The Tyranny of Text: the Archaeology of Religion as Historical Archaeology
Kit W. Wesler
Murray State University

Abstract

There are structural similarities between historical archaeology and the archaeology of religion. Archaeologists have often noted that the archaeology of historic societies tends to be overshadowed by the history of those societies, so that archaeology becomes the Handmaiden of History. Text is favored over archaeological data. The archaeology of religion suffers from similar favoritism. In Americanist historical archaeology, church archaeology is nearly nonexistent, despite being an active field in Great Britain. I suggest that we need to frame our research questions so that archaeology can take a significant role in the interpretation of religion and the investigation of religious sites.

A paper to be presented at the 23rd Annual Symposium on Ohio Valley Urban and Historic Archaeology, Carter Caves State Resort Park, Olive Hill, Kentucky, March 5, 2005.
Last semester I found myself teaching an upper-level class on the Archaeology of Religion. Now, my relationship with religion has always been quite distant. At Wickliffe, when people asked about Mississippian religion, I just said that you can’t really dig up what people believe. But I was asked to develop this class, and I thought, maybe it’s time to stop ducking the question. It turned out to be a very interesting class, not to mention producing the highest enrollment we’d ever had in an upper-division archaeology class.

Along the way, I started thinking about a number of issues in the archaeology or religion. Among those issues were a number areas of theoretical and methodological connections to historical archaeology. I’d like to talk a little about two of those areas today: the relationship between text and the archaeological record, and the place of church archaeology in American historical archaeology.

Some of you have heard my previous rants about the dominance of written records over archaeological data in historical archaeology. Taking a cue from Martin Wobst’s phrase, the tyranny of the ethnographic record, I have begun to call this issue the tyranny of text. It seems to me that, still, too much of historical archaeology is a supplement to the textual history, and that too many papers about historic sites
are compendia of historical data with little insight from the archaeological record.

Further, we still have a long way to go to make any impression on historians. I think of Richard Fox's discussion of his project at the Little Big Horn battlefield, and how historians told him he had nothing to add because he didn't know the documents as intimately as they did. I also note that advisors in my university's history department warn their majors not to take my historical archaeology class because it won't help them any. We all know this problem, I think.

I have always discussed Biblical Archaeology as a case in point, also. I suggest that Biblical Archaeology could be a historical archaeology in the broad sense: a chance to compare independent data sources. How much in the way of cultural reconstruction and testable archaeological hypotheses could be drawn from Biblical—or Quranic—texts? But as practiced, Biblical Archaeology is either used to confirm the Bible, or to deny its applicability to archaeological data.

We can look at the founders of Biblical Archaeology who set the tone. For William Albright, for instance, excavations of Biblical sites were "personal acts of piety." For Albright, archaeology was "useful primarily as a chronological aid and a verification of the accuracy of the Bible."
Or look at J. A. Thompson's work in the 1980s. Thompson was a "Lecturer in Old Testament Studies in a theological school." For him, Biblical archaeology "is a vital branch of general biblical research." He wrote, "through this study we are better able to understand and interpret the textbook of our faith," and, "Archaeological discovery supplements, explains, and at times corroborates the biblical story." In other words, this is archaeology as handmaiden to the Bible.

The contrasting side was voiced by Kathleen Kenyon, who was trained as a prehistorian. She says, "The great interval in time before they [Biblical texts] were put in writing makes it certain that they do not constitute an historical record... Any attempt to use this as a chronological basis is nonsense." She suggests that the grand sweep of the story, places mentioned, geography may be accurate, but incidents and individuals are either ahistorical or not correlatable with archaeological evidence-- so we shouldn't even try.

The debate continues. Neither side is using the Biblical texts as sources of hypotheses that are archaeologically testable: information on economics, foodways, class relationships, et cetera.

There are a few voices trying to find that middle ground. I recommend much of the work of William Dever, for example, in trying to lead the way towards a multidisciplinary
archaeology and the use of textual sources in non-religious ways. But his position raises hackles on both sides, and has yet to become the mainstream.

I used to see this as a Christian fundamentalist thing, lumping Biblical archaeologists of the "proves the Bible" persuasion with Creationists and other literalists. But then I read Gregory Schopen's article in the *Journal of the History of Religions*, entitled "Archaeology and Protestant presuppositions in the study of Indian Buddhism."

Schopen wrote that the study of Buddhism was "decidedly peculiar." He saw "a curious and unargued preference for a certain kind of source material," that is, texts. This despite the clear circumstance that literary material "records what a small atypical part of the Buddhist community wanted that community to believe and practice." He notes that the Buddhist scripture is "heavily edited, is 'canonical' or 'sacred,' and was intended--at the very least--to inculcate an ideal."

