

ARCHAEOLOGY & THE UNCERTAIN EDGE

BY COLLEEN MORGAN



TABLE 1 The author, drawing in the field, 2012. *Photograph by Ruth Hatfield*

Until this point the line had been steady, confident, true. The sandy, shelly deposit curved left, then right, was truncated by a later fire pit, then continued west-ward and my pencil recorded all of the contours in a perfect 1:20 centimetre representation. But then the deposit lost its hard, defining edge, feathering out, getting mixed and lost in an interface with the underlying dirt. Where did the sandy shelly deposit stop? Where did the layer beneath it begin? My pencil hesitated then drew a series of quick zig-zags, reminiscent of a line of heartbeats on a heart monitor from a dramatic TV scene, arcing around my deposit. Upon excavating the deposit, I may go back to the drawing, erase the zig-zags and replace them with a single, smooth line. But for now, the edge was ambiguous, open for interpretation, and so I used the drawing convention of a zig-zag, indicating an uncertain edge.

As Tim Ingold (2011:177) notes, archaeology is one of the few specialist disciplines where drawing is still valued as part of our daily practice, as a way to record, understand and engage with the materials of the past. We represent skeletons, landscapes, walls, houses, pottery, rocks and stratigraphic sections in technical, measured to scale drawings. While some of the illustrations end up in our lectures in publications, the majority of these drawings are by archaeologists, for archaeologists, and remain in our grey literature. Still, drawing is a vital part of the most important skill in archaeology—learning how to see, or what Charles Goodwin (1994) calls “professional vision.”

By drawing we intimately inspect our subject, gaining knowledge that transcends taking a photograph or even a laser scan of the same feature. Learning how to discern the stratigraphic relationships in archaeology is a difficult task and “drawing a definite line around something rests on reserves of professional confidence and interpretative skill” (Wickstead 2008:14). To add to the complexity, there are very few universally agreed-upon drawing conventions. I was trained in both American and British styles of excavation and the accompanying drawing conventions wildly differ across the Atlantic. American archaeologists draw the sections of their meter-

squares with little tufts of grass on the top, English archaeologists use hachures to indicate slope across their wide-open trenches. While American-style archaeological technical drawing has few conventions, English archaeologists have standardized lines and rugged tracing paper called permatrace so that they can overlay the drawings of the deposits in stratigraphic order. These differences aside, learning to see and draw archaeological deposits remains at the core of our profession.

This most important skill, that of learning to see and describe archaeological deposits is almost impossible to teach within the confines of a classroom. We rely on field schools to impart this information, taking students to archaeological excavations so they can interact with the archaeology. Sometimes while training students we inscribe the ground with our trowels, teaching them how to see subtle differences in colour or texture. While working in red dirt with colourblind archaeologists in Texas I had to use sound to establish the difference between solid ground and a posthole, tap-tap-tapping my way across the ground with the butt of my trowel until there was a slight change in tenor. Tap-tap-tap-thud-thud-tap-tap-tap, there was the hole that the Caddo dug for the centre post of their structures. Still, there are times that we are uncertain, even after many years of experience. During these times the solid line jolts back to life, a jagged heartbeat of subjectivity in a profession that still struggles for objectivity even after postmodernity.


This small selection of photographs and gifs that I have taken during my time as a field archaeologist in Qatar attempt to demonstrate the concept of the uncertain edge in archaeology. Perhaps as a parallel to teaching field archaeology in a classroom, demonstrating the uncertain edge through photography might be an impossible task; therefore I have chosen to augment a selection of the photographs, sometimes directly inscribing them with the Museum of London Archaeological Service drawing conventions. In this I hope to convey insight into the craft of archaeology and to the interpretive process during excavation. 



TABLE 2 At times we directly inscribe the dirt in order to teach students, or even to remind ourselves. This is not favoured amongst many, and certainly I do not do it before I take photographs of the deposit. I scored this deposit to show my workmen where to begin digging.

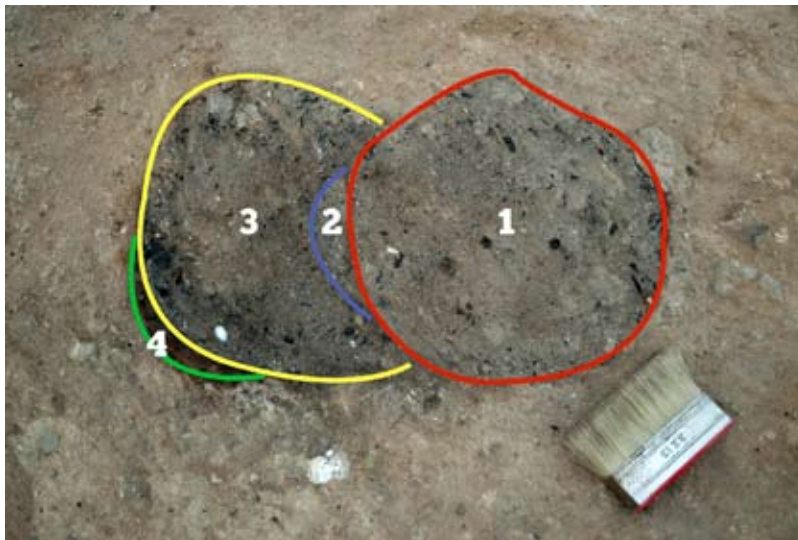


TABLE 3 Some features on archaeological excavations seem obvious, even when the features are intercut. There are four fire pits here; in the single context methodology we record the cut of the fire pit and the fill of the fire pit as two separate events.



TABLE 4 Larger surfaces can be more ambiguous; the sunlight, differential drying, and relative cleanliness can all make deposits look very similar or radically different. I have indicated the uncertain edges of this deposit, though I have since excavated the area and found more certain edges. In this gif the dot-dash-dot lines indicate the limit of excavation and the double dot-dash-double dot lines indicate truncation lines. In single context drawing, each of these cuts and deposits are drawn on individual sheets of permatrace then overlain to replicate the stratigraphy of the site.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 1 Ingold, Tim. 2011. *Being alive: essays on movement, knowledge and description*. London: Routledge.
- 2 Goodwin, Charles. 1994. "Professional Vision". *American Anthropologist*. 96 (3).
- 3 Wickstead, Helen. 2008. "Drawing Archaeology," In *Drawing - the purpose*, ed. Duff, Leo, and Phil Sawdon. Bristol: Intellect Books. 13-29.

All photos by Colleen Morgan (unless otherwise noted)