

MYSTERY, DIVERSITY AND THE JOY OF ARCHAEOLOGY

June 30, 2012 Pat Hadley Day of Archaeology 2012 Anthropology, Archaeological sub-disciplines, archaeologist, Archaeology, Culture, Human, incurable illness, Justin Beiber, maps, Megafauna, metal, Reflection, Theory, University of York, York, Zoology

Human beings are odd beasts. So much more than political animals, our ‘habits’ are so varied that they sometimes seem far from habitual. Capable of action on all scales, from building enormous monuments that take millions of people over many generations to a single individual caring for a companion in the face of incurable illness.

Yet, go with any person to the place they sleep and you will learn much about them, their society, economics, politics, aesthetics and so on. You can learn from the materials of that space – Do they sleep on a bed? under blankets? are they clean? Do they have Justin Beiber posters? Picasso prints? Turner originals? Is there water by the bed? is the cup glass, pottery or metal?

As you learn, you are becoming an archaeologist. You are investigating the intentional and unintentional behaviour of a human being through the materials that form part of their lives. Doing this for another person is difficult enough when they are stood next to you: add thousands of years of cultural distance, destruction and degradation of the objects and the task becomes herculean.

The diversity of posts on the Day of Archaeology reflect the huge variety of skills and ideas required to tackle the material remains of our human past. Some investigate the [finds](#), some the [people themselves](#), others look at [past environments](#), and some [actually dig the stuff up!](#) Most excitingly, the posts reflect the vast amounts of knowledge, capability and enthusiasm from a fraction of the people who have chosen to make archaeology part of their lives.



Pins in a map – a classic artefact made by archaeologists.

Archaeologists are interested in understanding the patterns in human behaviour (if there actually are any habits!) beyond the scale of a single human being's experience.

One classic way of looking for these is putting dots on maps. Geeky folk like me like to do this with computers but in the (not so) old days this was done with pins and paper.

In the postgraduate room at the University of York where I work there is one such map and it has been around for at least 5 years.

No one knows what it means.

The pins are multi-coloured, some have squares of green paper attached, there are pin holes missing pins. A human being (presumably a PhD student in the recent past of York's archaeology department) made this map to record their ideas. The records of their PhD have become separated from it. It has, essentially, become a prehistoric artefact.

Theories abound as to what the pins might mean – castles or battles of the English Civil War, abbeys dissolved in the Reformation, simply sites that the creator had visited – and the meaning of their colouring – chronology, types of site, nothing at all.

I like not knowing. I like using this object as a microcosm for the work of archaeologists – our attempts to read meaning and pattern into the materials left by other human beings. The joy of the puzzle is in it's unravelling, of playing one possibility against the others, of setting patterns in their context, of changing the tools we use to examine the remains.

For the archaeologists out there reading this, there is also a more prosaic lesson in this map: keep better notes!