

FIELD OBSERVATION, ARCHIVES, AND EXPLANATION

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Few experiences are more intellectually satisfying than puzzling over a question posed by a landscape scene or a map, uncovering the information required to focus the problem's varied dimensions through field investigation, archival search for related documents, or a combination of both, and thereby arriving at a plausible *raison d'être* for a geographical pattern or process. And few conjectures or hypotheses are as difficult to articulate yet as rewarding to solve as are those that spring directly from field observations.

Field research is difficult, in part because one must attempt to interpret an often overwhelming complexity of objects and relationships, layer upon fragmentary layer, derived from nature and culture, in and out of temporal chronology; a seemingly endless flux of clues within a montage where each is potentially causally related to everything or nothing (Boyer 1994). We train to identify and sort visual landscape cues into classes and categories and possible temporal associations: transport technologies and routes, building construction techniques and structural forms, environmental character and human associations, for example.

The field interpreter's difficulties are further magnified by uncertainties inherent in attempting to understand relationships, cause and effect, from the testimony of local informants. Seeking information about current conditions often involves an etiological search for precedents, for causes, which may require a historical perspective. But informants' accounts of past events are only partly reliable. Personal perception of events, of place characteristics, is mediated by an informant's memory and emotional state when an event occurred. Typically, human memory selects and interprets perceptions according to previous knowledge and expectations. These constructed memories are necessarily incomplete, in part because humans cannot perceive events and places from all possible perspectives. Nevertheless, one often attempts to fill the perceptual gaps through the logic of "what must have happened" (Vansina 1985). Of course, this effect is compounded by further selection and streamlining if primary or first-person perceptions are carried from one generation to another through oral tradition. Understanding and explanation are at risk if the field researcher naively attempts to construct a link between the construction of certain landscape relationships and an informant's explanation based on oral tradition and the vagaries of perception and memory. The result can be what is known in ethnohistory as an "iconatroph," a class of spurious etiological explanation wherein a contemporary observer attempts to explain a historic object or relationship *ex post facto* and without a direct observational link between himself or herself and the place or event (Vansina 1985).

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