to confront.

Case Study One- The African Burial Grounds

In 1991, during the construction of a new General Services Administration building in Lower Manhattan, the remains of a long-since thought destroyed colonial African burial ground were found. Previous to construction an environmental impact statement is required by law on all projects that use state or federal funds for capital improvement. One of the aspects of an environmental impact statement is the cultural heritage impact statement, which includes assessment of impacts on cultural resources. In this particular case, the impact statement had noted that the historical maps of the earliest occupation had indicated that this particular plot of land had been a "Negroes Cemetery" in the late 17th and early 18th Century, but due to the heavy development over the years, it was highly likely that this cemetery would have been destroyed in the interim. The building scheme was then allowed to proceed as planned. However, its predicted destruction due to centuries of urban development proved not to be the case. Miraculously, much of the graves, represented by over 400 individual remains, were intact.²⁶

After a few disastrous public relations events, the African American community of New York City held several protests and managed to get an injunction to stay further construction and allow for proper archaeological excavations to be conducted. In 1992, the historic black college Howard University was granted control over the excavations under the lead of Dr. Michael Blakey and the descendant community was given a larger share of stakeholder responsibility.²⁷ Later that year the African Burial Ground was added to the list of National Register of Historic Places and the following year became a National Historic Landmark.

The African Burial Ground is both a paragon of and a cautionary tale for historical archaeology. It is considered successful because of its eventual incorporation of the descendent community in the interpretation, analysis, and excavation of the burial sites. Though initially the House Subcommittee on Public Works and the General Services Administration were reluctant to relinquish their oversight power, they were finally convinced that the African American community of New York City had the right to act as descendants of those buried in the grounds, and therefore should be given a place at the table for preservation planning. Academics also noted how helpful the descendent community was in interpreting the material culture left with the deceased.²⁸ This set an inclusionary precedent that unfortunately has not always been enforced in governmental projects.

Case Study Two- The Battle of the Boyne Site

The Battle of the Boyne is seen historically as the decisive battle that left Ireland in English control. Fought between the ousted King James and the newly crowned King William of Orange in 1690 C.E. on a field outside the town of Dragheda in what is now the Republic of Ireland. This battle

is still commemorated today in Northern Ireland with parades and festivities each year. Currently, the site is located on the Oldbridge Estate and is managed by the Office of Public Works, Republic of Ireland.

The history of the site itself is fraught with the troubling national symbolism that is embodied. Each of the Unionist/Republican arguments had their own view on how to manage (or forget) the sight during the tumultuous early half of the 20th century. However, in the wake of the Good Friday Agreement and acknowledgement of the site's importance to both the Republic and Northern Ireland, the Irish Government purchased the estate, funded pilot archaeological studies, designated the area a part of the Heritage Council aegis, and built a visitor education center in the restored Oldbridge Estate house.²⁹

In 2007, as part of a larger effort to ease partisan tensions across the border, the Taoiseach³⁰ Bertie Ahern and the First Minister of Northern Ireland, Dr. Ian Paisley, visited the site as a symbolic gesture, acknowledging the importance of, and painful national memories associated with, sites such as the Battle of the Boyne. Part of Ahern's speech that day eloquently notes that: "The fact that we have come here together shows us once again that our history need not divide us. Your history is our history too. We need to understand our shared history if we are to build our shared future."³¹ This trip emphasized the importance of acknowledging, instead of forgetting, even the uncomfortable areas of a shared history to move forward to a peaceful future.

Discussion: Descendent Communities and Public Opinion

The African Burial Ground and the Battle of the Boyne represent some of the most difficult issues facing historic and post-

medieval sites: the power relationship between descendent communities and the entities that control the production of knowledge. The tension these two groups often stem from historical context of an unequal power structure, and can be seen in the demography of the field. In the United States, the vast majority of people holding advanced degrees in archaeology are Caucasian, a point that was illustrated by the difficulty of the African Burial Ground Board of Directors' search for African-American archaeologists to participate in the excavation.³² With the adoption of theoretical suites such as Post-Colonialism, the concept of multi-vocality has become more mainstream in archaeological interpretations. By addressing the views of descendent communities, we get a more balanced picture of history, even when confronted with possibly painful and still recursive events from the past.

