

Historical Anthropology

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Historical Anthropology is a social science whose method of examining and interpreting the past cultures. The discipline is not so much interested in chronology, but the natural and human environments in which past peoples have had to live. Defining these environments requires the use of other disciplines.

Historical Anthropology is often confused with History since that discipline began using social science methods. This is the *Annales School* of Bloch, Febvre, Duby, and others (1). Their purpose was to find a deeper understanding of a past populace's beliefs and motivations. The result was social and economic history. In many ways, Historical Anthropology is an extension of that trend.

Anthropology is an *inclusive* discipline, and should take all available forms of information into account before interpretation. This is not say that Anthropology hasn't changed over the years. Currently, matters of priority and interpretation are called *Postprocessual* (2). Here, how an individual in a group reacts to environmental pressure (both natural and human) is taken into consideration, as opposed to how the entire group reacts.

Still, Anthropology in generally is dependent upon field research. This requirement poses a problem for Historical Anthropologists—the past cannot be observed as the present is. As such, scholars must depend on a variety of sources from a specific time and place to interpret a past culture. These sources can roughly be classified to four categories:

1. Written sources.

2. Material sources.

3. Representational sources.

4. Artistic sources.

It should be noted that all sources can inter-relate to each other within one culture.

Written sources are documents, and maybe chronicles, records, letters, news reports, etc. Historians are traditionally interested in these forms of sources, and so the well-worn “primary source” scheme of classification applies very well here. A primary source is the original document. A copy of that source is a secondary source. A glossed copy, commentary, or part of that document is a tertiary source.

The above is a scheme of classification, and no more. Though historians prefer primary sources, no classification can judge a source. A source has to be read and re-read. Many documents require a great deal of skill to read, and so for some a tertiary source is more useful.

Material sources are objects, and can be clothing, jewelry, tools, weapons, furniture, etc. Many objects have been found by archaeologists, who have adopted anthropological methods of interpretation (3). Unlike documents, objects do not “speak” for themselves. Furthermore, the finding, documenting, and preservation of objects in context is a complex process, and needs to be written into a publication—book, article, or otherwise—for interpretation. Hence, the classification for documents, the primary source scheme, cannot apply with material sources. An archaeological dig-report is not a primary source; it is an archaeological dig-report that describes objects, etc. found. Publications that analyze objects are not secondary sources, but continue to describe specific objects found.

The important difference between written and material sources is that material source *requires* description and analysis. Describing a written source, while helpful and often important (), is not always necessary.

Representational sources consist of paintings, drawings, carvings, sculpture, and architecture. This is the territory of art historians, and so the artist, the patron, and the circumstances of work need to be known, if possible. From there, the iconography, style, and purpose of the work can be determined. Such elements as color, texture, material, and size need to be considered for analysis.

However, these sources present a problem unlike the other sources presented above. You cannot transport a cathedral or part of a cathedral, for instance, to the scholar. Most of these sources are unique, and cannot be easily transported if at all, and going to the source can be expensive. Before the internet, the solution to this situation consisted of large photo-slide collections, usually kept by museums, colleges, and universities. Other sources are art auction catalogs, exhibition catalog, and specialized art periodicals.

Artistic sources consist of all the other forms of expression that are not representational: music, theater, poetry, and literature. The sources here are often written and may be confused with regular written documents. The significant difference, however, between artistic sources and regular documents is intent. Artistic sources are meant to be performed and entertain an audience—even if, in the case of literature, that audiences consist of one performed.

This is a completely different dynamic. A church record may inform the reader of who is born when, and who died when. A liturgy for that church, even written, informs and probably reinforces that person's beliefs, and so possibly reflects the needs of a community and its culture. In fact, I have read that past anthropologists see ritual and ceremony in terms of public performance.

These classifications are for the sake of convenience. Musical instruments have been found by archaeologists. They have also been depicted in paintings, and presented in literature. An anthropologist interested in music would be curious about all three of these sources.

Turning to interpreting sources, cultural analysis begins with an understanding of context. This understanding is necessary because context reflect how some people within a group or culture perceived that source. Some sources, such as documents, provide the context by itself. A letter from a husband to his wife, say, states the context within the letter. Some other sources must have the context described. An object found by archaeologists should have to define the situation of its finding—the context—explained as a matter of routine. Once the source’s context is defined, analysis can begin.

Culture is a matter of details. Cultural analysis, to my mind, is a matter discerning an aesthetic from the source by examining those details. A cultural aesthetic presents what is desirable about something. This style of decoration found on a series of similar objects show that at one time, the form and the decoration was wanted. The sounds emitted by a particular musical instrument show that they were wanted for a certain style of music. A liturgy of a specific sect in a religion reflects that sects beliefs in what is right.

In complex cultures one sub-culture may prefer a different aesthetic from another sub-culture. Furthermore, there may be social differences between the two groups. This realization is also part of examining the details of a source or sources. Those details should A. define the separation with the community or group, and B. define who found the aesthetic desirable.

Finally, details reattach the source to the culture. Who wore the clothes, commissioned the painting, listened to the music, wrote the poem, etc. is the point of studying historical sources in the first place. Historical anthropology attempts to understand how someone lived at certain time and place. They could have lived in a close or spread-out community that made up their local culture. How they lived is as important as the events that they heard of or saw.

The human past is not a simple chronology. Whatever you call your research—history, anthropology, or something else—understand that the peoples of the past with a series of environments

and beliefs. Understanding that those elements are at the crux of whatever project that suits your interest.

Notes

1. Marc Bloch's *Feudal Society* is still almost required reading for Medievalists. Familiarity with The Annales School is usually accessed through it.
2. Hodder, Ian. "Post-processual Archaeology." In: *Advances in Archaeological Method and Theory*. (1985) 1-26. I suspect this citation is a reprint of the original article.
3. Binford, Lewis. "Archaeology as Anthropology." (1962). Ian Hodder is also important here.