Synthesizing Sources: Representing Data in Household Archaeology

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Society for Historical Archaeology Annual Conference, Toronto, Canada

Ideas for this session arose for Heather and I as we wrestled not only with the content of our dissertations but with the theoretical, methodological, and philosophical underpinnings of the discipline of historical archaeology. Because we both had many mentors as we wrestled with ideas, methods, theories, and approaches throughout graduate school and the dissertation process, it became clear that every approach to the discipline and its practice is dramatically idiosyncratic, determined in large part by one's academic genealogy. My own training, in both art history and anthropology, had only begun to prepare me to engage in critiquing the very processes of historical archaeology in the hyper-critical environment of graduate school.

In fact, when I first encountered Martin Hall's assertion that "one of the most prevalent shortcomings in historical archaeology as a discipline has been the failure to marry words and things" (2000: 16), I felt obliged to defend my chosen field and colleagues. I soon found, however, that the critique, though pointed, is one with which I agree. Moreover, I find the critique relevant at all stages: in our analyses, our interpretations, and in the presentations of our research. I recognize, of course, that this is no small task, and that tacking between words and things in our discussions as well as in the course of research is a daunting challenge. Necessarily, we isolate these sources during data recovery and interpretation as well as in our presentations, and attempt through our discussions to show our perception of their meaning and entanglement with other texts and objects and with the subjects of study. In order to successfully address this

proposed marriage, we need to critically consider both our sources of data (whether objects, texts, film, art, images, or voice) and the forms our discussions take, how we invoke, interpret, transform, appropriate, reproduce, or otherwise represent these sources.

Issues of time and of scale further complicate our attempts to access and utilize diverse sources of data. Few archaeological projects are of an intentional synchronic focus, and many projects now seek explicitly to explore multiple scales of relations, contextualizing research topics through multiple lenses in time and in space. Our use of texts and objects necessarily varies with each of these lenses accordingly, and we often find that our interpretation of meaning changes at different scales and through time. How can this multitude of meanings among these many diverse sources be manageable?

For Hall, understanding how texts and objects relate to one another came in part through his application of the idea of James Scott's "transcript… a web of relations that entwine both objects and words" and Michel Foucault's "statements… [which] have ever-shifting meaning, leading to multiple readings and ambiguities" (2000:16). He theorized that transcripts are created of dialogues and the dynamism of power relations, and that both statements and transcripts are characterized by the ambiguity of a variety of meanings, or "polyvalency" (2000:17). While I find some applications of the concept limited at best, such as Hall's constructed binary of public versus hidden transcripts, I find this generally a useful approach. We may not be able to consider the transcripts of discourse between the ceramics we excavated at a house site last season while we ourselves are literally transcribing the rent rolls of that village or trying to decipher the potential polyvalent meanings of the statements that we encounter in archival research; however, the existence and the relevance of that transcript is certainly clear. Rent rolls,

inventories, and tax records provide some insight into the financial position of the village at large, if not that of the household of study, and few would argue with the fact that textual representations of life in any community may have had many intended meanings and certainly many interpretations.

In studying the household, we focus our research on the spatial patterning of houses, outbuildings, and domestic artifacts. Relevant texts might include rent rolls, maps, travel accounts, autobiographies, and oral histories. Yet even if we can interpret meanings for texts and objects as we recover them, we must consider the polyvalency of meaning for each object and text over time, and, even more complexly, the meanings of groups of objects and collections of texts through time. This is particularly important in studying households, since it is all too easy to create a synchronic interpretation of any set of data. Diachronic analysis provides access to an even broader consideration of polyvalency, thereby further complicating analysis and interpretation. The concept of the household series may make this more manageable, where "the archaeological unit of analysis is not the household, but the household series, which… is 'the sequence of households that successively inhabit a given structure or house over a span of time over more than one generation'" (Smith 1992 in Alexander 1999:81). The concept of the household series provides a significant conceptual approach to the polyvalency of the household in diachronic perspective; for my own research, however, the household series is entirely more complicated than generational occupation.

Slievemore, the village of focus for my dissertation research, is located off of the western coast of Ireland's County Mayo, on Achill Island. The island itself is the largest of Ireland's islands, and is separated from the mainland by only a narrow channel at

Achill Sound, which nearly disappears at low tide; because of Ireland's dramatic tidal shifts, however, the Sound is spectacularly dangerous. This geographic separation from the mainland lent itself to a large number of nineteenth and twentieth century texts conveying to their reading audience the isolated, remote, and provincial nature not only of the island itself but also of its inhabitants. Artists traveled to the island in search of the perfect peasant for their images, city folk braved the ship, train, and buggy to see the native islanders who so perfectly matched their rustic surroundings, and proselytizers advertised the pagan practices of a backward and illiterate people living a 'savage' and 'barbaric' existence.

