

Introduction

For the moment, time as a factor in human life has lost its meaning. Three thousand, four thousand years maybe, have passed and gone since human feet last trod the floor on which you stand, and yet, as you note the signs of recent life around you—the half-filled bowl of mortar for the door, the blackened lamp, the finger-mark upon the freshly painted surface, the farewell garland dropped upon the threshold—you feel it might have been but yesterday. . . . Time is annihilated by little intimate details such as these, and you feel an intruder.

H. Carter and A. C. Mace
The Tomb of Tut.Ankh.Amen

What Is Archaeology?

What image comes to mind when you hear the words “archaeology” or “archaeologist”? Many people picture a romantic figure like the fictional Indiana Jones exploring exotic places in search of treasure and adventure. Novels, movies, and many popular accounts of archaeological discoveries have made this concept of archaeology and archaeologists quite widespread. Tales of abandoned cities, ruined temples, primeval monuments or mysterious ancient tombs tend to kindle the urge for adventure, exploration, or treasure hunting that seems to lie beneath the surface of even the most timid and conventional individuals.

As the following chapters will show, there was once some truth to this popular image of archaeology. The nineteenth century produced a number of archaeological explorers whose escapades could almost match those of Indiana Jones. But the fabulous treasures and exciting adventures that so captivate the public's interest are no longer the primary reasons for archaeological research. Today archaeologists seek knowledge rather than objects that are intrinsically valuable. Their ultimate goal is to sweep aside the mists in which time has enveloped the past and, thus, to help us understand vanished peoples and cultures. As we come to understand those who have gone before, we recognize our common humanity, our oneness with them, and we understand ourselves a little better.

Of course, this goal is not unique to archaeology. Both history and anthropology also seek to understand and empathize with past cultures and civilizations. As a result, archaeology is often regarded as a sub-discipline of one or the other of these two fields of study. What sets archaeology apart, however, is not its final purpose, but its method of achieving that purpose.

Historians, anthropologists, linguists, and other scholars derive information about the past from written records, myths, language, folklore, or oral traditions. However, the archaeologist attempts to deduce facts about bygone societies and events from the physical clues they have left behind. Tools, pottery, houses, temples, art, campfires, roads, and any other remains that show the results of human activity (including such unromantic items as garbage heaps), as well as the skeletal vestiges of humans themselves, all have stories to tell. And these stories might never be learned through written or oral sources. Archaeology attempts to extract from these physical objects as much of humanity's story as possible. Simply put, archaeology is the study of mankind's past through the recovery and analysis of its material remains.

Stages in Archaeology's Development

Archaeology's origins can be traced to a variety of different sources—Renaissance humanism, interest in biblical history, the emergence of a scientific understanding of the world and the universe, early ethnographic and ethnological studies, and art appreciation, among others. From such diverse roots archaeology has passed through what we might characterize as four general phases or stages of growth and develop-

ment. The first two phases, which saw archaeology's birth and growth to maturity, I have called the "heroic age." The last two phases, from after World War I to the present, represent the modern era in archaeology.

It should be kept in mind that this four-stage division is simply a convenient system for understanding multifaceted and interrelated trends through time. The dates given here are also only approximate. They are "averages," so to speak. As the chapters that follow will show, different fields of archaeological study moved from phase to phase at times that varied somewhat from these "average" dates.

PHASE I—EXPLORATION, ANTIQUARIANISM, AND EARLY EXCAVATION (CIRCA 1450-1860)

The first period in archaeology's development was also the longest. It could be said to stretch into the ancient past itself, since various individuals in ancient times were aware that still earlier civilizations had preceded theirs. On occasion, ancients even conducted what amounted to archaeological excavations as part of building renovations or restorations.

However, it was not until the early modern era (the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries) that such awareness of the past began to blossom into scholarly study of bygone cultures. Humanists wanted to learn all they could about ancient Greece and Rome. Biblical scholars began to seek information about the original contexts in which the Holy Scriptures had been produced. Art connoisseurs searched for examples of ancient sculpture, painting, and other arts. European antiquarians became interested in the past of their own nations. Furthermore, the contemporaneous development of the sciences gradually forced scholars to recognize that prior to the early civilizations there had been a pre-historic era. By the middle of the nineteenth century archaeological excavations were being undertaken in the Near East, America, and various parts of Europe in efforts to obtain antiquities and to learn more about the past.

