Between Dirt and Discussion:  
Methods, Methodology, and Interpretation in Historical Archaeology  
Steven N. Archer and Kevin M. Bartoy (editors)  
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According to editors Steven Archer and Kevin Bartoy, the purpose of this collection of essays is to address not only the current lack of discussion of methods within historical archaeology but also the failure of postprocessual theoretical discourse to adequately consider the relationship between theory and methods. According to the editors, the rush to shove archaeological data into particular theoretical frameworks has impoverished researchers’ abilities to think critically about how they collect that data and has drawn them away from that which makes archaeology archaeology—the material evidence of the past. The essays in this volume are intended to initiate a broad methodological discussion within the field. Evaluated against this goal, the volume represents a solid beginning in that direction.

Beyond the introduction and conclusion by the editors, the 10 contributions to this volume cover a number of archaeological methods from chemical, forensic, and microscopic analysis to the more traditional topics of typology and archaeology as scientific destruction. While not divided into different sections within the book, the chapters can be roughly sorted into three groups according to the approach to the discussion of methods taken by the authors. Several authors simply propose improvements to existing methods. In their chapter on the English clay tobacco pipe industry, Alan Vince and Alan Peacey discuss a modified method for geochemical sourcing of pipe clays. Kelly Dixon uses a comparative study of public drinking practices in ancient Mesopotamia and the 19th-century American West to demonstrate the usefulness of cross-cultural comparison in a broadly conceived historical archaeology. Bonnie Clark and Kathleen Corbett argue that historical archaeologists need to take interdisciplinary work to a new level through active collaboration with practitioners of other disciplines during fieldwork itself (in their case, between archaeologists and architectural historians).

Other authors take on some of the more inscrutable problems within archaeological methodology. Anna Agbe-Davies critiques popular typological traditions in Chesapeake archaeology before resuscitating Irving Rouse’s “modal analysis” (first developed in the 1930s) for classifying early colonial Chesapeake pipes. In one of the more interesting contributions, Scott Madry tackles the problem, yet to be solved, of how to represent chronological data in the three-dimensional format of geographic information systems. While he does not provide a conclusive answer, he uses three separate case studies to demonstrate convincingly the value to historical archaeology of understanding the development of cartographic methods over time. Archer, Bartoy, and Charlotte Pearson use a single subsurface feature from a 17th-century Virginia houselot to demonstrate that archaeologists need to consider more than merely stratigraphic sequences when determining the history of a site. Specifically, they correlate environmental data gleaned from the various strata within the feature with the known environmental history of the Chesapeake region. They propose a chronology for the site that would not have been apparent had they assumed that all the strata in the feature were the result of cultural activity.

The final grouping of contributions consists of those authors who focus on the implications of the destructive nature of archaeology. Marley Brown and Andrew Edwards discuss successive episodes of excavation at a single site in Colonial Williamsburg to demonstrate the value of reflexively considering the implications of various sampling strategies for the interpretation of sites. In his excellent chapter on techniques for identifying earthfast structures in the Chesapeake, Mark Kostro conclusively demonstrates the problems with using the one-size-fits-all approach, which tends to dominate cultural resource management archaeology,
when determining site significance. Bartoy, John Holson, and Hannah Ballard use a project in Yosemite National Park to make a similar argument, this time proposing less invasive techniques for determining site significance. Edward Harris contributes a chapter on the value of using the Harris matrix for preserving stratigraphic information that would otherwise be lost. Unfortunately, Harris’s call for the mandatory use of his matrix in professional archaeological codes of ethics comes off sounding more self-promotional than useful or necessary.

Overall, the unifying theme of these chapters (with the exception of Harris’s) is that methodology, defined as the critical discussion and evaluation of methods, is a crucial part of the archaeological research process and that each site excavated should benefit from individualized methodological consideration. In other words, applying cookie-cutter methods to archaeological sites in the name of comparability or, even worse, expediency sells researchers’ analyses short and therefore undermines their responsibility to both the archaeological record and the responsible use of archaeological knowledge in the present.

The usefulness of the book as a whole is somewhat handicapped by the chapters’ restricted geographical representation: 4 of the 10 chapters consider projects from colonial Virginia, and another 3 focus on sites in the American West. (To be fair, the editors recognize this limitation in their introduction.) Additionally, the price of the volume is prohibitively expensive for use in upper-level undergraduate and even graduate-level courses. Instructors might find individual chapters to be of value for discussions of specific topics; however, such an approach would diminish the overall contribution of this volume to archaeological methodology.

In sum, Between Dirt and Discussion provides a welcome intervention in postprocessual archaeological thought as well as a warning against the homogenizing tendencies of an archaeology that is subordinated to some corporation’s, or even the government’s, bottom line. Individual chapters will certainly provide food for thought. This volume, however, is only a beginning. Whether historical archaeologists answer the call and begin a serious reevaluation of all their time-honored but also timeworn methods will, in part, determine whether the field submits to the trend of corporatization that is transforming Western society or whether it retains its scholarly integrity.

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