Early published perspectives on Achill conveyed extreme poverty, both of the people and the land:

> "'a stinking patch of bog and barren soil… There are 6,000 people living in the most miserable hovels that sheltered man or woman, worse than man builds for his dog or fowl, getting not a penny, one might say with considerable truth, for the land for which they nevertheless pay rent… The villages of Achill swarm with people living under such conditions" (*Irish Daily Independent* 1894 in Moran 1988: 26).

Housing on the island was frequently described as mud huts or hovels built of turf (RIA Ms 24 G18: Lewis n.d.), and its inhabitants, in particular, were the subject of much derision, and elicited comparisons to slaves (Hartland 1895: 47; *The Times* 7 May 1881: 11; Greville 1845: xviii) and Eskimos (Barrow 1836: 195). These representations were not without the expected romanticization, especially at this rural location "in that 'melancholy ocean' which beats on the west coast of Ireland" (Treanor 1874: 8). More romantic yet were the claims Midland Great Western Railway, which extended its line to Achill from Westport in 1895: "Off the Irish coast there are yet to be found remote islands with an exceedingly primitive civilization. Achill owes much of its interest to the

fact that it exhibits a similar state of things in many points little altered by contact with the mainland" (Keogh 1914: 139).

Aside from these obviously romantic and indulgent accounts, little textual record exists for Achill Island in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Some rent rolls and tax ledgers survive, but no islanders' perspectives are presented anywhere in these texts. Many local oral histories echo the dramatic representations of the poverty of rural life on Achill, though individuals' own memories often contradict their stories. In these statements (as Hall and Foucault used the word), we can see ambiguities beginning to unfold: rent rolls reflect steady and regular cash payments in an area where no local employment was available and, according to travelers' accounts, no money was to be had; oral histories convey a materially comfortable and happy life while specific memories of hardship are still painfully highlighted in their accounts, and local histories of Slievemore, in particular, are poignantly linked to economic privation.

The ambiguities of the textual record may have severely limited research of life on the island were it not for the information gleaned from household archaeology at Slievemore.

Known locally and in tourist literature as the Deserted Village, Slievemore is comprised of over one hundred surviving stone structures on the southern slopes of Slievemore mountain, of which there were originally at least one hundred and thirty-seven structures. The village appears to have been established in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth centuries, and went through a period of gradual abandonment and periodic rehabitation until the mid-twentieth century, when it became entirely unoccupied. Local histories indicate that in Irish, "Slievemore" means 'the home of the tribe' (J. McNamara, *History of Achill Island*, June 8, 2006). The structures are single-roomed, of dry stone construction and are built partially into the side of the mountain.

For Slievemore, as with many other rural nineteenth century Irish villages, there is a general absence in the records of household inventories, wills, and tax records beyond the landowners' rent rolls and livestock holdings. This does not indicate illiteracy, since schools were established and well attended near the village by the mid-nineteenth century, nor only the village's rural location, though a reasonably far distance for a judge

or tax collector to travel for a death; instead, it indicates a general regard of the villagers – and, more broadly, the islanders – as not having much of value to tax.

Yet excavations at two house sites and at other locations in Slievemore have yielded a large number of imported ceramics, a large proportion of which are decorated. Further, in contrast to the content of ceramic assemblages at other rural Irish villages, where the large proportion of red earthenware vessels has been interpreted as an indication of dairying and domestic food production, very little red earthenware was recovered at Slievemore, and there is no evidence thus far that red earthenware ceramics were produced on the island in the recent historic period. Instead, recovered ceramics indicate a high consumption of imported ceramics and food goods, especially tea, apparently with a great deal or milk or sugar as indicated by wear patterns on the interior of vessels. Further, excavations yielded many other imported artifacts, including tobacco pipes and beads as well as glass and stoneware hollow wares that likely originally contained spirits, jams, and other items for bodily consumption.

Thus, the artifact assemblages from the households at Slievemore present a very different picture from the textual accounts of Achill Island from the same period. We are now used to finding that, more often than not, archaeological evidence complicates rather than corroborates textual histories. But what does this variation indicate about these households, and their inhabitants? How can this data best be utilized to understand the polyvalence of both the objects and texts and how do we understand the transcripts and entanglements of object and text at and regarding Slievemore?

Maintaining our focus may help: the objects and texts, though interesting on their own, are not our subjects of research. Instead, the former inhabitants at this village are

our focus of study, though we may get distracted by the outlandish or romantic statements of the texts and the many diverse objects we uncover. The fact that the village of Slievemore and its residents appear to have been explicitly written out of the histories and commentaries on Achill produced by travelers and proselytizers indicates that their presence and their way of life did not fit the image that these authors sought to present. Instead of living in rags, in turf hovels, and with no access to or knowledge of employment or material goods, Slievemore's residents in fact traveled abroad seasonally to pursue agricultural labor for the harvest season. This allowed them to earn a relatively predictable income, access international markets, maintain their landholdings and home, and to acquire imported items both at home and abroad including the decorated ceramics that we recover as well as the food, tea, and tobacco of which we only recover evidence. Certainly, the items with which migrants returned home, the items they purchased at home, and even the money earned abroad held different meanings for each of the laborers, their families and dependents, and the broader community.

