What is community archaeology?

Yvonne Marshall

Abstract

Community archaeology, understood as a distinctive set of practices within the wider discipline, is a relatively new development. Its most important distinguishing characteristic is the relinquishing of at least partial control of a project to the local community. This introduction takes a preliminary look at where this kind of archaeology is being carried out around the world and outlines what marks it out as different from other kinds of archaeology. In conclusion, it is suggested that community archaeology has a unique, if not critical, contribution to make to the future development of archaeology as a genuinely worldwide discipline.

Keywords

Community archaeology; post-colonial archaeology; collaborative research; colonialism; heritage management; feminist archaeology.

Is community archaeology new?

In some senses community archaeology has always been with us. People have always engaged with the past in the process of establishing meaning in the present, and they routinely incorporate objects and places associated with remembered or imagined past events into the narratives that create and sustain them as communities. Such actions have been integral to people’s lives since long before archaeology was invented (Bradley and Williams 1998), and have been part of the discipline throughout its history. In this broad sense community archaeology is far from new.

In this volume, however, we use the concept of community archaeology in a much more specific way. While the various papers are concerned with different aspects of what we are calling community archaeology, all aspire to certain core ideals of archaeological practice. These are detailed in the opening paper by Moser et al. They are in the process of developing an explicit methodology for community archaeology, which they suggest should include seven components. These concern all parts of an archaeological project from the initial point of devising research questions or areas of interest, to setting up a project, field practices, data collection, analysis, storage and dissemination, and public presentation.
Not all authors in this volume would aspire to include all these components in their projects, although each includes some of them. All authors would however agree on Moser et al.’s key point – that at every step in a project at least partial control remains with the community. This is the critical insight.

**Where has community archaeology come from?**

A definitive account of international developments in community archaeology has yet to be written but the way this volume has come together offers some preliminary indications. Following the call for papers, a surprisingly large number of abstracts and proposals were received from Australia and New Zealand. The final volume reflects this response and has three papers from Australia (Clarke; Fredericksen; Greer et al.), one from New Zealand (Allen et al.) and papers by New Zealanders and Australians that discuss other areas (Crosby; Marshall; Moser). This antipodean dominance was neither planned nor anticipated, and the reason for it was not immediately apparent, for, as this volume demonstrates, community archaeology is taking place all over the world. However, it appears to be more explicitly articulated as a specific set of practices within the disciplines of Australia and New Zealand. In these countries people more readily identify themselves as practitioners of community archaeology and there is considerable agreement as to what community archaeology consists of. The authors of all three Australian papers begin by locating themselves within these developments and several papers also provide background information on the development of Australian community archaeology (Clarke; Greer et al.; Moser et al.). Allen et al. touch on some of the developments taking place in New Zealand but there is as yet no published account of the broader tradition of community archaeology that has been established there.

Few offers of papers were received from North America and only two, Friesen and McDavid, are included in the final volume. Neither author has chosen to locate their work within a North American tradition of community archaeology. This is surprising because North America has a long and distinguished history of work in community archaeology. An early example is the internationally known project undertaken at the site of Ozette (Kirk with Daugherty 1974, 1978). Ozette is a late prehistoric/early historic whaling village located at Neah Bay on the north-western tip of Washington State. In 1966–7 excavations directed by Richard Daugherty from Washington State University established the presence of unusually well-preserved organic remains (Kirk with Daugherty 1978: 92–3). In 1970, a dramatic mudslide exposed extensive house timbers and other organic artefacts, prompting the Makah Tribal Council to contact Daugherty and ask him ‘to return to Ozette and evaluate the situation’ (Samuels and Daugherty 1991: 13). Due to the extraordinary preservation of the village in waterlogged conditions beneath earlier mudslides a huge excavation programme was begun. It ran continuously from 1970 to 1981 and was visited by up to 60,000 people each year. This vast enterprise was initiated by the local Makah community and they continued to exercise control and provide direction throughout the project.

