Physical Evidence and the Battle of the Little Bighorn: The Question of Interpretation

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Abstract

Archaeologists have identified over a thousand shell casings and bullets at the site of the Battle of the Little Bighorn. Many theories on the nature of the battle, the effectiveness of the weapons, and the location of the fighting have been proposed by the location of these artifacts. But there are major problems in interpretation. Only about 1% of the supposed artifacts remain, and the vast majority were plundered long ago. The artifacts are suspect because there is no way to know if they actually had anything to do with the battle or if they were added later. Any analysis made on the bases of the remaining shell casings and bullets must be made with these limitations in mind.

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Little Bighorn Battlefield Museum | Photo: David Graham You'll find the most detailed answers to this question in three fine books: Archaeological Perspectives on the Battle of the Little Bighorn and Archeological Insights into the Custer Battle b... They Died with Custer: Soldiers’ Bones from the Battle of the Little Bighorn—examining skeletal remains to determine how individual soldiers died—is a fascinating blend of history, archeology and forensic anthropology. Archaeological Perspectives on the Battle of the Little Bighorn (p. 105) identifies forty-two firearm types used in the battle. The Battle of the Little Bighorn, fought on the banks of the river of that name in Montana Territory in June 1876, is the most often discussed fight of the Indian wars. It has been said that we will never know what happened there because there were no survivors. That is nonsense. Interpretation should be based on historical and physical evidence whenever possible. Battle relics and bones have been found virtually on every part of the Little Bighorn Battlefield. Where they have not been found is in the trench of the Deep Ravine. When the archaeological record shows no sign of
bodies, it ought to be matched with the appropriate historical record – that there were few, if any, bodies in the Deep Ravine. At mid-day on June 25, Custer's 600 men entered the Little Bighorn Valley. Among the Native Americans, word quickly spread of the impending attack. The older Sitting Bull rallied the warriors and saw to the safety of the women and children, while Crazy Horse set off with a large force to meet the attackers head on. Despite Custer's desperate attempts to regroup his men, they were quickly overwhelmed. Custer and some 200 men in his battalion were attacked by as many as 3,000 Native Americans; within an hour, Custer and all of his soldiers were dead. The Battle of the Little Bighorn, a