

TEXT-AIDED ARCHAEOLOGY

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Summary

Texts have been used in archaeological research since the inception of the discipline. The first archaeological explorations took place in circum-Mediterranean lands at a time when the tradition of classical scholarship was strong and where there were numerous texts, such as those of ancient geographers and historians, that could be consulted in order to identify and date ancient sites and monuments.

With the development of culture history as an approach to the study of the past during the nineteenth century, the use of texts in archaeological research became even more important, as archaeologists strove to define the ethnic groups responsible for the production of the artifacts that they were collecting and classifying. In the mid-twentieth century processualists such as Binford argued against the reliance on texts in archaeology, but more recently postprocessualists have returned to them as a source of analogies for understanding past human behavior.

Many kinds of ‘texts’ have been employed in archaeological research: literary texts, such as those of historians, geographers, poets, and dramatists; documents, such as inscriptions, law codes, probate inventories, diaries, etc.; oral traditions; and images, such as mosaics, paintings, sculpture, and maps. There are specialists in the study of each type of text, whom archaeologists must consult if they are to properly interpret the texts they use.

Examples of the use of texts in archaeological research from many parts of the world demonstrate how texts have been used to identify sites, to construct chronologies, to promote nationalism, and to capture the imagination of the public through links between archaeological remains and the mythological past. They also show how the use of texts can be both benefit and constrain interpretations of the past.

Looting of archaeological sites, which destroys evidence by removing artifacts and texts from their original contexts, has been and continues to be a major impediment to the interpretation of the archaeological record.

1. Introduction

Archaeologists have used texts to inform their work since the early fifteenth century when the Renaissance merchant known as Cyriac of Ancona traveled in the eastern Mediterranean making extensive records of the monuments, sculpture, and inscriptions he was shown. Although most of Cyriac’s work has been lost, as have the antiquities he described, it is known that he made extensive use of the *Geography* of Strabo, a first century AD Greek traveler, in order to identify many of the sites he visited. Strabo, in turn, relied on the Homeric epics, in the belief that Homer possessed accurate knowledge of the people and places around which he composed the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

The term ‘text-aided’ archaeology was first proposed by Hawkes in 1954 as a way to distinguish the archaeological study of historical periods and places of the Old World from the ‘text-free’ archaeology of prehistoric periods, i.e., periods that preceded the adoption of self-conscious historical writing. There is debate, however, regarding the classification of periods known either through rudimentary, non-historical texts such as the Linear B tablets of Bronze Age Greece, or through texts like the Homeric epics that were composed and transmitted orally for centuries before they were committed to writing. Although the term ‘protohistoric’ has been used to describe these periods, it has not found universal acceptance. In North America, the introduction of writing and European culture in the year 1492 marks the division between the prehistoric indigenous past and historical times.

The terms ‘historical archaeology’ and ‘text-aided archaeology’ often are used interchangeably, and recent discussions regarding the nature of literacy and the meaning of the term ‘text’ have broadened the definition of historical archaeology to include the availability of texts of all kinds, not just self-conscious histories. The following discussion, therefore, will touch on the use not only of histories, but also of poetry, drama, documents, images, and oral traditions in text-aided archaeological research.

2. Texts and material remains

The kind of evidence derived from texts differs substantially from that of material remains. Texts are often characterized as particularizing, archaeology as generalizing. Texts speak about short-term, specific events, while archaeology reveals long-term processes. Likewise, texts can speak about individuals in history, while archaeology usually must be content to study the material remains of groups. Texts focus on the elite members of society, while archaeological remains provide evidence for those whose voices are silent in written accounts, such as the poor, women, and disenfranchised members of society. Yet, archaeology can only reveal how their lives were determined by such things as environmental constraints, economic cycles, and demographic pressures, rather than by social, political, and religious ideas known from texts. Finally, texts provide an *emic* (insider’s) view of past cultures, while the study of material remains produces an *etic* (outsider’s) view. Thus, the differences in textual and material evidence suggest that although they may be about *related* things, they rarely are about the *same* things.