From its inception, the Ozette Archaeological Project considered cooperation with the goals of the Makah Indian Nation an important part of the project. Making these
archaeological excavations understandable and relevant to the present generation of Makah was an initial goal, so that the Makah themselves could control the stabilization procedures and storage/accession systems after excavations were completed. . . . As excavations progressed and the scope of the recovered materials became clear, it was obvious that a more permanent facility would be needed to house the recovered materials and to publicly display the preserved evidence of their ancestors’ craftsmanship in carving and weaving. These needs culminated in construction of the Makah Cultural Research Center (MCRC), containing a museum and other facilities, opened in 1979. (Samuels and Daugherty 1991: 18)

The Makah Cultural Research Center was subsequently expanded with the construction of a traditional longhouse, and the addition of further collection management and research areas (Samuels and Daugherty 1991: 21). The close collaboration maintained between archaeologists working at Ozette and local Makah residents, the high level of control exercised over the project by Makah people, the retaining within the community of the means to preserve, store and display the excavated materials, combined with the publication of a large research corpus of books, reports, dissertations and articles, are very much the goals of community archaeology as outlined in this volume by Moser et al. Ozette demonstrates not only that community archaeology has a distinguished history in North America, but also that it has been productive and stimulating.

Another early, internationally known example is Janet Spector’s work at Little Rapids (Spector 1991, 1993). Acting on her long-standing dissatisfaction with narrowly scientific approaches to archaeology, she decided in 1973 ‘to try to develop a feminist approach to archaeology’ (Spector 1993: 7). In 1980, as part of this endeavour, she began working with the Wahpeton people at the site of Little Rapids. A community archaeology project gradually developed and Spector finally began to feel at ease with the archaeological practices she was employing.

For the first time in my archaeological career, a project felt right. We worked as an interdisciplinary, multicultural team. Descendants of the people who had lived at the site were there, speaking Dakota, telling us about Dakota culture, and helping us understand more about the small clues to their past that we found buried just beneath the surface.

(Spector 1993: 15)

For Janet Spector, a community archaeology approach grew out of her feminist convictions that archaeological practices and interpretations needed to be more meaningful in human terms. Other archaeologists have also discovered a synergy between the objectives of feminist and community archaeological approaches, and several are contributors to this volume.

This pioneering work, of which Ozette and Little Rapids are only two of the better-known examples, has not resulted in the identification of community archaeology as a tradition in North America. One reason may be that community archaeology is commonly located within cultural resource management (CRM) rather than being considered part of academic research. An example can be seen in the account published in Antiquity of a successful long-term community archaeology programme conducted by the Pueblo of
Zuni (Anyon and Ferguson 1995). The programme started out in the early 1970s with a largely management and training mandate but only a few years on it was winning contracts and research grants, and both Zuni tribal members and non-Zuni archaeologists were conducting research as part of the programme (Anyon and Ferguson 1995: 916, 927). While the editor of *Antiquity* describes the Zuni programme as ‘an example and model for others’ interested in ‘archaeology becoming more a partnership between researcher and community’ (Anyon and Ferguson 1995: 913), the authors themselves never explicitly suggest this. Their account presents the Zuni programme as an example of innovative and successful CRM, not research. Only in their concluding remarks do they hint that it may also be an innovative way to conduct research with the potential to enrich the discipline and produce unique perspectives on the past. Nor, despite publication in a journal with an explicitly international focus, is there any attempt to locate the Zuni programme as part of wider national or international moves to develop community-based archaeology.

Only one paper was offered from Europe and unfortunately it was not available for the final volume. This cannot mean that community archaeology is not being carried out in Europe. Rather, it suggests that community-based work is not often visible beyond the communities directly involved – a situation which will hopefully change. In Britain, like North America, community archaeology is commonly located within heritage management and outside the remit of serious academic research. For example, a session on community archaeology/social inclusion organized by Don Henson of the Council for British Archaeology opened the 2002 Institute of Field Archaeologists (IFA) Annual Conference. The speakers came from museums, contract-based archaeology units and county councils, but not universities.

