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Essay 3.2 Multiple Ways of Knowing the Past

Personal diaries, travel narratives, and other forms of written historical records are rarely as mysterious as the ancient remains studied by archaeologists. In fact, archaeology provides limited scientific data, but a plethora to discover, debunk, and interpret about our human past. In archaeology, there are no modern-day witnesses or substantial written records to confirm our understanding of the past, rendering the ancient sites a paradise for individuals with daring imaginations and creative ways of interpreting a single history. The only problem with this is that there tends to be multiple interpretations that are potentially biased and inaccurate. One must recognize that one observer develops an interpretation based on his own experiences, knowledge, and understanding of archaeology, which can be very different from another observer's. Conflicting theories on the nature of a burial site and biased perceptions of the women's role in a prehistoric society are only two of a multitude of obstacles that archaeologists have been facing discovery after another. Historic sites such as Stonehenge in Britain and Little Rapids in East Dakota delineate the clash of interpretations among anthropologists. It also shows the clash between anthropologists and other active observers of the ancient remains. By examining the differing opinions of the past and evaluating their benefit to contemporary society, one may better figure how archaeologists can integrate alternative interpretations without compromising their validity.

Scattered across the British Isles are megalithic structures like Stonehenge that attract not only archaeologists, but over two-hundred and fifty-thousand pagans throughout Britain. Stonehenge has been considered a sacred ground for pagans since the 18th century, yet most

pagans are not focused on replicating past traditions, but rather evolving the practice into a modern system inspired by those traditions. Organized rituals eventually became problematic in the 1970's when young pagans gathering for the occasional solstice (a celebration of the sun when it is at its greatest distance from the celestial equator) involved the use of drugs and excessive alcohol. The free festival attracted massive crowds which contributed to a state of chaos at the ancient site. Although vandalism is infrequent since most pagans believe in the utmost reverence of the ancient ruins, uncontrollable mobs of inebriated adolescents put the site at risk of destruction. Before Stonehenge could be disturbed any further, chief archaeologist David Miles of an organization called English Heritage, which protects the site, blocked access to all visitors. Ironically, some of these pagans considered archaeological digs as a desecration to their ancestors' burial grounds. Thus, pagans were outraged by the sudden deprivation of their right to observe a vital aspect of their religion while archaeologists seized every opportunity to make use of it (Powell, 2003). Although every British citizen must be granted their right to practice religion, archaeologists were adamant about keeping them off the grounds that pagans considered holy. For archaeologists, preserving potentially valuable information about our rich history is more important than privileging a people access to holy ground.

It is important to recognize the benefits from both sides of the argument. The archaeologists, on one hand, believe the ancient remains must be preserved in order to study and cherish it rich history. Pagans, on the other hand, would rather use the ancient remains for the present as a way of paying homage to its past. The upside of providing free access to pagans on solstice is that British citizens are provided with the basic privilege to openly observe religion and especially celebrate traditions rooted in a vibrant history of an ancient and somewhat mysterious people. For archaeologists, however, the benefits of blocking access to Stonehedge

are crucial to the preservation of the ancient ruins. Contemporary society can benefit from information that mere scientific data cannot adequately provide- the way a people live, their subsistence patterns, cultural motivations, and how they were structured politically are all important questions that can be answered only when sites have not been modified and tarnished by modern mishaps. I realize that everyone should have the right to practice religion; but if they have the potential to destroy our access to valuable information about human past, then we need to reconsider how we handle archaeological sites. What seems more important is preserving the human past in order to better understand humans and their nature. Exceptions could be made for eager pagans by setting quotas on how many can attend to each solstice and implementing tight security on the site during such occasions. Regardless, I believe that all archaeological sites should be undisturbed as much as possible.

Another major example of the archaeologist's everyday predicament can be demonstrated by studies conducted on natives of Eastern Dakota. In response to omnipresent androcentrism in conventional interpretations of archaeological finds, Janet D. Spector developed a feminist-driven approach to studying the ancestors of Indians at Little Rapids. In order to subdue western ideologies of women and gender arrangements, Spencer developed the task differentiation framework, in which one examines gender specific activity patterns. Unfortunately, her framework failed to provide an objective perspective on gender roles. She then wrote a narrative influenced by her study of contemporary people in the area with the aims of providing examples of how to write archaeology in new ways and realized the importance of including the contemporary society of a people being studied (Spector, 1991).

What is beneficial about Spector's approach is that one is prevented from writing in an androcentric context, which perpetuates degrading stereotypes of women. Feminist archaeology,

as Spector calls it, would emphasize the importance of gender in analyzing the culture and history of a people. Although I recognize the importance of considering gender in archaeological practice, I don't believe feminist archaeology is a completely valid approach. It seems just as precarious for interpreting a case study from a feminist, gynocentric point of view as it is androcentric. Also, Spencer's narrative approach is only feasible when societies of an ancient people exist in contemporary form because one would be doing more of an ethnographic study than decrypting the past. As for investing prehistoric sites where there is no contemporary society to extract information form, feminist archaeology is inclined to being biased and a detriment to formulating more accurate interpretations of the past.

Alternative interpretations to conventional archeological understanding should be limited, but not completely ignored. It is imperative that archaeologists integrate the gender topic in their case studies. It is also important that they reconcile differences by making compromises and taking into account people who may perceive the site as not just a valuable discovery for the social sciences, but also a sacred ground for a multitude of contemporary people. We must remember, however, that with no substantial written historical records, it is very easy to interpret the past based on biases derived from our own culture or understanding of other current ones. Archaeologists have the crucial responsibility of not only meticulously protecting and caring for their discoveries, but also making thorough decisions about which interpretations are feasible and which reinforce biases in archaeology. Even though the archaeologist's struggle to provide accurate interpretations could forever persist, it is acquiring the open mind to accept a multitude of interpretation that makes their career so problematic, yet noble.

Work Cited

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