Some have argued that one of the strengths of text-aided archaeology is the fact that texts and material remains are two separate, *independent* categories of evidence about the past that can be used to corroborate one another. However, the simple fact that claims about the past originate from different categories of evidence does not guarantee their independence. Rather, a piece of evidence can be considered independent only if the reasons for believing that it is true do not depend on the reasons for believing that the other piece of evidence also is true. For example, when the identification of a site is equally possible through textual evidence or evidence from the site itself, the two pieces of evidence can be said to be independent. But if either piece of evidence is ambiguous, and the ambiguity can be resolved only by referring to the other piece of evidence, the two cannot be said to be independent even though they belong to different categories.

Because they are intentionally and consciously produced, it is thought that ambiguity and bias are inherent in texts, in contrast to material remains, which some have argued are not intended to communicate information. Contemporary ethnographic evidence has shown, however, that people often incorporate intentional symbolism in their artifacts, or use artifacts in a symbolic way in order to construct social identities, which also results in ambiguity. Moreover, some texts such as probate documents also provide unbiased accounts whose meaning has not been consciously manipulated. Finally, because natural processes determine the selection and preservation of material remains, while the self-conscious actions of people affect the preservation of texts, some believe that the archaeological record preserves a less biased account of the past than texts. Ultimately, however, the reliability of each piece of evidence, whether archaeological or

textual, must be evaluated on its own merits, not on the basis of the category of evidence to which it belongs.

3. Texts and historical archaeology

The variety and quantity of texts available for use in conjunction with archaeological research varies greatly depending on the time period and geographic setting of the site or region under study. Many factors, such as the extent of literacy, the nature and preservation of materials on which texts were written, and the selection of texts thought worthy of preservation by later generations have played a role in forming the body of surviving texts. For example, the large number of inscriptions from fifth century BC Athens is in stark contrast to the paucity of inscriptions from the same period elsewhere in Greece. Moreover, most Athenian inscriptions record public rather than private transactions, due in large part to poor conditions for the preservation of perishable writing materials such as papyrus, wooden boards, and leather that presumably were used for private documents. In Egypt, however, where conditions for the preservation of these materials are good, the picture of the past preserved in texts is far more comprehensive.

3.1. Literary texts

Many of the texts used in conjunction with archaeological research belong to the category of literary as opposed to documentary evidence. For example, the works of ancient historians and geographers often are consulted for information relating to chronology, the location of sites and monuments, topographical features, and landscape changes. (See 5.5.1 Greece) These are not always reliable sources, however, since their authors often lived at a later time or in a different place from the events they describe and as a result relied on oral accounts of informants or texts of earlier authors for their information. Rarely did they consult original documents from the period in question. When evaluating the reliability of a text, therefore, it is necessary to determine the author's bias as well as that of his sources. In addition, since historical writing is a literary form, an author's selection and arrangement of material will affect its intended meaning. Texts also must be evaluated to determine whether or not they record what the author actually wrote, since no extant manuscript is that written by its original author but is a copy many times removed. In addition, ancient authors sometimes appropriated the text of an earlier writer, copying it word for word without acknowledging the source, so the same account found in more than one author is not necessarily more reliable than a variant found in only a single author.

In addition to historians and geographers, poets, dramatists and orators also provide useful information about the past. For example, they may speak of activities that took place at a particular site or in a particular building, the function of specific objects, and the nature of the landscape in certain places or at certain times. This kind of information is often difficult to tease out of a text, however, as it was part of the common cultural background of the intended audience, which is not always made explicit.

Formerly, when archaeology was more closely allied with philology and history, some archaeologists were capable of evaluating and interpreting textual as well as material

evidence; but today, as the scientific aspects of archaeology have become increasingly important, most archaeologists no longer receive adequate training in literary and historical analysis. Therefore, collaboration with philologists and historians has become a necessity for archaeologists who rely on textual evidence to interpret the past.

3.2. Documents

Documents, both public and private, form another category of texts available to archaeologists. They include law codes, treaties, administrative records, boundary markers, dedicatory inscriptions, records of business transactions, correspondence, deeds, wills, probate inventories, etc. Because most documents are intended as contemporary records of events and transactions, they generally lack the bias noted in other written sources.

