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Acquisitiong Archaeology-Year Two From Stratum to Strain

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The best part of archaeology is finding a layer — a stratum — and working out its specific consistencies. The artifacts, features, even the soil that comprise the layer all lend themselves to internal coherence: they are, so the theory goes, all of a single time and place. However all the components of that layer came together, they did, somehow, come together. Even those elements of the stratum that do not seem to fit in or make sense can eventually be worked out with proper methods, sound reasoning, and a little creativity. The remains encapsulated in any single stratum are just so many pieces of a puzzle that, once solved, will reveal the answer to so many questions: Why do these remains? What brought all these elements together in this particular place at this particular time?

What becomes more difficult is taking a step back, moving away from the details of a specific layer, and looking at the larger site. Taken together, the many layers tell a different story altogether — or, perhaps the larger story. In working top down from stratum to stratum, one can be reasonably sure of a reverse chronology. However, there is no guarantee of consistency or continuity. It would be misleading indeed to assume a steady, continuous sequence layer to layer. Historical events could certainly disrupt the sequence: construction, migration, war. Beyond the vicissitudes of history lie great geologic events: floods, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions. Markers for these events are easy enough to identify but they often complicate the flow of history and what some would call progress. Interpretation that spans strata provides a broad view and a more complete context; it also becomes more generalizing and, in some cases, less clarity.

History, some say, is circular; there is some degree of figurative truth in such an assertion in that certain patterns recur. I might go with thematic — linear change of ideas or unfolding of events, but not necessarily a straight line. One may discover categories of ideas that span multiple strata, loosely connected in space but also temporally linked. Nietzsche systematized such a connection into a “genealogy,” an approach that places emphasis on “fundamental transformation, on disruptions, and psychological innovations and moral inventions that emerge in specific material and cultural contexts.”

This idea was developed and refined by Foucault, who used it to transform his own work and famously applied such a method to his popular later works. He “recognized that archaeology provided no account of transition from one system to another. Accordingly, he introduced a ‘genealogical’ approach which does not replace archaeo-

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IMHBCO (In My Humble But Correct Opinion) — Soup Kitchens and Superstores: An (Imperfect) Google Books Analogy

by Rick Anderson (Associate Director for Scholarly Resources & Collections, Marriott Library, University of Utah; Phone: 801-721-1687) <rick.anderson@utah.edu>

Imagine this scenario: the Sunny Day Soup Kitchen is operating in a downtown neighborhood. It has limited funding, but the dedicated and skilled employees who run it do their best. Every day, from 7:00 am until 9:00 pm, they offer soup and bread to anyone who comes through the door. Theoretically, the service is available to all, but in reality there are limitations: only those with access to the facility can use its services, for example (home delivery is available, but only to residents of the immediate neighborhood). The dining area can seat 45 people at a time. The menu is limited as well: each day three kinds of soup and two kinds of bread are offered. Since the Sunny Day Soup Kitchen relies on a combination of (increasingly scarce) public funding and private donations, such limitations are inevitable.

Now imagine that Wal-Mart decides to open a soup kitchen of its own in the same neighborhood. Soup-Mart will operate in a manner that is in some ways similar to that of Sunny Day, with some very significant differences. First of all, Soup-Mart will offer a changing menu of 30 varieties of soup and ten varieties of bread each day, at no charge. The service will be available every day of the week, around the clock, and the dining area seats 500. Soup-Mart will use a small fleet of trucks to deliver soup and bread to residents anywhere in the greater metro area, at no charge. Costs will be underwritten in part by the chain’s other commercial ventures and in part by advertising placed on the walls of the dining room, on the Soup-Mart delivery trucks, and on the bowls in which soup is delivered.

So far, the functional difference between Soup-Mart and the Sunny Day Soup Kitchen is really only one of scale — more soup, more bread, more seats, and more hours of service to more people. But here’s...