Because these sites embody two divisive elements of their representative nations - race relations in America and the root of sectarianism in the Republic of and Northern Ireland - their preservation, and interpretation, could be in threat of whitewashing or biased interpretation. For the African Burial Ground the descendent community was able, through highly visual and well-organized protests, to ultimately gain some control over the process. This site brought to light many uncomfortable, but necessary, conversations about slavery in a Northern state, and its lasting legacy of racism. At the Battle of the Boyne site, the Republic of Ireland's government had to shore up public support for the idea of preserving this site, which is still a symbol to many of a very real and active sectarian fight still today. This case is almost the reverse of the one in New York where the government was not initially including the public. Here the government was appealing to the public to appreciate this site as significant and worthy of preservation efforts.

Ultimately, historic and post-medieval archaeologists deal with the archaeology of the modern world.³³ This presents some exciting research questions stemming from colonization, globalization, and the beginnings of capitalism, but also brings with it the need to acknowledge the darker sides of these phenomena. As Deetz says in his introduction to *In Small Things Forgotten*: "One of the more important developments in American historical archaeology during the past two decades has been the emergence of African American archaeology as a critical component of the field."³⁴ Our world today is still greatly shaped culturally by these very phenomena, which force us to confront things like white privileged voices in the academic ivory tower. Minorities are still grossly under-represented in American archaeology. Additionally, while white women have made inroads, they are still minority shareholders of tenure track jobs and other high impact positions.³⁵ Though historic archaeology, through its intense relationship with public archaeology, has done much to improve the field's relationship with descendent communities, it would do better to encourage practitioners from these minority groups to enrich the field as a whole.

Another way this tension about examining Post-Medieval sites in Ireland can be represented is anecdotally. Over this past summer, I was working in Northern Ireland on a Scottish Plantation manor with an archaeologist from the Republic. During the course of the day, as conversation meandered, we eventually got to talking about how exciting it was that Post-Medieval archaeology was becoming a legitimate area of study. As one of crew members put it "twenty years ago it was almost taboo to do excavations on a site that post-dated the 1600s C.E. Now it's quite fashionable." As archaeologists have started to tread where only historians have gone before, vast amounts of research data has opened up to a new generation of archaeologists.

Conclusion: Archaeology of the Modern World

As Susie Wright says: “If prehistoric archaeology is about making the unknown more familiar, the archaeology of historic periods is often about de-familiarizing what we think is the known past.”³⁶ Historical archaeologists blend available historic data and archaeological data to give us a richer picture of the past. As more minorities join the field of archaeology, and we start to develop ways to address sensitive subjects pertaining to colonization, the stage is set for a new Global Historical Archaeology that starts to transcend the regional data sets - much like Harold Mytum’s work with cemeteries across Britain, Ireland, and New England.³⁷ As the archaeology of the modern world gains traction, it is hopeful that a multitude of voices- from historical text, descendent communities, and minority practitioners- join together to give us a vibrant picture of the past.

Endnotes:

1. Orser 2004, 7-9.
2. Hume 1968, 6; Hall and Silliman 2006, 1-3.
3. Hume 1968, 6; Majewski and Gaimster 2009, xviii.
4. Hall and Silliman 2006, 1-3.
5. Hume 1968, 5-6; Hall and Silliman 2006, 1-3.
6. Pauketat and DiPaolo Loren 2005, 7-8.
7. Tarlow and West 1999, 1-2; Funari, Hall, and Jones 1999, 16-17.
8. Andren 1998, 9.
9. Hume 1968, 6.
10. West 1999, 1-2.
11. Orser 2004, 7-9.
12. Funari, Hall, and Jones 1999, 2.
13. South 1978, 223.
14. Hume and Miller 2011, 9-10.
15. South 1978.
16. Deetz 1996.
17. Yentsch and Beaudry 1992.
18. Hume 1968.
19. Smithey 2011, 14-17.
20. Horning and Palmer 2009, XIII-XIV.
21. Johnson 1996, 10-19.
22. West 1999, 1-2.
23. Majewski and Gaimster 2009, 525-526.
24. West 1999, 1-2.
25. Courtney 2001, 1-2.
26. Epperson 1999.
27. La Roche and Blakey 1997, 84-106.
28. Jamieson 1995, 39-58.
29. Brady, et al. 2007, 53-54.
30. Irish Prime Minister.
31. Smithey 2011, 181.
32. La Roche and Blakey 1997, 88-89.
33. Orser 1996.
34. Deetz 1996, xi.
35. Bilien-Green, et al. 2008.
36. West 1999, 1.
37. Mytum 2006.

