

Archaeological Objects

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Archaeologists have made a significant contribution to the study of the Middle Ages in general, and have almost dominated the Early Middle Ages (about 500 AD to about 1100) in particular. Since its inception in the 19th Century, archaeology has habitually discovered objects dated to the period. To this day, the painstaking efforts of these scholars continue to contribute new information to the study of the Middle Ages.

But like all academic disciplines, archaeology, has grown and changed. Before the World War II, archaeology used a historic method for interpretation. In fact, Soviet Archaeology (1) believed the discipline was an auxiliary to Marxist/Leninist historical work. More importantly, archaeology was seriously abused by governments whose all-encompassing ideology dictated what interpretation was correct. After the World War II, a change to a different method of interpretation was necessary. That change, at least with American and Western Europe circles, was anthropology.

Being an *inclusive* discipline, anthropology attempts to take all discernable elements into account in order to explain a culture. Since objects are part of any culture, they are of interest to anthropologists. Historians, trained to examine documents, were less suited to the examination of objects. In 1962 archaeologists Lewis Binford realized the usefulness of anthropology (2). He presents three categories for objects:

1. *Technomic* : "...signifies those artifacts having their primary functional context in coping directly with the physical environment." An iron hammer-head found in a settlement means the ability to smelt and work iron, or conduct trade for needed iron. The hammer can be used to build structures or make other items.

2. *Socio-Technic*: "These artifacts were the material elements having their primary function context in the social sub-systems of the total cultural system." An iron hammer-head found in a grave partially signifies the deceased's useful skills and so position within the community.

3. *Ideo-Technic*: "Items of this class have their primary functional context in the ideological component of the social system." A cast silver pendant in the shape of a hammer signifies a religious/ideological belief of the owner.

Note the example used here, a hammer, is dependent on context for interpretation. For archaeologists defining context has become important for interpretation. When studying a specific object, other finds within the whole context can suggest that object's usage. For instance, a pile of metal slag found nearby would suggest that the hammer could have been used for forging metal. A well- defined context consists of:

- A. The exact geographic location of the context and the object.
- B. The condition of the dig site. Is it a parking lot, a field, a church-yard, etc.?
- C. A physical/visual survey of the site, and a stated strategy of excavation.
- D. A record of the exact position of the object(s) found.
- E. A record of the condition of the object(s) found in situ.

No classification scheme is perfect. But combining Binford's three categories with a well-defined context allows someone to write object centered documentation, instead of a source centered documentation. An example of this documentation could look like this, again using a hammer:

"...a hammer was found at the edge of the settlement area, along with other tools around a firepit. Analysis of the ashes both of the pit and waste found near the area found indications of charcoal and iron slag. For these reasons, the hammer is thought to be Technomic in function, and used for blacksmithing."

Here the documentation states not only how the hammer is used, but how the culture of the settlement perceived it. Blacksmithing was important enough to have a specialized area *and* specialized tools as well. As such, the documentation brings the activity closer, giving the reader a greater understanding of the past culture.

There are other problems. Corrosion and rot take their toll, and few objects found by archaeologists are in pristine condition. Many objects are incomplete, and so their practical function cannot be fully discerned. Secondly, the context of the find is not always easily defined. A stray has very little context of or real context at all. The solution to both of these problems is compare the finds with others found in better condition and in better contexts.

Also, some will disagree, saying this idea is too academic. A rebuttal for this two-fold. First, the current method of documentation—"The Primary Source Scheme"-- is the product of academic thinking. If you reject the new idea, then the old idea must be rejected as well. Second, the majority of documentation used is the product of academic institutions, which trained archaeologists and other scholars. Academics and academic publications are inescapable.

Also true, however, is the fact that the Middle Ages, however it is defined, was not solely about objects. Other subjects should be of interest. Those other subjects should require their own method of documentation. "What is the form of documentation?" should be asked instead of "How does this fit into the requirements?" Multiple forms of classification for specific sources should be used, instead of one ill-fitting form for everything.

This idea may seem radical. After all, writing documentation can be confusing and tedious. Documentation, however, does not simply prove that an object or other project is from a particular medieval time and specific place, but is part of the process of the project. Without it, the work is incomplete. But the nature of any source used should be acknowledged as is. An archaeological source is not a primary source (3), it is an archaeological source to be judged by that discipline's own standards. If there is any radical idea here, it is that.

Notes:

1. Klejn, L. "Chapter 3. Archaeology in Soviet Russia." In: *Archaeology of the Communist Era. A Political History in the 20th Century*. L.R. Lozny (ed.) Cham, Switzerland. Springer (2017). As I understand it, in the Marxist-Leninist sense archaeology was supposed to provide material evidence of the means of production of the past. Archaeological features such as burials were not, then, of primary interest. It must also be realized that under Stalin many archaeologists were purged, since they were considered member of the intelligentsia.

2. Binford, Lewis. "Archaeology as Anthropology." *American Antiquity* (1962) 215-225.

3. Unless you happen to be working on the history of archaeology—a fairly worthwhile pursuit.