Digital Recall

written by Jeremy Huggett | 14/07/2020

We've all experienced that rush of recollection when we uncover some long-hidden or long-lost object from our past in the bottom of a drawer or box, triggering memories of encounters, activities, people, and places. We're accustomed to the idea that we use evocative things as stored memories, deliberately or inadvertently, and as distributed extensions of our embodied memory (e.g. Heersmink 2018). Is it the same with digital objects? For example, van Dijck asks:

> Are analog and digital objects interchangeable in the making, storing, and recalling of memories? Do digital objects change our inscription and remembrance of lived experience, and do they affect the memory process in our brains? (2007, xii).

Perhaps it's a neurosis brought on by the contemplation of my excavation backlog, but I think there is a difference: that not all analog objects are equally interchangeable with digital equivalents in terms of their functioning as distributed memories, and that this difference is significant when we consider the archaeological narratives we are able to construct from our digital records. It may be that this perspective is coloured by the physical nature of my backlog from the 1980s and 1990s which for various reasons sits on the cusp of analog/digital recording. Although Ruth Tringham recalls how in the 1980s the digital recording of hitherto paper records was distrusted (Tringham 2010, 87), not least due to concerns about the fragility of the hardware and impermanence of the product, in my case it was rather more prosaic: as someone working with computers full-time in my day job I had no desire to turn my excavation experience into a busman's holiday as the on-site computer technician. The downside was that I subsequently gave myself the monumental task of manually entering the record sheets into the database and scanning/digitising the plans and sections in the off-season. In retrospect, however, this provides the opportunity to consider the different affordances of the two sets of analog and digital records, a perception that is reinforced by the pre-pandemic experience of packing my office which incorporated two days of sorting and moving the physical archive and about five minutes transferring the digital files.

It isn't so much that the analog or digital records are better or worse than one another – it's simply that they are different, even though in this instance the one was created from the other. The memories triggered by handling the analog records are significantly different to any associated with the digital – there are the muddy fingerprints, dirty smears, the doodles, the crossings-out, the bold

versus faint lines, the annotations and marginal comments, even the spoof finds card for small find number 666, or the cartoon portrait of a co-worker on an area plan. All these things and more have the power to instantly transport you back into the field and prompt remarkably clear memories and recollections of the past. While it is true that they work best for those of us who were there in the first place, they still provide a material albeit imperfect set of impressions for anyone handling those records and a degree of proximity to those actors and actions in the past. In contrast, the digital records carry none of these connotations: they appear clean (and are cleaned-up), they are 'data' to be searched, retrieved, and plotted, not objects equipped with a range of connections, associations, imperfections which in various ways and to different extents carry meaning. Quite literally, these analog records carry the kinds of marginalia I have referred to previously: unstructured information that is not capable of being translated into their digital proxies and which means those proxies are poorer representations as a consequence.

What are the implications of this? It underlines that born-digital records, as currently constituted, do not carry with them many of the associations commonly associated with their analog equivalents, and this has consequences for the archaeological record – one that goes beyond the issues of standardisation etc. commonly associated with the digitised record. But it isn't quite so simple as claiming that old, largely paper-based records are better able to capture the memories of past events and actions in the field, and we can perhaps draw a distinction between different data capture methods. For instance, the kinds of associations outlined above may be commonly found with paper record sheets, permatrace plans, etc., but it seems unlikely that the shift from 35mm photography to digital photography significantly alters the ability of the resulting photographs to make, store and recall our memories, although of course the digital photograph is more amenable to editing and alteration and there is a tendency to take more of them in the first place. There is some dispute over this: some consider that the shift to digital photography favours communication and identity formation over and above its function as remembrance (van Dijck 2008, 58). Alternatively, as as Tringham suggests (2010, 69) in the context of photography and videography, digitalisation does help us remember and brings to mind events and actions in the past.

One conclusion here is that the digitalisation of the written and drawn record is less effective at supporting our memory. And, if this is indeed the case, it is not something that has been fully considered in debates surrounding the archaeological record: that what we offload into a born-digital record provides a more limited scaffold for certain key aspects of recall and recollection in constructing our archaeological narratives, albeit at the same time adding new exclusively digital affordances. That's certainly my experience in preparing for writing up old excavations but we perhaps have yet to face up to the implications of this in terms of the born-digital excavation data that we are increasingly generating. As Colleen Morgan and Holly Wright argue, digital surrogates for field drawings must preserve the material encounter with the archaeological deposits (2018, 146), but this extends beyond the capture and representation of information to the accumulation of imperfections and physical manifestations of the conditions of creation of all our field records.

References

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