Why Finding an English King Matters for the Archaeology of Sarasota/Manatee

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The Top Archaeology Story of 2013

In February 2013, a partnership of academics and avocational historians announce recovering the skeletal remains of King Richard III (reigned 1483-1485), British royalty probably best remembered through a Shakespearian play. King Richard was killed at the end of the War of the Roses, replaced by Henry Tudor who became Henry VII, and his body buried in the church of the Grey Friars; the friary was dissolved by Henry VIII and the church erased. The archaeologists together with the King Richard III Society found the burial site with a skeleton that matched the age, sex, and stature of King Richard III. News accounts celebrated the excavation as a major discovery (for details, see University of Leicester’s website http://www.le.ac.uk/richardiii/).

Portrait of Richard III of England
Small Blue Dot Represents Location of King Richard III’s Remains  
(Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Greyfriars,_Leicester_site.svg)

In December 2013 the editors of *Archaeology* magazine listed the project as the top archaeology story of the year, stating: “The most celebrated archaeology story in recent memory is the 2013 confirmation that bones thought to belong to King Richard III, found beneath a parking lot in Leicester, were, in fact, those of the infamous English monarch. Naturally, it leads our Top 10 Discoveries of 2013” (see http://www.archaeology.org/issues/116-1401/features/1573-richard-iii-homo-erectus-angkor-wat-jamestown).

*Archaeology* Magazine Cover January/February 2014

King Tut’s tomb, Pompeii, Otzi the Ice Man found in the Alps, and now King Richard III are the popular successes of archaeology. The findings make for great headlines as excavations
reveal specific details for individuals and offer tactile evidence of particular moments from the past. But while these are the headline-producing, most of archaeology addresses general questions – the evolution of modern humans, rising sea levels and human responses, the peopling of the Americas, the rise and demise of ancient civilizations, among many other anthropological concerns. The Leicester project offers an opportunity to reflect on the contemporary intersection of excavations, archaeology, and heritage.

The search for specific antiquities started the discipline in the early modern period but for the last half-century professional archaeologists have labeled the approach, dismissively, as antiquarianism. Yet antiquarianism, although rarely under that label, still fits popular perceptions of the field. The search for King Richard III illustrates a productive pathway that meets disciplinary and popular interests.

**Archaeology and History in the News**

The nuances for the Leicester project deserve attention: the archaeologists sustained an academic research design while partnering with the King Richard III Society. The Society, according to its mission statement (http://www.richardiii.net/aboutus.php), “aims to promote, in every possible way, research into the life and times of Richard III, and to secure a reassessment of the material relating to this period, and of the role of this monarch in English history.” The mission statement goes on to recognize that its goals “appear to be an extraordinary phenomenon - a society dedicated to reclaiming the reputation of a king of England who died over 500 years ago and who reigned for little more than two years.” There have been vigorous academic debates over the role of the public in archaeology, particularly as community-based approaches have developed and flourished. There are limits to what archaeological excavations and analyzes can
provide, and restoring a reputation would seem a challenging goal. The archaeological research focused on the layout of the friary precinct and recovering the details of the buildings; the Society focused attention on the famous individual. So the archaeologists recovered the spatial biography and stratigraphy for the church while the Society celebrated the details of King Richard III. The partnership allowed both components of the public archaeology to prosper.

Here in southwest Florida, Looking for Angola has a smaller version of that type of partnership, with Time Sifters Archaeological Society members, volunteers from Reflections of Manatee, Inc., and other community members joining an interdisciplinary research team in the process of locating a community on the Manatee River that existed from the 1770s to 1821. Finding material evidence of a maroon community, even one just two hundred years ago, is a challenge; connecting material remains to a precise set of historic events – the expansion of Angola with the movement of Black Seminoles to Tampa Bay after the 1818 Battle of Suwannee – even more so. But patient research that narrowed the target area and expanded understandings of the materiality for the south side of the Manatee River (see Baram 2013 Partners in Search of History http://box669.bluehost.com/~timesift/?p=1037 for a review) led to successful archaeological analysis of the excavations.

The announcement for the archaeology of Angola in October 2013 did not produce international headlines although the front page of the Bradenton Herald was a great venue for the local community to learn about the discovery.