He discusses several examples of how the Buddhist scholars discount archaeological data when they are inconsistent with the established history. For instance, there is an ongoing debate about whether monks owned property. The texts say that Buddhist monks renounced all property except for essentials of clothing and a begging bowl. Yet the inscriptions are replete with records of donations by monks and nuns. There are numerous
small hoards of coins at monastic sites. There is a discussion of a small ceramic vessel with a monk's name on it. There is abundant evidence that monks and nuns did own property. But the commentators dismiss the evidence with statements like, "As the Buddhist ascetics could not possess any property..." the donations must have been begged. The coin hoards must be aberrations or a late debasement of the monkhood. The jar with the monk's name was his funerary urn, because he could not have owned property.

Schopen also give the example of the disposal of the dead. Apparently, nothing in Buddhist texts addresses the proper disposal of the deceased. So the scholars say that nothing is known about Buddhist funerary customs. This despite the fact that Buddhist cemeteries have been observed and recorded by archaeologists for 150 years. Schopen comments, "Here the assigning of primary status to literary sources has not so much determined how the archaeological record should be 'read.' It has, rather, determined that it should not be read at all."

He concludes with an observation about the fundamental assumption of Buddhist scholarship: "since archaeology and epigraphy tell us what people actually did they cannot tell us about 'real' or 'correct' religion [which]... resides in scriptural texts, in formal doctrine."

Does this sound like Biblical archaeology? It sounds like the archaeology of Judaism. The Hebrew Bible not only was
written to codify Judaic practice and belief by projecting it well into its own past, but it contains a generally negative view of religion not centered at Jerusalem. Schopen's comment that the text "records what a small atypical part of the [religious] community wanted that community to believe and practice" seems most appropriate here.

There are two major issues in the archaeology of early Judaism: the formation of the Israelites as an ethnic group, and the creation of Judaism as a religion. The first is fairly well in hand in Iron Age I and II studies. The second, in which the transition from Yahweh as a chief god of a pantheon, with his consort Asherah, to the monotheist Yahweh of the Hebrew Bible is critical, is still a mystery in the archaeological record.

This is all very interesting stuff, not least because it parallels the debates in historical archaeology between historians and archaeologists. Archaeology has yet to come into its own. Literary data is privileged in the broader scholarly community, and even among some archaeologists.

I wish I had a nice transition to my second topic, but I don't, so here we switch to church archaeology. As I was looking into the archaeology of recent and Christian religion, I found that church archaeology is a booming concern in Europe. In John Crossley's 1990 book on Post-Medieval archaeology, for example, he calls church archaeology "a fast-growing specialism
over the last 20 years." There is a Society for Church Archaeology based in England, and a journal, *Church Archaeology*, now readying its sixth volume.

In 1997, Carol Pryah, *Church Archaeology*’s editor, wrote that "our first issue rides upon a tide of national developments in ecclesiastical scholarship, preservation and management… embracing the buildings of all faiths and denominations, their burial grounds, and settlement and landscape context."

Warwick Rodwell’s following article noted that Church Archaeology had emerged within the last three decades as a coherent subfield. He described a rather inauspicious founding project, in 1968:

"The excavation of St. Mary Aldermanbury was carried out by a gang of five Irish labourers, supervised by an ex-army captain who professed an interest in archaeology but had no previous experience. Recording was basic and largely conducted on Thursday afternoons when the director paid his weekly visit to check on progress and to take away any artefacts. Finds were not an onerous problem: building materials were not generally retained; skeletal remains were shovelled into sacks and taken away for disposal by the local council and lead coffins were rolled up by the laborers and transported to a scrap yard on Friday afternoons in order to provide cash for the weekend."
Other projects were more professional, and standards comparable to other archaeological projects soon were applied. The impetus intensified after the Anglican Church's Pastoral Measure of 1968, which authorized the divestiture of underutilized churches, the so-called redundant churches. Suddenly historic churches were on the market and vulnerable to conversion or demolition. Most of those actually affected were nineteenth-century churches, but there was great concern for investigating earlier ones. In the meantime, the destructive effects on the archaeological record of normal maintenance, restorations, expansions, and burial programs also prompted investigations of living churches. With this activity, the Anglican Church began to recognize its own responsibilities and interests in conservation of its heritage.

Church archaeology has focussed on three general areas; fabric studies, burials, and landscape contexts. New information about building techniques and materials, often revealing unsuspected sequences of churches, has been valuable, although here again archaeological data has faced an uphill battle for recognition. Rodwell noted some instances in which "art historians... dismissed the structural evidence because it undermined a profound dogma" about certain churches' histories.

