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Clipboards and Context

Archaeologists love their trowels, but for my money, when I go into the field, the thing I want with me at all times is my clipboard.

I have this one [clipboard above], which I bought at Staples in 2007 and have never regretted. Technically the box makes it a little more than a clipboard, but I like it because it's metal, durable, and holds a ton of forms, tags, bags, and graph paper.

Tracing the history of clipboards is frustratingly difficult. As near as I can tell, the clipboard is a 20th century invention. The first mention in the OED comes from the 1907 “Army and Navy Stores Catalogue” which lists

“The ‘clip’ boards for patience and bridge. . . This board is fitted with nickel clamps on each side to keep it perfectly rigid.” (Army and Navy Cooperative Society 1969: 380).

This definition coincided with the transformation of clerical work into a full adjunct of management and organization of business (Braverman 1974: 304-312). In other words, clipboards appeared at a time when people needed new ways to track and organize systems of people and objects in space with the expansion of managerial capitalism.

Now, when people think of the clipboard, they're more likely to think of "Cut and Paste" functions on the computer. The computer clipboard functions as a temporary space (usually RAM), for storage of text, images, or other material for later use. Though versions of something like "cut and paste" had existed since the 1960s, the clipboard system that we know today had its origins in Xerox PARC and the development of personal computer (Moggridge 2007: 63-68).

But what both of these meanings and histories have in common with archaeological use is that, in both cases, the clipboard is a container of context. In the former, the relationships between commodities, costs, and locations formed a set of material relationships that had to be maintained on paper. In the latter, the relationship between information (text, pictures, etc...), RAM location, and a user interface creates an informational context.

And of course, for archaeologists, context has always been one of our central metaphors (Shanks and Tilley 1987: xix, see also Lucas 2001 for a historical perspective). The idea of the relationship between objects is as important as the objects themselves is what separates modern archaeology from antiquarianism, and from other disciplines that abstract objects from the material and social relations in which they are enmeshed. We've spent a lot of time theorizing what the relationship between context and human "culture" is, but almost all of us agree that there is something about being human that can be inferred and understood by looking at the arrangements and agglomerations of objects deposited by humans in the ground. That's context.

The great irony of archaeology is that we have to destroy context through excavation in order to recover it—under the ground, it's invisible and protected. To explain the past, we need context, but to get context, we need to excavate. Clipboards sit at the intersection of this process, because the recording of context, of the relationships of objects in the ground, is what allows us to get at culture in the past. It's why, more often than not, we spend at least as much time writing and taking notes as we do excavating.

For reasons that most archaeologists (including me) haven't figured out, non-archaeologists do not have this concept as a metaphor. I've been involved in excavations across New England, many of them with public components, and in every case, the most popular question asked by people who visit the sites is the same:

“Have you found anything good yet?”

Now, don't get me wrong—I love this question, but it's kind of a mixed blessing. It's wonderful, because it's a teaching moment—someone is interested in what you're doing, and you get an opportunity to explain it. Unfortunately, the question usually recapitulates the public vision of archaeology—namely, that we dig up objects for their own sake, independent of context. It's been my experience that most of the people who come to archaeological sites think of us as over-glorified treasure hunters. And getting the conversation around to *context* can be a cumbersome and difficult project.

But this is where my clipboard sits again at the intersection of context, excavation, and explanation. Whenever I get this question, I pull out my clipboard, and talk about context. I show maps I've drawn, unfinished bags of artifacts with field tags inside noting their location, the excavation forms half filled in—whatever I've got. And once people get that idea—that we're primarily excavating context as opposed to artifacts, then everything we've found is interesting, because everything is part of that context. Every artifact, ecofact, and feature was deposited in an assemblage as part of a cultural process which the analysis of context allows us to explain. So my clipboard ends up being a carrier of context, and allows me to integrate excavation and explanation. Not too shabby for a piece of metal with a clip...



The Archaeologist and his assemblage, ca. 2007. Note the clipboard in the foreground.

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