Yet a polyvalence of the objects we recover must be understood in an even more complex context: Slievemore's inhabitants held their land in common, and they cared for their livestock and carried out their agricultural pursuits as a community. Households, or the network of folks – most often nuclear and extended family – inhabiting a single structure at Slievemore, changed locations of habitation every few years as structures and field plots were reassigned among community members. What appears to be an interesting but not especially surprising ceramic assemblage from one house site may actually have been deposited by many different households over ten to fifteen decades of periodic shifts in occupation. The apparent absence of matched sets of ceramics in these

assemblages, then, may not be indicative of special meaning attached to certain pieces or a desire to have a variety of styles, but of the common movement of households. Moreover, these diverse and unmatched sets may indicate a broader communal use of space, in which the physical boundaries of the house structure were less indicative of a dichotomy of public and private spaces than of practical use in retaining warmth and blocking a strong and chilly prevailing southwesterly wind. Transcripts linking households and objects to texts at Slievemore must necessarily be dynamic and allow not only entanglements and polyvalence but must also be considered in diachronic perspective and at the multiple scales of individual, household, and community.

The diachronic processes of transcripts at Slievemore continue also into the present. The village was attributed a broad variety of polyvalent meanings through its processes of habitation, later only periodic habitation, eventual complete abandonment, and to its current state of moderate deterioration. Local histories present notably different stories of age, periods of habitation, reasons for abandonment, and the village's current value and relevance to local communities.

Another quick example may serve to illustrate the polyvalency of meaning in a household archaeology of the present. In a recent article in *The Guardian*, Christine Finn (2009) discussed the mantel in her family's home. Each of the many objects placed in this highly visible location was imbued with multiple meanings by every individual who viewed them, and even more so by those who placed them. Cards displayed for over a decade carried the text representing thought and emotion, and their display, especially for such a long period of time, indicated a desire for the objects and their meanings to be a center of focus. Yet, as Finn suggested, this focal point was also the location of more than

thoughtful presentations of affection – it was also a contested location of convenience, where decorative ceramics, souvenirs, and sentimental cards fought for space with objects of more utility such as keys and the television's remote control. Each item, whether decorative or functional, carried a variety of meanings for every person whose possessions landed there or who simply viewed the objects. Further, Finn suggested, her photograph of the family mantel and its adorning objects, now placed above the cleared and redecorated original space, was not just an image but a document, which could be and was read by viewers in polyvalent ways. In presenting this complex of objects and meanings, Finn conveyed her understanding of the entanglement of these objects with each other in diachronic perspective. Her project was no less a part of historical archaeology for its familiarity, its date, or its small use of texts – in fact, these characteristics may provide an entrée to understanding how complex the interactions of meaning and object may be, a fact that is easy to lose sight of after months in the archives or seemingly endless hours completing artifact analysis.

The utilization and integration of data from disparate sources is certainly a challenging task, but it is one that we have willingly and most often happily accepted. It is surprising, though, to consider how often projects are critiqued for not employing enough of either text or object – these are either seen as too much a handmaiden to history (in the case of the missing objects) or too data-driven or materials focused (in the case of the absent texts). In fact, though potentially 'incomplete,' these may provide a starting point from which to understand the complex entanglements of objects or texts before moving toward understanding the entanglements between the two sources.

Hall's transcripts and statements provide a helpful example for a theoretically-grounded approach to considering and presenting the entanglements of our sources of data, and how they relate to our topics of research. Finn's quick discussion of her family's mantel, however, shows that our predilection toward grand scales and jargon is not necessarily the best solution. The first step in a critical analysis of how to use disparate sources of data effectively and in conjunction is a real critical consideration of those very sources at every stage of research: we need to think about how we access, utilize, interpret, present, and represent texts and objects, before, during, and after research and publication.

Though it seems an obvious enough statement, we need also to consider how all of our data relate to our subjects of study, and the polyvalency of each, before complicating our understandings with transcripts and entanglements. Many processes of research, including excavation, artifact analysis, and archival investigations, require that we distinguish and pursue highly discrete functions, separating manageable pieces to meet project goals. But these methodological processes often further disconnect texts and objects from each other as well as from subjects of research. The utilization of texts and objects for anthropological investigation may be a unique characteristic of historical archaeology, but the very fact that it is a cornerstone our methodology indicates that it requires unending engagement through critical perspectives.

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