Cemetery studies, including excavations, also made contributions, despite that, in Rodwell's words, "exhumation... is
influenced by public emotion, irrational decision-making and duplicity of standards." We can relate to that. But the work has shown that "the archaeology of Christian burial is... a complex subject embracing grave construction,, funerary ritual... and corporeal decomposition."

Finally, landscape studies have investigated siting, orientation, size and form of churches and churchyards, the nature of boundaries and entrance positions, alignments with roads, and topographical and chronological relationships of single churches and within multi-church towns. Church archaeology is clearly here to stay in Europe.

So having looked at this, I tried to prepare a lecture on church archaeology in the United States. Tried. There isn't much there. Noel Hume's 1969 book, one of our founding documents, doesn't even mention churches.

I looked through the index of the journal Historical Archaeology, and found three references to churches. Two mention churches in surveys in Mexico. The third was an effort to find the church at Martin's Hundred in Virginia. Eric Klingelhofer and William Henry used a soil corer in a field, found graves and a few pieces of window glass and lead quarrels with no other domestic refuse, said, "Yup, that's the church," and went away. There is no mention of churches in the journal since 1985.
I looked at Kathy Deagan's *Archaeology at the National Greek Orthodox Shrine*. Sounds promising. But the Shrine owns the site now, not historically. The site did have the first chapel of the St. Augustine Minorcans after 1777, but Deagan did not find it. She did find one rosary bead, but here research questions and analysis were about Spanish colonial assemblages.

Closer to home, Floyd Mansberger did test excavations at L'Eglise de la Famille in Cahokia, Illinois, commissioned in honor of Cahokia's 300th and the church's 200th birthdays. The goals were to document the building's construction history and find pre-1799 features. Mansberger did find a bass pendant crucifix stamped FRANCE at the base--in the topsoil.

I do not for a moment mean to suggest that either Deagan's or Mansberger's projects were not good projects. I am just noting that the goals and findings had nothing to do with an archaeology of religion or of the churches as religious structures.

We do of course have cemetery studies of various types, but as far as I know, very few of them consider the archaeology of Christian burial in any explicit way. The most-studied religious-oriented sites in the U.S. are missions. Elizabeth Graham contributed an overview of mission archaeology to the *Annual Reviews in Anthropology* in 1998. She noted that those studied focus on the contact experience, particularly the lack
of evidence for conversion, and on indigenous groups at the time of contact. Walthall and Benchley's study of the River L'Abbe Mission at Cahokia is a good example, though graham didn't mention it. Graham noted that there are a number of analytical issues that have been given short attention in mission studies, including the process of adaptation and syncretism by the Christian churches in the New World. This is, in fact, integral to the study of Christianity in general; as Graham notes, "Christianity undergoes conversion by being continually transformed." So do all world religions. The processes we see in the Americas are only a segment of worldwide phenomena, and we could contribute to some very broad and comparative perspectives.

But we don't. Why is Church archaeology booming in Europe, and resoundingly silent here? The U.S. is famously the most religious country in the developed world, yet churches are absent from our archaeology.

Is it because of a secularization of the academic community? Are most of us are Kerry voters and shy away from the Bushian religious right? Are we just sick to death of creationist and fundamentalist assaults on science, and therefore shy away from any academic engagement with religious issues?
Or is it in our training? Check your introductory archaeology text. What does it say about the archaeology of religion? I'll pick one. Hole and Heizer, 3rd edition

"Most archaeological inferences about the nature of religion or ideology are highly speculative because they concern areas of behavior for which few rules of interpretation have been developed. Or they may concern interpretation of artifacts that could be explained by reference to kinds of behavior entirely different from the intellectual."

In other words, they punted. This is a later edition of the text I was trained from--no wonder I always ducked the issue!

Renfrew and Bahn's text Archaeology does have a serious section on the archaeology of religion. But if you look at it carefully, it is oriented to the religions of early states, not to world religions--and not to shamanism, animism, or Neolithic Mother Goddessism (which is a whole urn of worms in itself).

I think, largely, we don't do church archaeology because we haven't thought about research questions. Our disciplinary insistence since the 1960s on materialism, research design and anthropological hypotheses left us without defined goals regarding church sites, and then the perspective that religion is epiphenomenal, and so mostly beyond the reach of archaeologists, has reinforced the avoidance.
It's time to think out those issues. It's time to introduce church archaeology into American historical archaeology. Issues of chronology, landscape and social context, the place of church in the community, of whether we can identify denominations in church sites, of whether the Christian church really is a founding influence on the U.S.--as current court cases on the Ten Commandments assert--all of these have archaeological implications, and all can be studied by archaeological methods.

Let's not duck fundamental questions of history and society. We need to think more about the archaeology of religion. We need to do what archaeology does: provide a reality check, a challenge to received wisdom, and a ground truth against the tyranny of text.

Thank you.