UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON
SPRING 2016

ARCHY 574A: META-ARCHAEOLOGY
Evidential Reasoning in Archaeology

Instructor: Professor Alison Wylie
Class meetings: Tuesdays 5:30-7:20, Savery 157

Seminar Description
This quarter Meta-archaeology is offered as a 3-credit topics seminar on evidence: what counts as archaeological evidence and as best practice reasoning with evidence in archaeological contexts. We'll be reading selections from a manuscript on *Evidential Reasoning in Archaeology* (Chapman and Wylie, in press) and a collection of essays, *Material Evidence: Learning from Archaeological Practice* (ed. Chapman and Wylie 2015), juxtaposed with primary archaeological and philosophical literature on evidence and evidential reasoning. Together these readings bring into focus several different ways of conceptualizing the nature and role of evidence in empirical inquiry. The approach we'll take is resolutely case-based; the central aim of this seminar is to tease out the assumptions about evidence that underpin archaeological debate, and to build a framework for thinking critically and constructively about evidential reasoning in practice.

The readings selected to complement *Material Evidence* and *Evidential Reasoning in Archaeology* are intended to build an historical as well as a philosophical context for understanding contemporary archaeological debate. They include some classic archaeological statements about the limitations and the potential of trace evidence as well philosophical accounts of the logical empiricism that influenced the New Archaeology and a range of alternative accounts that emphasize the theory-laden, purpose-specific nature of evidential claims. Together these delineate a spectrum of positions few of which devolve to the relativist and constructivist extremes that are often assumed to threaten when the case is made that evidential claims are interpretive 'all the way down' or, in an archaeological context, 'at the trowel's edge'.

With this spectrum of positions in view, the focal question of this seminar can be more sharply formulated: how is it that archaeological evidence can be powerfully constraining even though it is thoroughly a construct? The selection of readings drawn from *Material Evidence* and *Evidential Reasoning in Archaeology* illustrate a repertoire of strategies by which archaeologists address this challenge. These include strategies for making effective use of 'legacy' data, bringing external technical/scientific resources to bear on archaeological problems, and mobilizing multiple lines of evidence that exemplify what philosophers of science describe as "robustness reasoning."

Requirements
This is a reading-intensive seminar. The requirements include weekly reading responses and in-class presentations that emphasize close reading and critical analysis of the archaeological and philosophical texts that are assigned for the weekly seminar meetings. In addition, each member of the seminar will be required to write a more substantial thesis-driven paper in which they build their own case-based analysis of evidential reasoning in their area of primary research interest.

Course texts
Material Evidence: Learning from Archaeological Practice, ed. Chapman and Wylie (Routledge, 2015).
All other readings available on Canvas.

Learning objectives
My central goals for this seminar are that you should come away with the following:
- Content knowledge of positions on the nature and use of evidence that have been especially influential in philosophical and archaeological debates about evidence;
- Skills of conceptual analysis relevant for disembedding assumptions about the nature of evidence and norms of evidential reasoning that are often left unstated in archaeological debate;
- Insights about how these positions and assumptions figure in your field of interest and an appraisal of their relevance to your own research program.