The publication of a new journal, *Public Archaeology*, suggests this pattern may change. In the first issue there were two papers on community archaeology. One, not surprisingly in view of this volume, is on a project in Australia (Field et al. 2000). The other deals with England (Faulkner 2000). This second paper draws our attention to the way archaeology in Britain is being narrowed by bureaucratic restriction and by the drive for universal, standardized field practices. Faulkner calls this ‘archaeology from above’ and contrasts it with his alternative ‘archaeology from below’, ‘in which fieldwork is rooted in the community, open to volunteer contributions, organised in a non-exclusive, non-hierarchical way, and dedicated to a research agenda in which material, methods and interpretation are allowed to interact’ (Faulkner 2000: 21).

Faulkner (2000: 30) explains how ‘archaeology from below’ can work in practice by describing his Sedgeford Historical and Archaeological Research Project, a ‘long-term, large-scale, multi-disciplinary, multi-period investigation’ centred on a ‘Norfolk rural parish’. Many components of the Sedgefield project echo those of the Ozette Project and many of Faulkner’s practices are similar to those outlined here by Moser et al.

Four papers in this volume describe work conducted with communities outside the developed, English-speaking world (Ardren, Crosby, Moser et al. and Sen). Three of these are collaborations between English-speaking Western academics and small, non-Western communities interested in developing local heritage tourism. Ardren’s work in the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico and Moser et al.’s work at Quseir, Egypt, are both academic research projects that include extensive components focused on community
heritage development for tourism. In contrast, the Fijian projects discussed by Andrew Crosby are driven entirely by local interests and his involvement with the various village-based heritage tourism initiatives described has been at the request of local communities or organizations. Swadhin Sen’s work in Bangladesh is different again. He examines the role of archaeology in constructing an ideology that establishes and maintains the post-colonial nation of Bangladesh. Sen is concerned to understand how this archaeology impacts on the self-identification of local communities, particularly in terms of how religion and religious monuments are employed.

A key aim of this volume is to change the perspective that community archaeology is simply a CRM or heritage management issue and of little relevance for academic research. The management and public presentation of archaeological and other heritage resources is an integral part of community archaeology. Heritage tourism that puts money into the pockets of local people rather than multinational corporations, and which develops local heritage resources in ways which are sensitive to the needs and interests of local people and to the potential disruption tourists can bring into local communities, is a central part of the projects discussed by Ardren, Crosby and Moser et al. However, community archaeology is much more than this. It is a specific approach to all aspects of archaeological practice and, as such, looks to transform the nature of our discipline in fundamental ways.

Another aim is to bring together some of increasingly numerous experiences of archaeologists working closely with communities all over the world. The many and varied voices of these archaeologists are seldom heard in international publications and are even less often brought together in a way that allows them to inform each other.

What is community archaeology?

Swadhin Sen’s paper (this volume) raises several fundamental questions. What is a community? How is a community constituted and how is it defined? Communities are seldom, if ever, monocultural and are never of one mind. They are aggregations of people who have come together for all kinds of planned and contingent reasons. There are therefore many ways in which the community relevant to a particular archaeological project may emerge. None is unproblematic and in many cases the interest community changes over the course of a project.

For Anne Clarke (this volume) the process of discovering a community was a personal odyssey in which she came to know, respect and value a particular group of aboriginal people. The rewards of becoming part of this community led her to define her work in terms of their changing needs and interests. In Anne Clarke’s case the commitment to community archaeology grew alongside her deepening relationship with a specific community. A different experience of deepening commitment is discussed in Allen et al. (this volume). In this case the ongoing collaborations are taking place between several communities: the University of Auckland, the Taranaki Museum and the Ngati Mutunga Maori community of North Taranaki, New Zealand.