Works Cited

- Andren, Anders. 1998. "Between Artifacts and Texts: Historical Archaeology in Global Perspective." In *Contributions to Global Historical Archaeology*, edited by J. Charles E. Orser, 3. New York: Plenum.
- Bilen-Green, Canan, Karen A. Froelich, Sarah W. Jacobson. 2008. "The Prevalence of Women in Academic Leadership Positions, and Potential Impact on Prevalence of Women in the Professorial Ranks." Paper read at WEPAN.
- Brady, Conor, Emmet Byrnes, Gabriel Cooney & Aidan O'Sullivan. 2007. *An Archaeological Study of the Battle of the Boyne at Oldbridge, Co Meath*. Leiden: University of Leiden Press.
- Courtney, Paul. 2001. *An Archaeological Resource Assessment and Research Agenda of the Post-Medieval Period in the East Midlands (1500-1750)*. Leicester: University of Leicester.
- Crossley, David. 1990. *Post Medieval Archaeology in Britain*. Leicester: Leicester University Press.
- Deetz, James. 1996. *In Small Things Forgotten: An Archaeology of Early American Life*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Funari, Pedro Paulo A., Martin Hall, and Sian Jones, ed. 1999. *Historical Archaeology: Back from the Edge*. Edited by P. J. Ucko, 1-20. Vol. 31, *One World Archaeology*. London: Routledge.
- Gaimster, D. 2009. "An Embarrassment of Riches? Post-Medieval Archaeology in Northern and Central Europe". In *International Handbook of Historical Archaeology*, edited by Teresita Majewski and David Gaimster. New York: Springer.
- Hall, Martin and Stephen W. Silliman. 2006. *Historical Archaeology*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Horning, Audrey and Marilyn Palmer, ed. 2009. *Crossing Paths or Sharing Tracks? Future directions in the archaeological study of post-1550 Britain and Ireland*, xiii-xiv. Woodbridge: The Boydell Press.
- Hume, Ivor Noël 1968. *Historical Archaeology*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.
- Hume, Ivor Noël and Henry M. Miller. 2011. "Ivor Noël Hume: Historical Archaeologist." *The Public Historian* 33 (1):9-32.
- Johnson, Matthew. 1996. *An Archaeology of Capitalism*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd.
- Mytum, Harold. 2006. "Popular attitudes to memory, the body and social identity: the rise of external commemoration in Britain, Ireland and New England." *Post-Medieval Archaeology* 40 (1):96-110.
- Orser, Charles E. Jr. 1996. "A Historical Archaeology of the Modern World." In *Contributions to Global Historical Archaeology*, edited by C. E. J. Orser, 1. New York: Plenum Press.
- . 2004. *Historical Archaeology*. Second Edition. Upper Saddle River: Pearson.
- Pauketat, Timothy R. and Diana DiPaolo Loren, ed. 2005. *North American Archaeology*. Malden: Blackwell.
- Smithey, Lee A. 2011. *Unionists, Loyalists, & Conflict Transformation in Northern Ireland*. New York, New York: Oxford University Press.
- South, Stanley. 1978. "Pattern Recognition in Historical Archaeology." *American Antiquity* 43 (2):223-30.
- . 2002. *Method and Theory in Historical Archaeology*. Clinton Coners: Percheron Press.
- West, S. 1999. Introduction to *The Familiar Past?: Archaeologies of Later Historic Britain*, edited by Sarah Tarlow and Susie West, 1-15. First Edition. London: Routledge.
- Yentsch, Anne Elizabeth and Mary C. Beaudry, ed. 1992. *The Art and Mystery of Historical Archaeology*. Boca Raton: CRC Press, Inc.