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Headline from Bradenton Herald, October 17, 2013
The news focus went to the archaeologist; the discovery, by itself, did not capture the popular imagination. The difference is the expectations: a famous king, with a play by Shakespeare to keep the name alive for generations, found in a major British city versus a nearly unknown, to popular perceptions of the region, community of maroons on the Manatee River.

**The Heritage Questions in Southwest Florida**

This seems to be the general challenge for southwest Florida: how to expand interest in the past, to make the history of this region fascinating to the general public, residents and visitors alike. There are historical figures are from the late 19th to early 20th century, who can intrigue and whose names are fairly well-known locally: Whitaker (William and Mary – whose family cemetery is protected by the Daughters of the American Revolution), Ringling (John and Mable and Charles and Edith), and Bertha Palmer (commemorated at Historic Spanish Point). The earlier inhabitants, like the Cuban fishermen, are only vaguely known to the public (although there are hints of their presence, for instance Philippi Creek commemorates the Cuban fisherman Phillippi Bermudez). For the deeper past, few names are known and evidence of specific historic events rare. Even the people between the Calusa and the Tocobaga are known only from the early Spanish record: Uzita, the settlement that encountered Hernando de Soto and his 1539 expedition and Pojoy, a group that might have been descendants from Uzita (see John Hann 2003 *Indians of Central and South Florida 1513-1763*). The earlier peoples left material remains including shell mounds and middens that go back thousands of years but of the individuals and their decisions little is left. Archaeologists have recovered important material evidence of the earliest peoples in such beautiful locations as Little Salt Spring and Warm Mineral Springs that hint at the significance of the region but there is a disconnect between past and present. So it is
easy to lament the lack of breadth and depth of public interest and support for this rich regional heritage.

New College students on the Bolyston Mound
(Photograph by Uzi Baram)

The one heritage question that has popular attention is the landing place for Hernando de Soto. The May 1539 landing is commemorated by the De Soto National Memorial, on the south side of the mouth of the Manatee River, but the exact spot is debated from Charlotte Harbor to Tampa Bay, with the north side of the Little Manatee River being a likely locale (see Jerald Milanich and Charles Hudson 1993 *Hernando de Soto and the Indians of Florida*). Archaeological finds from the expedition, like the 2005 finds a few miles from present-day Ocala (see http://www.ocala.com/section/TOPIC0212), are greeted with media attention and popular enthusiasm. An archaeological find associated with the de Soto expedition in the region would receive attention.
Proposed Route of the de Soto Expedition
(Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:DeSoto_Map_Leg_1_HRoe_2008.jpg)

When the history for the region, from the ancient peoples who buried their dead at Little Salt Spring to the builders of the shell ridges among the Archaic-period coast, from the Pojoy to the Seminoles and maroons, becomes as well known to the residents of Sarasota/Manatee as the historical characters in a Shakespearean play, the finds of archaeological excavations and analyzes will become newsworthy. That is the challenge for supporters of archaeology, historic preservation, and heritage as a means to build social capital and community: to make the regional past come alive so that the archaeological understandings and findings are as exciting as the identification of a human skeleton under a Leicester parking lot.

**Interest Makes Headlines and Headlines Generate Public Interest**

Professional archaeologists today do not seek the trail of the famous, yet the interest in specific histories is what makes archaeology engaging for the general public. The discovery of King Richard III offers a model for collaboration between an intensely interested group looking for a historical figure and the archaeologists who created a research design focused on general, answerable questions. The archaeological result, the one that fits the scholarly network and academic concerns, sustains the professionals and the research team produced a report on the details on the church and its material changes that fits the profession, allowing colleagues to
review, critique, and validate the findings and interpretations, while the discovery made headlines, helping to sustain popular interest in archaeology. Such collaborations offer a productive pathway for archaeologists and the public to engage in heritage-production, hopefully toward positive social values as coexistence, peace, and social justice. As more such collaboration gain traction, I am hopeful that community members will encourage interest for the heritage that is beneath our feet and for research that is scientific and emancipatory. I am also hopeful that the increasing partnerships across this region will encourage the rising generation to be engaged in the nuances as well as general patterns of what happened here over the centuries. Partnerships and collaborations recognize that no one individual can cover all aspects of an archaeological program; the nature of collaboration offers plentiful and fruitful interactions and discoveries for disciplinary concerns and for the general public, a positive lesson from *Archaeology*’s top find of 2013.