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Abstract:

The organization of archaeological fieldwork often resembles a military-style campaign structured around rigid, top-down hierarchies. This is reflected in many aspects of current practice, including the ultimate authority of the site director, the use of excavation methodologies that remove the act of interpretation from field archaeologists, and the general deskilling and reification of archaeological labor in fieldwork. Though there have been several examples of resistance to this hierarchical model we maintain that a sustained critique could stem from an unexpected source: the creation of communities that model anarchist principles through the implementation of the single context methodology in archaeology. In this article we explore the potential for anarchist praxis in archaeological fieldwork and the implications of anarchist thought on the issues of authority and non-alienation of labor in a neoliberal landscape.

Body:

Excavation animates archaeology. It is the public face of archaeology, appearing on television screens and illustrating news articles—a golden trowel symbolizes the highest recognition of archaeological professionalism (Flannery 1982). Digging is a deeply evocative archaeological practice, yet it is the most undervalued mode of archaeological knowledge production, least cultivated skill with fewest monetary rewards, and is considered so inconsequential that non-specialist labor is regularly employed to uncover our most critical data sets. Additionally most archaeological fieldwork remains deeply hierarchical with rigid, top-down structures of authority, with varying degrees of alienation of labor in academic and professional settings.

Shanks and McGuire (1996) position archaeology as a craft, identifying divisions within archaeological labor, and propose a return to a master/apprentice-based model of enskillment. Yet the proposed “master” and “apprentice” are never defined beyond an amorphous teacher/student relationship that is contrasted with a “factory model” of contract archaeology that emphasizes efficiency. That the authors draw from a “factory model” is significant; the construction of *worthwhile* fieldwork as primarily propping up academic enterprise can minimize the potential contribution of commercial archaeological labor to meaningful knowledge production. The accompanying class connotations also remain problematic. Importantly, while field archaeologists in the past “defined themselves in opposition to the labourers on their site” through nationality or class, current commercial archaeologists in the helmets and high-visibility vests of construction workers may “see their roots laying more squarely with the labourers of the large-scale research digs than with the educated ‘gentlefolk’” (Everill 2007, 122; see also

Roberts 2012). We find that the relatively egalitarian organization of labor associated with single context methodology as employed in commercial archaeology to provide a significant critique of hierarchical modes of fieldwork, both in academic and commercial sectors.

A few archaeological field projects have tried to implement collectivist strategies to explore new forms of organization for archaeological fieldwork. Notably, the excavations of the Colorado Coal Field (Ludlow Collective 2001; McGuire and Reckner 2003) examined structural class inequalities and attempted to create a field school that mitigated the inherent hierarchy of archaeological site structures (Walker and Saitta 2002). They found hierarchy and authority unavoidable while teaching students on site and were unable to effect much change other than opening up staff meetings to the students so they could see the process of decision-making.

In the United Kingdom the Sedgeford Historical and Archaeological Research Project (SHARP) was a long-running research project that incorporated democratic principles after an acrimonious dispute in its first year (Faulkner 2000; 2009). Though the site maintained a hierarchical structure, paying volunteers were able to advance through this structure and were encouraged to provide feedback regarding their placement in the excavation (Faulkner 2000: 32). Later in the project, a board of local Trustees attempted to wrest control of the project from the archaeologists and what had been a participatory democracy was codified into a representative democracy that required "representative bodies, clear rules, and tight control" (Faulkner 2009: 59-60). Indeed research strategies in archaeology that rely heavily on the unskilled labor of students, community members or workmen may be fatally flawed to engender a truly emancipatory archaeology, and it is outside of the purview of this short article to address this pernicious, systemic issue in archaeology. Still, we find great inspiration from the efforts of Ludlow Collective and SHARP, and continue to view the subsequent contributions of members of these initiatives essential to radically rethinking the organization of archaeological labor.

We build on experiments in archaeological fieldwork such as these to inform a collectivist strategy that draws from anarchist theories of authority and the single context methodology employed in British commercial archaeology, specifically that of the Department of Urban Archaeology recording system used by the Museum of London. While seemingly an incongruous pairing, the correct implementation of the single context methodology distributes knowledge production on archaeological sites and relies on "natural" authority—that of expertise developed over many years rather than the artificial authority enforced by hierarchical structures such as universities. Bakunin (1871) discusses an anarchist view of authority thus:

"Does it follow that I reject all authority? Far from me such a thought. In the matter of boots, I refer to the authority of the bootmaker; concerning houses, canals, or railroads, I consult that of the architect or the engineer. For such or such special knowledge I apply to such or such a savant. But I allow neither the bootmaker nor the architect nor savant to impose his authority upon me. I listen to them freely and with all the respect merited by their intelligence, their character, their knowledge, reserving always my incontestable right of criticism and censure. I do not content myself with consulting a single authority in any special branch; I consult several; I compare their opinions, and choose that which seems to me the soundest. But I recognise no infallible authority…."

