

Decolonising History: Utilising material culture to diversify perspectives

By Sylvie Gervais sylvie.gervais@durham.ac.uk
Supervised by Dr. Adrian Green a.g.green@durham.ac.uk
Prof. Natalie Mears natalie.mears@durham.ac.uk
History Department

Research aims – decolonial pedagogy through evidence

My research aims to establish why it is valuable for the purpose of decolonisation to implement object handling and a focus on non-textual forms of evidence for the testimonies of marginalised groups. Engagement with the artefacts that belonged to people who were not necessarily literate nor had the means to write their own testimonies allows for widened perspective on what constitutes as 'historical evidence.' **The deconstruction and broadening of the idea of 'evidence' is imperative for increased engagement with sources in the historical study of marginalised and colonised groups.**

Methodology

I looked into collections located within the University with potential to be usefully applied to Early Modern L1 History modules. I contacted Gemma Lewis at the Oriental Museum to discuss artefacts in the university collections, including locally-excavated objects from the period found in the River Wear. **Most relevant to my cause however was the host of remains excavated beneath Palace Green of Scottish soldiers taken hostage after the Battle of Dunbar in 1650.**

Additionally, I conducted research into the pedagogical importance of involving object-handling within historical study. I have found that object handling would greatly benefit the decolonial movement in the history curricula and there are plausible ways of bringing this about by making better use of the university's own collections. This collaboration would bring a greater range of material evidence and aid in the democratising of history and varying the testimonies explored.



Several universities including York and LJMU joined together to work on a 3D reconstruction of a young lad, one of the skeletons in the burial which showed signs of facial scarring, and presumably died at a younger age.



The remains were piled on top of each other unceremoniously and not buried with their possessions which stripped their identity.

Case Study and Discussion

Underneath Palace Green, Durham Cathedral, the remains of imprisoned Scottish soldiers were found in 2013, taken hostage following the Battle of Dunbar in 1650 between Cromwell's Parliamentarians and the Scots. **The hostages in Durham died of either famine, dysentery or disease, but little snippets of their lives have been found through analysis of their skeletons. More significantly, some of the surviving soldiers were taken to the Saugus Iron Works in Massachusetts, New England, and lived, but in indentured servitude.** Here is an example of a group of people whose suffering is being pieced together by the evidence left behind, and their voyage to America also is indicative of the transatlantic exchange during the period. **The original excavation allowed us to re-establish these men's identities which had originally been stripped by their unceremonious burial.**

The examination of material evidence such as this would aid the motive of decolonisation because it fits with the themes and tensions that the Atlantic Archipelago module encounters, and this case study in particular integrates the seminal events of the period and transatlantic emigration as something that affected our local area as well. The discovery of the bones raised questions of possible repatriation as well, which can nicely lead further into a discussion of 'ownership' of material evidence – is labelling something as evidence still cruel and impersonal? Either way, understanding these men's lives allows victims of conflict to finally be known and respected.

Conclusion

The University's collections hold many objects belonging to local people from the early modern period and better utilising them would largely benefit our decolonial motives by means of diversification of evidence.

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