Most commonly perhaps, archaeologists begin by identifying the site or sites on which they want to work and the emergence of a community with interests in those sites follows
from that choice. Two kinds of community tend to emerge. The first consists of people who live locally, either on or close to a site. Such communities are defined in the present and are largely about people’s relationships to their place of residence. For example, Moser et al. (this volume) are working in Egypt on a Roman port more than two millennia old. This site is in many ways temporally and culturally remote from the mixed ethnic community of contemporary Quseir with whom the project is collaborating. In a quite different sense, the religious monuments which are the focus of Sen’s surveys are often remote in cultural and/or religious terms from the local people asked to interpret them. Greer et al.’s discussion of the redevelopment of the Conservatorium of Music in Sydney also concerns a community defined largely in terms of their residence near, or wider interest in, a particular place.

The second kind of community consists of descendants and includes those who can or choose to trace descent from the people who once lived at or near the site. These communities are defined by their relationships to the past and to other people. McDavid’s work on the Levi Jordan Plantation Site (this volume) is concerned with one kind of descendant community. Many of the African-American people it includes are geographically and/or culturally remote from the site and from the archaeological work carried out. As her paper outlines, this situation raises unique problems for archaeologists wishing to consult with and disseminate information to such a far-flung, poorly defined community.

In practice, the two kinds of community described above usually overlap. This is the case for projects discussed by Allen et al., Ardren, Clarke, Crosby, Friesen, Fredericksen and two of the three case studies outlined in Greer et al. Each of these projects involves both a locally resident indigenous community and other members of the indigenous community who no longer reside near the site of interest but retain a sense of connection to the place because they trace descent from people who lived or still live there. In addition, there is usually also a non-indigenous local community that includes the major landowners. For example, the Pakbēh Regional Economy Program, located at Chunucmil on the Yucatán Peninsula, México, operates primarily in collaboration with local Maya residents and descendants, but the project also takes into account the wider community which includes wealthy landowners who are not always resident in the area and descendants of the hacienda owners (Ardren this volume).

Sometimes it is the community which chooses the archaeologist. Max Friesen and Andrew Crosby (both this volume) were each asked by local communities to help with projects already initiated. The Kitikmeot Heritage Society contacted the University of Toronto because they felt that professional archaeological investigations could enrich the oral historical record they were in the process of collecting. Similarly, local Fijian communities and organizations sought the help of a professional archaeologist in order to bring to fruition the village-based tourism initiatives they had begun to set up.

Of particular interest are European/indigenous contact period sites. Many of these sites are places of past conflict and violence. There is a tendency to assume that such sites belong to, or are only of interest to, one of the two sides – usually the side with the most positive experience of the place. Conventional approaches to these sites tend to entrench such dichotomies. In contrast, community archaeology approaches can open up unexpected convergences of interest. A case in point is Moss and Wasson’s (1998) fascinating dialogue discussing the history, meaning and significance of Chet-less-chun-dunn, an
Athapaskan village in Oregon which was burned in 1856 by a party of thirty-four Euro-American men, killing and scattering the inhabitants. Contrary to expectations, archaeological work at the site brought together local descendants from both sides of the conflict in unexpectedly affirming ways.

In this volume, Fredericksen, Greer et al. and McDavid examine sites of past conflict and all come up with surprising results. In the course of his work at Fort Dundas on Melville Island, Australia, Fredericksen found that local Tiwi people chose to weave connections with this apparently European place in a manner unconstrained by literal readings of past events that occurred there. One of the case studies examined by Greer et al. concerns the pastoral industry of New South Wales, Australia, in which both aboriginal and settler peoples were key participants. They argue that an older shared history of mixed aboriginal/settler pastoral communities lies hidden by recent segregation of indigenous and non-indigenous pastoral station workers. Finally, McDavid identifies instances where the descendants of slaves and slave owners unexpectedly discover openings for reconciliation as a result of archaeological work at the plantation site. These examples strongly suggest that archaeologists should be cautious in assuming they know in advance who has an interest in a site and why.

This point returns us to Swadhin Sen’s surveys of how local people choose to interpret religious monuments in Bangladesh. His results show that people are interested in and concerned about these monuments in complex ways and their interests are not necessarily confined to sites identified with their particular religion. The assumption that people will care only about monuments of direct relevance to their own religion is not supported. Instead, people remain open to a wide range of interpretations. These are cautionary tales for archaeologists. It is important that we do not foreclose on some of the potential of community archaeology by being too quick to presume who will or will not be part of the community of interest.

**Where does community archaeology take us?**

In 1981–2 Bruce Trigger and Ian Glover edited two numbers of *World Archaeology* (13(2 and 3)) that explored ‘Regional traditions of archaeological research’. The goal was ‘to examine and try to account for variations in the questions asked and in the modes of analysing and explaining data employed by archaeologists in various countries or regions around the world’ (Trigger and Glover 1981a: 133). The resulting papers were a testament to the diversity of the various archaeological traditions practised in different parts of the world.

In an article that evolved from the two *World Archaeology* volumes, Trigger questioned the idea put forward by David Clarke (1979) that, as the discipline of archaeology matured, we would achieve greater unity or coherence in ‘the kinds of problems archaeologists think it is worth investigating and in what they are predisposed to regard as acceptable interpretations of evidence’ (Trigger 1984: 355). Dynamic regional traditions, Trigger argued, ‘did not reflect the isolation of archaeologists from each other’ as Clarke had suggested, but instead reflected the ‘close relationship between the nature of archaeological research and the social milieu in which it is practiced’ (Trigger 1984: 356–7). Trigger
went on to identify three social contexts that he considered particularly influential in directing the way archaeology was practised: nationalist, imperialist, colonialist. These are all big-picture contexts. They frame the archaeologies of entire nations and groups of nations. But are they our only options?

Les Groube (1985) famously asked this question in reference to the newly emergent, post-colonial nation of Papua New Guinea, a land of only about three million people, but divided into some 900 ethnic groups. If archaeology was able to develop as a discipline only in one of the three contexts outlined by Trigger, there was little hope for it in New Guinea. The papers in this volume are in some senses a follow-up survey to that conducted twenty years ago by Trigger and Glover. Our new survey identifies a fourth and very different kind of social context in which archaeology can flourish. Practised in this context, the community, there remains some hope that the discipline of archaeology will find a mandate among the diverse peoples of postcolonial nations like New Guinea and Bangladesh.

This introduction does not pretend to be a comprehensive review of the emergence of community archaeology. It simply highlights some selected examples known to the author in order to show that similar kinds of development are taking place in many parts of the world. Too often, however, community archaeology conducted in one place remains unknown to archaeologists working in other places – a situation this volume aims to change.

Community archaeology represents an opportunity. We need it, not because it is politically correct, but because it enriches our discipline. Community archaeology encourages us to ask questions of the past we would not otherwise consider, to see archaeological remains in new light and to think in new ways about how the past informs the present. Relinquishing the right to total control over an archaeological project and allowing local communities to make critical decisions on research directions, questions and priorities may at first seem like a loss. Certainly it will sometimes mean that research questions held dear by generations of academics must be put aside. However, with the closing of one opportunity others open. There is a widespread belief among the authors of this volume that the kind of collaborative research fostered by community archaeology will be crucial if archaeology is to have a future. It is the only way that indigenous people, descendant communities and other local interest groups will be able to own the pasts archaeologists are employed to create. As many of the papers make clear, community archaeology can be extremely time consuming, deeply frustrating, humbling and challenging in unanticipated ways – but it is also rewarding in ways that transcend narrow academic accolades.

Department of Archaeology, University of Southampton, SO17 1BJ, UK

References