Following Bakunin, Angelbeck and Grier differentiate between “natural authority (those sought for their knowledge, skill or experience) and artificial authorities (those imposed by institutions)” (2012, 552). In his response, McGuire suggests that a radical practice of archaeology might be best served by giving up the artificial but not the natural” (2012, 575; see also McGuire 2008, 60-61). Though imperfect, we maintain that single context methodology reinforces this natural authority and can lend itself to more egalitarian ways of structuring archaeological labor.

Single context methodology as developed in Winchester and implemented by the Department of Urban Archaeology of the Museum of London was developed under the specific conditions of archaeological fieldwork in the 1970s. Spence (1993) provides an excellent review of this fascinating history; important to this article are the requirements of the system for each archaeologist to correctly interpret the sequence of deposition on site and connect to this sequence with those constructed by other archaeologists working in surrounding areas into a Harris Matrix. This emphasized the importance of the skill of individual excavators who were “expected to define, plan, record and excavate their own contexts” (Spence 1993, 25; see also Berggren and Hodder 2003, Leighton 2015) and demanded that the archaeologists to then combine their expertise to create a collective interpretation of the site.

While the system is noted to increase efficiency in recording archaeology and contributes to greater comparability between sites, important to this study is that “this approach to recording consequently resulted in the establishment of a non-hierarchical staffing structure” (Spence 1993, 26). With the single context recording system, each excavator could be a wholly independent and equal contributor to a collective effort to interpret and record the archaeological site. Further, Leighton links this to both a higher degree of trust in the skill of the archaeologist to make interpretations and the assumption that the excavator is “a *more* authoritative knower than someone who only looks at the textual record, because knowing objects *both* materially and archaeologically is a complex process that requires *tactile* interaction (2015, 83, emphasis in the original).

Since Spence’s (1993) publication there has been a continual degradation of egalitarian structures through the unrelenting pressure of capitalist and neoliberal forces on archaeology (Everill 2007, among others). Without pandering to an idealized past, we explore these aspects of egalitarian labor to inform an anarchist praxis in archaeological fieldwork, with a focus on issues of authority and non-alienation of labor in a neoliberal landscape. The adoption of the single context recording system does not completely explain the tendency toward flat organizational structure on some British archaeological sites; there are several contributing factors that promote egalitarian approaches to archaeological labor. These factors include: the focus on the skill and autonomy of the individual excavator and their active contributions to collective knowledge building (see also Leighton 2015), the discourse fostered by informal discussions on the edge of the trench, a culture of care fostered through rigorous health and safety practices, and the generally leftist political background of archaeologists on site.

As used by the Museum of London, the single context system is designed for large-scale open area excavation, in which sections play a subsidiary role in maintaining stratigraphic control. Instead, greater emphasis is put on the skill and experience of individual excavators to define, record, and excavate deposits in plan. Each deposit and negative event is recorded individually,

in contrast to systems that remove arbitrary amounts from 1x1 meter units or excavation by locus (see Berggren and Hodder 2003; Leighton 2015 for further discussion). Archaeologists are responsible for recording each stratigraphic relationship in an excavation area and these contribute to a site-wide Harris Matrix. The hand-written matrices for large archaeological sites excavated before the widespread use of computers are incredible to behold. The Harris Matrix for Billingsgate, a large excavation in central London in 1983, is 1.4m x 3.4m, comprised of several large sheets of paper stuck together, and covered with annotations in varied handwriting, with many changes, long lines of white correction fluid, and erasures (Figure 1). These materialize the process of collective decision making and interpretation through the inscription of stratigraphic relationships on paper. Individual archaeologists are able to meaningfully contribute to the site-wide narrative, though post-excavation write-up is still often the purview of one or two individuals. The construction of a record of the stratigraphy of the site as a coherent whole is undertaken by archaeologists in conjunction with those working around them without the direct oversight of a director. In this way the single context system fostered a model with similarities to anarcho-syndicalism, wherein a small, non-hierarchical group works together towards a common goal, side-stepping any more formalized authority.

Empowering archaeologists with the recording and interpretation of the deposits they excavate resulted in another component of more egalitarian site archaeology - that of the trench-side chat. In his ethnography of a British excavation, Edgeworth notes that interpretations of material evidence are never the product of an individual, but come through conversations between two or more workers on site (2003, 112). These conversations are complemented by co-operative labor, in which archaeologists work alongside each other at a given task, such as cleaning large areas (113) or helping each other define the edge of a ring ditch (118). In one example, Edgeworth sketched the section of a cremation burial, but after speaking with another excavator, altered the sketch to reflect his changed understanding of the stratigraphic relationships created through this conversation (2003, 252-253).