For ancient periods most documents are preserved as inscriptions of various sorts: inscribed on clay (see 5.1.3 Mesopotamia and 8.6.1 Bronze Age Greece and Homeric archaeology) and stone (see 5.5.2 India and Nepal), incised or painted on ceramics (see 5.5.2 Mesoamerica), and as legends on coins. Even when found in archaeological contexts, however, it is not the archaeologist who normally studies inscriptions but other specialists. For example, epigraphers deal with inscriptions on clay, stone or metal, numismatists with coin legends, papyrologists with texts written in ink on perishable materials such as papyrus, wood, and leather as well as on pottery fragments (*ostraka*), and ceramic specialists with painted inscriptions that belong to the original decoration of ancient pottery. Some believe that the primary duty of these specialists is simply to establish a reliable text, but others argue that the job of integrating the text into history falls under their purview as well.

There has been a temptation to put greater faith in inscriptions than in the accounts of ancient historians or other literary texts, in the belief that they are more vivid and objective witnesses to the events they recount. However, bias can exist in such texts as well. Rulers may have exaggerated their conquests, or even appropriated the deeds of their predecessors; honorary decrees may have been proposed ‘tongue in cheek’; or an inscription may be a later compilation of various kinds of information about a particular event. The context in which inscriptions are found must also be carefully evaluated, since inscriptions sometimes have been incorporated into later structures.

3.3. Oral traditions

Although it might appear that oral history is beyond the scope of text-aided archaeology, oral traditions can be viewed as another form of ‘text’ through which information about the past is preserved. The most common use of oral history is as an aid to the interpretation of documentary and archaeological evidence; but oral history also can stand on its own as a source of evidence about the past. In both cases, oral traditions provide an emic view of the past, which can be contrasted to the etic view of foreigners that is preserved in written accounts.

There are two forms of oral history: one in which informants recount events or processes in which they participated or witnessed, and the other in which informants

relate events that occurred outside their experience or lifetime. Although the former accounts are more reliable and easier to confirm, all oral accounts, by their very nature, are subject to change with each retelling. Faulty memory and recollection often impose new chronologies or introduce anachronisms, making the lack of reliable chronology the most serious limitation of oral histories. Moreover, changes in oral accounts also result from the desire of informants to tailor their accounts to meet the perceived wishes of their listeners.

Some archaeologists see the use of oral accounts as unscientific, since they believe that they belong to the realm of myth rather than history. This attitude is prevalent in literate societies, which tend to marginalize oral communication by relegating to it things such as magic while elevating matters such as religion to the domain of texts. In societies without pervasive written traditions, on the other hand, oral accounts are the repository of most traditional information.

In the Third World, where much archaeological research involves periods that precede written texts and where strong oral traditions still exist, there is a greater potential, as well as a greater need, for the use of oral history in archaeological research than in regions with rich textual and documentary backgrounds. Here oral traditions have been especially useful in locating and identifying ancient sites (see 5.4 Africa) and in interpreting small-scale items such as a site's recent history, the function of individual structures, and short-term economic patterns. In addition, oral traditions can provide a voice to groups that otherwise are silenced by correcting faulty conclusions drawn from textual and/or archaeological evidence. At times, however, oral accounts pertaining to well known ancient sites and monuments have been distorted to serve the nationalistic purposes of post-colonial governments as they strive to create modern nation-states in territories where artificial borders were drawn by past colonial powers.

3.4. Iconography and images

Although images are not texts in the proper sense, they can serve as intermediaries between objects and texts. For example, vase paintings, mosaics, murals, book illustrations, and maps can supply contexts for objects from archaeological sites whose use would otherwise be difficult to determine. Pictorial representations depicting scenes from everyday life such as activities in workshops, banqueting scenes, theater productions, and weddings, some of which also incorporate written texts that identify the objects or activities portrayed, have aided in the interpretation of many archaeological remains. In addition, some images became fixed representations of important events or ideas that served as powerful reminders of past legendary or historical events. The presentation of these symbols in iconographic form functioned as powerful ‘texts,’ accessible to everyone, not just literate members of society. Although these images preserve significant information about the past, it is often ambiguous and difficult to interpret since contemporary written texts rarely comment upon their meaning.

4. Culture History, Processual, and Postprocessual Archaeology

In the Old World, where text-aided archaeology originated, the initial focus of

archaeology was on ancient literate cultures, especially those that were viewed as antecedent to the European cultures of the time. Under the influence of nationalism in the late nineteenth century, an approach called ‘culture history’ eventually emerged that was highly descriptive, looked to ancient texts to supply analogs for past human activities, and used specific examples to form generalizations that could explain variations in the archaeological record, i.e., it is an inductive method.

