Recording Structural Remains
at an Archaeological Site

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Anthropology 231
Winter, 1976
In an effort to study the details of structural remains at an archaeological site much can be gleaned from the ground as well as from the standing structure. Where the architecture is lacking, archaeology can do much to reveal how the structure was built, its original appearance and often, much information about the people who lived there. Information gained from such an archaeological study may be used for the possible preservation or reconstruction of a building, as well as for comparative studies of inter-area and intra-area architecture at one or more points in time.¹

Initially, the prospective archaeologist records the building or its remains just in the way that he discovered it. This process consists first of note-taking and/or the tape-recording of all details. Specifically, all visible elements of construction, both inside and outside the structure are recorded. This should involve -- if the condition of the building permits -- a plan view of the entire site, horizontal and vertical measurements and measurements and drawings of floor, ceiling, and roof details.²

There are several methods of transcribing these measurements, though indeed there are some ways that are more preferable than others. In what Dr. Thomas E. Renk considers to be the best method, lines are drawn parallel to and outside the sketch of the building and property. X's are then placed on
these lines representing where the actual measurements are taken from. For example, in figure one on page three, the distance between points A and B on the layout represents a distance of three feet between the northeast corner of the house and the first window on the east side. Just outside the lines with the X's, and near the center of them, is printed the notation "O'ALL" which stands for the overall measurement. This measurement acts as a check against all individually measured segments, as it is measured independently of them. The large "X" found in the front and backyards of figure one represents the diagonal measurements of these yards. But no matter the method or technique used in transcribing measurements, all drawings should be drawn to scale or appropriately marked if not. In addition, cardinal directions should always be shown on each drawing.3

Photography is an almost indispensable tool for recording purposes and should, in fact, be used in detailing every item in an archaeologist's feature record. Because of the tremendous detail it can provide, almost all questions concerning the appearance and detail of a building can be resolved. Since the obliqueness created by angle shots can be misleading, archaeologists should take photographs that squarely face the intended subject. In addition, each photo should contain an easily recognized feature and/or some slight overlap with previously taken shots, so that it can be easily identified.4

So much in the way of detail can be gained from well-executed photography that one can almost never take too many
Figure 1

Plan view of an historic dwelling and grounds with lines for horizontal measurements (Renk, p.35.).
Post molds most often appear as small, circular dark spots when scraped with a trowel. Such a discoloration should be investigated thoroughly, but one must be a bit wary of classifying it as a post mold immediately. It must be kept in mind that such soil disturbances as animal burrows, small trees and the like will also appear as circular distortions. Then, too, posts may have been set or driven into the ground by relatively recent occupants. Thus, one should be watchful of square molds, which are usually indicative of fairly modern times.\(^\text{10}\)

If a pattern of molds is perceived, this may indicate to the recorder where additional molds may be located and, in the end, give a rough sketch of the structure they previously helped form. After recording the location and size of the top of the mold section, the feature should be divided approximately in half, with one of the halves excavated by vertical exposure of the profile. Such a procedure will give the recorder a proper record of the feature and will also allow for a profile picture of the feature.\(^\text{11}\)

At this point, it is important that level excavation of the area not only continue, but probably be expanded. If after recording the post mold work is continued on the shelf, without any expansion, an important habitation floor may be destroyed. If additional molds are found, they may form the arc of a circle, a straight line of posts, or the angle of one corner of a rectangle. Thus, one should proceed with level excavation until the entire pattern of the floor plan has been exposed or until it is certain that no
additional post molds are present in the vicinity.\textsuperscript{13}

In trying to determine if a group of post molds forms some sort of pattern or is only of a random nature the concerned archaeologist may choose to compute a correlation coefficient in a manner similar to the way Dr. David S. Prose did in his study in his study of Summer Island III.\textsuperscript{14} Specifically, he computed a correlation coefficient between a number of small interior posts and their distance from the center of either of the two hearths discovered in the area.\textsuperscript{15} This yielded an $r$ value of \textit{.814}, significant to the .01 level of probability ($t=10.015$, $n=53$), thus indicating that the semi-circular distribution of these post molds was not of a random nature.\textsuperscript{16} Thus, at a site such as Liberty Hall, where some post molds have been revealed, one could compute a correlation coefficient for a group of relevant post molds that seem to fit a pattern—be it circular, rectangular or whatever—that might be part of some larger structure. It must be added that knowing the structural characteristics of the buildings on your site would be an aid in deciding what particular pattern a correlation coefficient should be computed for.

This last point demonstrates how important it is for the archaeologist to familiarize himself with the relationship that exists between technique and culture in the area in which he intends to work. For instance, Dr. Maurice Robbins has found that in many of his excavations of Indian cultures in Massachusetts that a circular pattern, consisting of either single post molds or of pairs of post molds, may well indicate
a habitation floor, particularly if the enclosed area is marked by discolored or hardened soil. Therefore, by knowing certain facts about the culture he is dealing with, Dr. Robbins can glean much more information from what he actually finds, plus he will be able to proceed in a manner that best suits what he will believe will follow in the process of further excavation.

Whatever pattern is exposed, each post mold should be plotted on the recorder's site map and then marked with a stake that distinguishes the point from other stakes that mark the make-up of the grid. Such a procedure is basic to any archaeological site, for often is the case that the important interpretations concerning a particular excavation are made when a properly done site map is consulted.

Another type of feature that must be excavated with care because of its significance to larger structural remains is the hearth. Most often the first indication of the presence of a hearth will be fragments of burned and reddened stone. These fragments are usually associated with patches of dark soil containing charcoal and/or with reddened areas of burned soil.

Once any one of these evidences is exposed, the immediate area should be investigated in order to confirm or deny the find. In doing this, the archaeologist should leave the stones and areas of discolored soil in place, but try and locate additional stones or discolored soil with a trowel and possibly a paint brush. It should be kept in mind that more stones may be immediately below the surface that has already been exposed.
After properly recording the position of the hearth, section it approximately in half and excavate one of the halves as was discussed in the case of the post mold. At this point, a charcoal sample may be taken in order to try and date the hearth and/or to try and get an indication of the plant life of the period in that area.20

An archaeologist excavating a hearth, and the area around it, should stay alert for possible artifact finds such as cooking utensils. Another important possibility is that carbonized food remains will be present, which could furnish valuable data concerning the food habits of the culture occupying the area being investigated.21

Whatever structural features are uncovered, they should be designated by a collective term and assigned numbers in a single series. This is more preferable than attempting to determine their function immediately and then classifying each type. In regards to such a procedure, Dr. Maurice Robbins suggests that the first feature found on the site should be designated "Fe 1." Then later, when the excavation is complete and the report is being written, you can determine the function of the feature and assign some other designation to it if desired.22 The advantage of such a system is obvious, for often is the case when a feature appears to be something other than it is on its initial discovery.

After the structure is discovered and recorded in this manner, a surveyor should locate the feature on the grid, with precise points, so that it can be mapped. Dr. Robbins then suggests that a vertical measurement from the top of the
ENDNOTES


2Ibid.

3Ibid., p. 36, 39.

4Ibid., p. 39.

5Ibid.


7Ibid., p. 78.


9Ibid.

10Ibid., p. 127.

11Ibid., pp. 127-8.

12Ibid., p. 128.

13Ibid.


15Ibid.

16Ibid.

17Robbins, p. 128.

18Ibid., p. 124.

19Ibid.

20Ibid.

21Ibid.

22Ibid., pp. 156-7.

23Ibid., p. 159.
BIREFLIOGRAPHY


South, Stanley A. "Photography in Historical Archaeology." *Historical Archaeology*, 1968.