The interpretive discourse described by Edgeworth reflects the experience of the authors; unsurveilled archaeologists often wander over to a fellow archaeologist’s area and ask them what is going on. What then commences is a discussion wherein the archaeologists chat about the stratigraphic relationships in the trench and possible interpretations of the deposits. This conversation, often animated by gestures, is a form of narrative ekphrasis, a rhetorical exercise that involves verbal description and bodily performance interpreting the physical remains of the past. Through continual narrative building about the archaeological record using dialog and performance, the archaeologists come to a collective interpretation. Archaeologists with less experience listen to these discussions and learn to perform their own. Importantly, these trench-side chats are non-hierarchical exchanges of insight based on experience; a very different exchange occurs when a non-involved site director or specialist periodically appears to query or challenge the excavator’s interpretation (Hamilton 2000). When single context recording is mapped onto a site with a rigid hierarchy and these discussions are heavily surveilled, they move from a casual yet productive exchange between equals to a more cautious, bounded, recitation of the stratigraphy.

Though imposed by government regulations, the health and safety procedures on British commercial archaeological sites foster a community of care amongst site participants. Risk-

taking such as digging in deep, unshored trenches, without proper protective equipment, or other unsafe working procedures is seen as unacceptable and amateurish. Archaeologists with more experience and training in dealing with risks on site take it upon themselves to impart their knowledge to less experienced diggers. There is a feeling of responsibility to ensure the safety of all participants on site, and some train to become a "first aider"—an archaeologist trained to deal with emergencies. Risk assessments and health and safety briefings are routine; violations of good practice are discussed with shock and disgust. For example, when a deep sounding was cut through the West Mound at Çatalhöyük, there was an outcry amongst British archaeologists:

> I have worked on many sites over the years, primarily, though not exclusively, in the UK. Throughout this time I have always been trained to believe, and practice, that health and safety is THE single most important priority on any groundworks operation, archaeological or otherwise. In my opinion this trench fulfills none of the criteria of safe practice which I believe should be the norm. (Taylor 2006, see also Taylor 2007)
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> The safety issue is one that I should have raised earlier when I first saw the deep sounding, basically it was dangerous then and is even more dangerous now. No shoring, loose spoil heaps on the edge of extremely high and vertical sections and I could go on. (…) Not only would any accident have serious repercussions for the project, but more importantly some of the people who are working there I consider my friends and I don't want to see them put in harm's way. (Regan 2006)

That these concerns stemming from experienced commercial field archaeologists were not addressed at Çatalhöyük is perhaps unsurprising in the strongly hierarchical academic research project.

Finally, there is a prominent inclination toward leftist thought amongst archaeologists from many different countries, and British archaeologists have taken part in social movements since at least the 1970s. Hobley's Heroes (http://www.hobleysheros.co.uk), a website that documents the lives of archaeologists who worked for the Department of Archaeology in London, hosts a series of informal publications written by the archaeologists in the 1970s and 80s. These publications, including "The Weekly Whisper," "Hobley's Heroes" and "Radio Carbon" combine information about recent archaeological finds, comics, how-to guides, poetry and other commentary that provides insight into the political inclinations of the diggers. In the October 1978 edition of Radio Carbon, members of the Department of Urban Archaeology are said to have "showed its solidarity against the Nazis on the 'Carnival 2' march organized by the Anti Nazi League" (Figure 2). A later edition reports the DUA marching against "government cuts, their implications for the social wage and unemployment, and the Governments Employment Bill" (Radio Carbon 1980). This is also reflected in the very fabric of the previously cited Billingsgate Harris Matrix, on the reverse is a call for entries to design a banner to be displayed during political demonstrations (Figure 3). While only a brief review of one aspect of the undoubtedly rich, diverse, and storied history of the participants of the DUA, the participation of archaeologists in marches and leftist sentiment underpin a more receptive attitude to egalitarian organization of labor on site.

We argue that the introduction of single context recording had both a dramatic impact on the way in which archaeology was undertaken as well as revolutionizing the way social relations on site were structured. Single context recording promotes individual empowerment of diggers allowing them to contribute to collective knowledge construction on site. Equally, it promoted a more horizontal management structure. Removing strict hierarchical relations on site encouraged other forms of discourse and community building and camaraderie, such as trench-side discussions and improved health and safety practices. Finally, all these found a very receptive audience in the generally leftist politics of the archaeologists. While no single site was a perfect example of this, there are interesting principles at work that could help inform anarchist praxis in the current day. Incorporating an anarchist perspective on the differences between natural authority and artificial authority could combat the reintroduction of rigid hierarchy imposed by neoliberal forces on the profession.

To conclude, this is a partial, necessarily incomplete picture of the complex patterns of specialization and labor in archaeology. Constructing past archaeological practice as an egalitarian ideal is not our intention; we gather the fragments and potentialities that are fostered by democratized site structures to show that it is possible to work toward an anarchist praxis in archaeology, using models that are already in place. Conceiving archaeological fieldwork as enskilled practice, encouraging conversation as a meaningful nexus of site interpretation, fostering a culture of care through attention to health and safety and removing masculinist narratives of suffering in the field are all ways of moving toward an anarchist praxis in archaeology.

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Illustrations

Figure 1: Archaeologists Against Nazis/Anti-Nazi League logo, as illustrated in *Radio Carbon*, October 1978: http://www.hobleysheroes.co.uk/images/RC-pdfs/RC-7810.pdf