

UC Berkeley

Then Dig

Title

ZEITGEIST: CERI HOULBROOK

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/05r4k5r8>

Author

Morgan, Coleen L

Publication Date

2013-11-18

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

THEN DIG

Peer-reviewed archaeology blogging



ZEITGEIST: CERI HOULBROOK

Sanctifying Our Sites: Self-reflection on an archaeological dig

Ceri Houlbrook, PhD Researcher, University of Manchester

If I had to propose a title for my line of research – and the label-loving realm of academia suggests that I do – then I would declare myself a folklore archaeologist. Basically, I employ archaeological methodologies in my study of folkloric objects and structures.

But these archaeological methodologies rarely include excavation, and so, even though I've been dipping my toe into non-research-related digs over the years, I'm really – in the literal and metaphorical sense of the term – an archaeologist without a trowel. However, in September 2013, I had my first opportunity to get my hands dirty in a dig that was relevant to my research.



For my thesis, I've been studying British coin-trees, which are exactly what they sound like: trees which have had coins embedded into their barks for various folkloric purposes, such as luck or wish-fulfilment. I've catalogued over 200 of these trees, ranging in date from the late 18th century to the present day.

There was one particular coin-tree which took my interest; a dead hawthorn in Argyll, Scotland, which I was having difficulty dating. One source claimed that it was 'centuries' old, whilst the landowner opined that the custom had begun in the 1920s. The coins embedded into the tree, however, all post-dated the 1950s. And so when the evidence on the ground doesn't proffer the information you need, what do archaeologists do? We dig.

I'm not writing this post to discuss the results of this excavation, which will be published elsewhere (although for the sake of the curious reader, I'll briefly remark that the landowner's estimation of the 1920s doesn't appear to have been far off the mark). Instead, what I'm aiming to discuss are the processes of an excavation from the perspective of someone who's new to those processes. Because, even though I'd been to this coin-tree site before, it suddenly felt very different – because this time I wasn't there as a folklorist, but as an archaeologist.

There's something about designating a place an 'archaeological excavation site' that gives it more prestige – even, to a certain extent, a sense of sanctity. The ranging rods, surveying equipment, array of buckets, shovels, trowels, and measuring tapes, all contribute to this shift, as

if they imbue it with greater importance. They are props, removing it from the surrounding landscape, marking it out as something ‘special’. Archaeologists are often accused of desecration; in the hackneyed words of Mortimer Wheeler, ‘Archaeology is destruction’ (1954: 15). However, I would argue that we do the opposite. We don’t desecrate; we consecrate.



Although I’m always careful around coin-trees, I’ve never felt the same excessive anxiety as I did on this excavation. I was suddenly incredibly cautious about how I physically engaged with the site; I was reluctant to touch the tree, and whenever I moved around in its vicinity, I did so gingerly, as if so much as breathing on the coin-tree would bring the whole thing crashing down. It was a strange transition from my last visit, when I’d viewed the coin-tree as a natural part of the landscape rather than as a fragile monument, and it really struck me that archaeology doesn’t just explore sites; it alters them.

And we alter ourselves to accommodate them.

From what I’ve observed, people don’t revere these coin-trees. They don’t perceive them as solemn or consecrated, but as interesting features that they can touch, climb over/under, sit on, and hammer their own coins into. They don’t worry about the fragility of these structures; to them, it’s inevitable that the coin-trees will eventually fragment and decay. And so there’s nothing conservative about the ways in which members of the public interact with these monuments.

But as archaeologists, we don't class ourselves as 'members of the public'. To an extent, we don't class ourselves as 'people'. We're like time-travellers; we're scared to interfere lest we alter something that shouldn't be altered, and so we remove ourselves from time and place. We treat our sites as sacred; we handle our finds not as if they were objects meant to be handled, but as artefacts, fragile and enshrined.

Now I'm not suggesting that all archaeologists everywhere change their approach. There's a reason we act the way we do. But what I am suggesting is that in some cases perhaps, in order to gain both a fuller and deeper understanding of a site, we should allow ourselves to engage with places and structures the way everyone else does. To experience them as people rather than just as archaeologists.