PHASE II—ARCHAEOLOGY COMES OF AGE (CIRCA 1860-1925)

The early nineteenth-century archaeological speculations and excavations laid the foundation for widespread archaeological activity during the latter half of the century. Unfortunately, national rivalries and an emphasis on possession of antiquities often led Westerners to pillage and loot sites in less developed parts of the world. However, reports of these excavations and the arrival of major antiquities in Europe and

the United States helped stimulate widespread interest in and support for archaeological research.

Gradually, those who saw archaeology primarily as a source of information about the past and not simply as an antiquities-collecting enterprise began to exercise some influence. During the decades at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, stratigraphical excavation techniques, typological sequence dating and stratigraphically based pottery chronologies were developed. During this era archaeology became an academic discipline rather than an adventuresome hobby. While antiquities continued to be gathered, what they told us about the past began to be valued more than the objects themselves. Leading scholars in most fields of archaeology had adopted this new professional approach by the outbreak of World War I. By the mid- to late 1920s it had become practically universal.

PHASE III—SYSTEMATIZING AND ORGANIZING THE PAST (CIRCA 1925-1960)

During this period widespread excavation continued in most areas except during and immediately after World War II. The multitude of digs using the now generally accepted stratigraphical method of excavation made it possible for archaeologists to better date and interpret their finds. Scholars were able to synthesize data to define individual cultures and trace their development through time. Unfortunately, many of these cultural "histories" were little more than descriptions of changes in the types and distribution of pottery and other artifacts. Nevertheless, they laid the foundation for the more complete understanding of cultural development that would follow.

As archaeology became more systematic, its practitioners began to express its theory more explicitly. Was archaeology basically a handmaiden of history or was it a form of cultural anthropology? What should archaeologists be striving to accomplish? Naturally, in this discipline with many diverse origins there was little agreement on such theoretical issues. Various attempts to delineate the theory of archaeology led to widening differences between the historically oriented fields of Old World archaeology and the anthropologically oriented New World archaeology.

This period also saw more widespread use of scientific instruments and procedures to locate, date, and interpret remains. Archaeologists learned to use aerial photography, machines that measured electrical resistance, metal detectors, and other scientific devices to locate walls, artifacts, and other archaeological features still buried beneath the earth.

As a result, archaeological surveys became more complete and more useful.

The best known and most important scientific aid to archaeology, however, was in the realm of dating remains. Radiocarbon dating, tree-ring chronology, and other scientific dating methods revolutionized our understanding of prehistoric chronology. They also helped make archaeologists aware of the importance of wood, charcoal, grain, and other natural materials encountered during excavations. Thus, excavation methods had to become even more precise and careful than before.

PHASE IV—TOWARD A SCIENTIFIC ARCHAEOLOGY (CIRCA 1960-PRESENT)

By the 1960s some archaeologists recognized the need for a more complete understanding of ancient cultures, including their ecology. But a few went further. Instead of simply describing ancient cultural phenomena, these scholars sought to explain why the phenomena had occurred. Led by Americans schooled in cultural anthropology, these archaeologists became even more scientific in their approach, proclaiming the advent of a "new archaeology." They emphasized careful formation and testing of hypotheses, a cultural evolutionary approach, the use of systems theory, and quantitative analysis of data. They were confident that they would discover basic laws governing cultural change that not only would enlighten our understanding of the past but better enable us to shape our future.

The ideas of the new archaeologists prompted much criticism and debate. But in time even historically oriented archaeologists accepted some of the elements of the new archaeology, including the use of quantitative analysis of finds.

This change in approach and emphasis has been accompanied by the continued development of scientific aids to archaeology. Better survey devices such as ground-penetrating radar and robotic underwater cameras have been used to locate sites and artifacts. Scientists have also continued to discover and improve scientific methods for dating archaeological remains. But the most important scientific development has been the computer revolution. Over the past decade and a half computers have become commonplace in almost every profession, including archaeology. From providing statistical analyses of pottery sherds to plotting the locations of excavated remains, computers play a major role in modern archaeology. Moreover, it is likely that their importance will continue to increase as time goes on.