Archaeologists who subscribed to the premises of culture history asserted that without the aid of texts, it was difficult to reconstruct many past cultural practices. For example, Hawkes maintained that the more specifically human the activity, the less accessible it is through archaeological evidence alone. His well-known ‘ladder of inference’ states that there is an increasing degree of difficulty when making inferences from archaeological phenomena as one moves from the realm of technology to subsistence/economics, social/political institutions, and finally religious institutions and spiritual life.

When employed as a framework for the interpretation of prehistoric sites, the goal of culture history was to define archaeological cultures, i.e., the material manifestations of groups of individuals who were responsible for the production of assemblages of artifacts recovered through archaeological excavation and survey. Shared traits in the material record were used to define an archaeological culture, which often was equated with an ethnic group according to what some have called a pots equal people syndrome. Geographical and temporal variation in the archaeological record was attributed to cultural diffusion, migration, or invasion rather than to cultural evolution, as had been the case previously.

In response to what he viewed as the limitations of the culture history approach, Lewis Binford, the leading proponent of the so-called New (processual) Archaeology in North America, argued in the mid-1960s that methodological naïveté, not lack of texts, prevented archaeologists from recognizing non-material elements of past human activity in the archaeological record. Rather than the particularizing concerns of culture history, the New Archaeology was problem oriented, emphasizing system, process, and the formulation of general laws, which were generated and tested using the hypothetico-deductive method employed in the empirical sciences. History and archaeology were regarded as two separate fields of study, and increasing emphasis was placed on the ties between archaeology and anthropology.

More recently, however, postprocessualists such as Hodder have criticized Binford’s approach for ignoring the role of purposeful human thought and action, as well as for dismissing the wide variety of past human experience. Because postprocessualism is an emic approach that attempts to get at the views of people in the past regarding how they did things and what was important to them, the approach works best with texts. As a result, some aspects of culture history are once again becoming incorporated into archaeological research programs.

However, the availability of texts can be seen as both an advantage and a disadvantage, or as Andrén has termed it, the ‘paradox of historical archaeology.’ For on the one hand, texts supply analogies, either ancient or modern, as well as contemporary evidence for

the interpretation of the archaeological record. On the other hand, a reliance on texts runs the risk of tautology by constraining the interpretation of the archaeological record to what is already known.

5. Examples of Text-Aided Archaeology

Since text-aided archaeology still lacks a strong body of theory to support it, specific examples illustrating how texts and archaeology have been used in conjunction with one another often are employed to demonstrate the methods, successes, and failures of the approach. The examples given here have been chosen to illustrate applications of text-aided archaeology in different geographical settings and chronological periods worldwide. Some are detailed accounts of specific instances where both textual and archaeological evidence have been joined in an attempt to solve a particular historical or archaeological problem. Others are simply overviews of the nature of text-aided archaeology in a particular region or country. Although these examples are necessarily selective, they demonstrate that, while the approaches may vary from one part of the world to another, the problems that arise when archaeologists employ texts to aid in the interpretation of the archaeological record are similar.

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Biographical Sketch

Nancy C. Wilkie is the William H. Laird Professor of Classics, Anthropology, and the Liberal Arts at Carleton College, Northfield, MN, USA. She was awarded her AB in Classics from Stanford University and her MA and PhD in Greek from the University of Minnesota. As a Registered Professional Archaeologist (RPA) she has participated in archaeological surveys and excavations in Greece, Egypt, and Nepal, and as Fulbright Senior Lecturer at Tribhuvan University in Kathmandu, Nepal. Her publications include several books and numerous articles on this work. In addition, she has written and lectured widely on issues of cultural heritage preservation, and she currently serves as a member of the Cultural Property Advisory Committee of the US State Department, to which she was appointed in 2003. In 1998 she was elected President of the Archaeological Institute of America (AIA), a position that she held until 2002. Previous to that time she also served as First Vice-President (1994-1998) and Academic Trustee (1988-1994) of the AIA.

She also has served as Chair of the Committee on Excavations and Survey and as Chair of the Committee on the Wiener Laboratory as a member of the Managing Committee of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens.