



# AN INTRODUCTION TO “THE RECENT PAST”

## A NEW HISTORICAL ARCHAEOLOGY COLUMN

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I am happy and honored to introduce *The Recent Past* to readers of the *The SAA Archaeological Record*. This column is the latest of a series of regular features that has transformed this newsletter into what our new editor Andrew Duff has called a vibrant forum for debate, new ideas, practical advice, and research. *The Recent Past* will focus on issues related to historical archaeology—a growing sub-discipline of our field that most archaeologists are undoubtedly aware of, even if they are not entirely familiar with its underpinnings. As Martin Hall and Stephen Silliman (2006:1) point out in a recent edited volume on the subject, historical archaeology “means different things to different people.” For some, it centers on colonialism, European expansion, modernity or capitalism. For others the important aspect is the presence of the written word alongside the material culture we excavate. Whatever the definition, historical archaeology is the archaeology of the recent past and this column will explore what it has to offer.

Regardless of how one sees historical archaeology, it should be obvious to even the casual observer that the necessity and demand for it has grown dramatically over a relatively short period of time. As America revitalizes (or gentrifies) its urban areas, as more and more historical sites become eligible for inclusion on the National Register for Historic Places, and as many of us look back to our collective pasts to understand our current situations, the need for historical archaeology develops. In the world of cultural resource management, there are few archaeologists that have not needed to deal with historical materials and in the academic world, a growing number of programs including—or even specializing in—historical archaeology have appeared. Thus, the numbers of practitioners self-identifying, at least in part, as historical archaeologists has grown in response. One clear indicator of this phenomenon is the fact that the current membership in the Society for Historical Archaeology (SHA) numbers around 2,400. This means that if all members of the SHA were also members of SAA (which, of course, they are not) they would make up about one-quarter of the SAA membership.

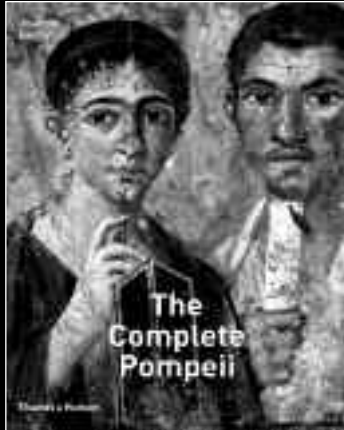
*The SAA Archaeological Record* has, of course, featured a good number of articles dealing with historical archaeology (my per-

sonal favorites include the thematic issues dedicated to the archaeology of American race and ethnicity that were published in 2004). Like our new editor, I hope to build on these past works and use the *The Recent Past* column to provide the SAA audience with a more regular and concentrated venue for historical archaeology.

It seems to me that this column needs to accomplish two different, but related, goals. One is to provide a forum for the discussion and dissemination of information about historical archaeology to the interested SAA readership. Towards this goal I hope continue to create interesting thematic issues (such as the aforementioned articles on American ethnicity) with a more established consistency. Additionally, I hope to use the stand-alone column to cover current research and the debates important to historical archaeologists—covering topics such as descendant community involvement, the political content of historical archaeology, industrial heritage, conflict archaeology, public archaeology, and (of course) the reoccurring debate about the general state and nature of historical archaeology.

I also feel, however, that we need to use this column to improve and expand the dialogue between historical archeologists and the rest of the SAA membership. In many ways there is a false divide between prehistoric and historical archaeologies—two research endeavors that share so much history and method. This is very evident to the many practitioners, such as myself, who have done quite a bit of “both kinds” of archaeology. On the other hand, there can be real differences in the kinds of questions historical archaeologists ask of their data. The very fact that we study New World colonialism, imperialism, industrialization and the rise of capitalism is bound to make our branch of the discipline somewhat distinct. As Kathleen Deagan (1988:10) said during one of our discipline’s many identity crises: “[t]he fact that we are, for the most part, studying our own society also makes—or should make—a difference in both the questions we ask and in our methods for answering them.” However, given the tenor and direction of some of the recent work of a few of my prehistoric colleagues, I do not think that this divide is too wide to bridge. Towards the goal of opening up

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such a dialog, I hope to invite a series of articles for the column that address why the archaeology of the recent past matters and how historical archaeology should fit within our broader discipline.

The next edition of *The SAA Archaeological Record* will be the first thematic issue associated with this column. It will include brief articles on several projects that deal with the theme "Archaeology and Historical Memory." Historical or cultural memory has become an important aspect of many studies over the past decade, and I hope these papers will demonstrate that historical archaeology can be a good platform to examine how we remember the past and what that memory differentially emphasizes and forgets. If you have a project that will fit in this theme, or have ideas for stand-alone columns or thematic issues relating to historical archaeology, do not hesitate to contact me or Andrew Duff. We look forward to your contributions.

Potential contributors to *The Recent Past* can contact me at the following address:

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