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Notes as Tools: Documenting Archaeological Destruction

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Notes as Tools: Documenting Archaeological Destruction

Archaeology is destructive.

In our quest to reconstruct the life ways of past cultures we depend on the intact context of archaeological remains. The necessary irony of archaeological investigations is the systematic dissection of intact cultural deposits in order to study and preserve past cultures. Once these deposits are destroyed, the only place they are fully documented is detailed field notes taken by archaeologists.

Field notes are arguably the most important tool in the archaeological toolkit. Yet, they are often the most overlooked and under-appreciated (at least until they are needed during the artifact analysis or report writing stage). That said, there is no single best way to take notes (though some would probably argue otherwise). Pre-made sheets with blanks inevitably have fields that

aren't needed from project to project. Different phases of any archaeological project require different types of notes. The availability of different technologies open new avenues for documenting archaeological remains.

At some point in our archaeological careers we will be required to write an excavation report without the benefit of having been in the field for that particular excavation. Writing a report completely based on a set of field notes made me realize how critical these notes are to facilitating the later stages of a project and future visits to the project area. Having written reports from field notes at both sides of a continuum from non-existent to overly detailed, I've laid out several note taking philosophies that I have shared with several students during archaeology field schools.

Don't put off taking notes.

You are in the middle of this feature excavation and don't want to interrupt your work flow with note taking. You can remember that the initial fill stage was excavated as "Zone A", a sample of a charcoal lens was taken and is contained in aluminum foil in the "Zone B" artifact bag, and a single diagnostic projectile point was recovered just beneath the charcoal lens.

Ok. Well what if a city bus suffers a mechanical failure, careens into your excavation unit, and squishes you. All of that information that you were *going* to write down is lost. The poor archaeologist that has to write up the notes on your excavation will probably get a headache trying to figure out how the charcoal and projectile point are related.

Sorry, not realistic?

Ok. You have your notes in your head. Get rained out of the field. Soaked, dirty, and grumpy you decide to have a few margaritas at the Mexican restaurant next to your cheap hotel. A Law and Order marathon is on television (again), but you get sucked in anyway. You wake up in the morning with your "Rite in the Rain" field book stuck to your face with a mixture of drool and 10YR 4/3 silty clay loam. Vital details about your feature may or may not have made it into your field book.

Locate your notes in space

This can be done in several ways.

Note the grid coordinates (Northing and Easting or UTM) of whatever it is you are documenting (remember to note the depth below surface or below datum!).

Record the angle and distance from your location to several permanent landmarks. Road intersections, property markers, and building foundation corners are good. Porta-potties are not. You never know a city bus could suffer mechanical failure and run into the porta-potty and your spatial reference is gone.

Remember, someone should be able to locate the areas that you are writing about while relying solely on your notes.

Add some interpretations

Thinking about what you are excavating helps you catch details that support (or refute) your working hypotheses.

While not every interpretation will be correct, hypotheses will prompt you to record details that support your model and prompt you to change the interpretation when you encounter something that doesn't fit.

Make your notes clear and make copies

Once you are in from the field, give your notes a once over. Annotate them in a different color pen so the stages at which the notes were places on the paper can be differentiated. Make copies or scans of your field books so a bus with mechanical problems doesn't burst into flames and destroy your only copy.

Notes are a serious matter, they are often the only record of an intact archaeological deposit. While they don't have to be works of art, they do need to be clear and accurately reflect what you excavated.

If others can't understand what you worked on, then what makes you different than a looter?

