

ARCHAEOLOGY

THIRD EDITION



DAVID HURST THOMAS



THIRD EDITION

David Hurst Thomas

American Museum of Natural History

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Preface

People who like this sort of thing will find this the sort of thing they like.

BOOK REVIEW BY ABRAHAM LINCOLN (1809–1865)

Archaeology, Third Edition, is a user-friendly, but not dumbed-down, introduction to archaeology—what it is, who does it, and why anybody should care about archaeology.

This book departs, in a few ways, from the standard textbook. For most archaeology texts, the approach is fairly encyclopedic and dispassionate.

But I can't do it that way. Little about archaeology is impersonal to me, and my biases are clearly reflected here, as they were in the two previous editions of this book.

To be sure, modern archaeology is a specialized and complicated academic discipline. Today's archaeology has plenty of concepts, several bodies of theory, and a huge array of analytical methods—and these are things I'd like you to understand. But archaeology is more than method and theory. It's also dust and discouragement, and I want you to know something about that part as well.

Many, perhaps most, archaeologists tend to write about their life's work in narrative as dry and stuffy as the caves they often excavate. I don't see why archaeological writing needs to be like this. Archaeologists don't talk like that in real life and many even enjoy what they do, although you'd never know it from the literature. Archaeology should be fun and satisfying.

Because of this perspective, you'll find that these pages will reflect something of my own personality. In the first chapter, for instance, I narrate the history and development of Americanist archaeology. Because the lives and interests of individual archaeologists can be as revealing as the archaeology itself, I'll give you a brief life history of eight well-known American archaeologists. The selection is personal, reflecting my own mind-set and background. Other archaeologists would doubtless choose others to personify different values. This is what I mean about the largely personal slant.

Don't be humble. You're not that great.

GOLDA MEIR (1898–1978),
ISRAELI POLITICIAN

You'll also find that the text proceeds largely by example, several of which are drawn from my own archaeological experience. I'll tell the tale of how Gatecliff Shelter was discovered, a fairly subjective sketch designed to show you something of what archaeology really feels like. I'll take you along with us as we search for a lost sixteenth/seventeenth-century Franciscan mission in

Georgia's fabled Sea Islands. This search not only illustrates the growing importance of high-tech remote sensing approaches, but it also tries to impart something of the flavor of getting out there and actually doing the archaeology.

So now you're forewarned: What follows is an anti-encyclopedia. It's a personalized and admittedly idiosyncratic interpretation of what's up in contemporary Americanist archaeology.

*Scientists are not mere knowledge-acquisition
machines; they are guided by emotion and intuition
as well as by cold reason and calculation.*

PAUL HORGAN, STAFF WRITER, *SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN*

How This Book Evolved

This is a brand new, 18-year-old book.

The first edition of *Archaeology* was published in 1979. It provided an overview of what was then called the *new archaeology* (and today is better termed the *processual agenda*). The first edition was unique in a couple of ways. For one thing, it was written from a first-person perspective. I just couldn't see why archaeology needed to be presented as deadly dull and lifeless.

I may have my faults, but being wrong ain't one of them.

JIMMY HOFFA (1913–1975?),
AMERICAN LABOR LEADER

Beyond this, the first edition reflected the times in which it was written. The 1970s and 1980s were at once stimulating and confusing—not unlike today. Many archaeologists could see little but conflict and chaos: loud arguments about how best to understand the past, with little agreement on much of anything.

I bluntly disagreed with this position. The “new archaeologists” had an unfortunate habit of rejecting all that had gone before. I believed (and still believe) that the discipline of archaeology develops by selective accretion—adding newer developments in method and theory to the solid base of what our predecessors accomplished. I saw my role as textbook author to be one of cutting through the hype and self-serving bluster, to demonstrate how the various pieces—“new” and traditional—fit together into a workable discipline of archaeology.

*Archaeology was not practiced exclusively by idiots before
1962 (or 1950 or 1935).*

ALBERT SPAULDING (1914–1990), ARCHAEOLOGIST

The processual agenda had three sequential goals. Archaeologists must first *establish cultural chronology*—define the spatial and temporal framework with which to organize the specifics of the archaeological record. The intermediate goal was to *reconstruct past lifeways*, to define the recoverable aspects of past human existence: settlement pattern, population density, technology, economy, organization of domestic life, kinship, maintenance of law and or-

der, social stratification, ritual, art, and religion. In effect, archaeologists working at this intermediate goal were pursuing “the anthropology of the dead.” The ultimate goal in archaeology was to transcend the specifics of chronology and lifeway to *define the cultural processes* behind past and present behaviors. So-called *processual archaeology* sought to uncover the timeless and spaceless law-like generalizations that would help us understand modern society and how it came to be. Explaining this sequential, overarching framework in processual archaeology was my major objective in the first edition of *Archaeology*.

*If I have seen a little further it is by standing on the
shoulders of Giants.*

SIR ISAAC NEWTON (1642–1727), PHYSICIST AND MATHEMATICIAN

But after nearly a decade, *Archaeology* began looking a little frayed around the edges. The discipline had changed, and a new edition was clearly in order. In 1989's *Archaeology*, Second Edition, I replaced out-of-date and “morbund” sections with fresher examples that demonstrated current archaeology in action.

Although the second edition maintained the basic processual agenda as an organizing framework, I made several significant additions, upgrading the discussions of historical archaeology and Cultural Resource Management (“applied archaeology”), explicitly confronting the changing roles of women in archaeology, and adding three new chapters on archaeological field methods.

Archaeology, Second Edition, remained an anti-encyclopedia with a personal (often first person) tone and examples often drawn from my own experiences and interests, grounded in the mainstream processual agenda. Nevertheless, in 1989, I did take note that some archaeologists had begun framing alternatives to the processual agenda. The so-called *postprocessual critique* attacked the basic premises of processual archaeology. For one thing, the postprocessual critics rejected the processual search for universal laws, arguing instead that such “laws” supposedly governing human behavior simply do not exist. Postprocessual critics also pointed out the inadequacies of “an explicitly scientific approach,” emphasizing instead the subjectivity involved in all archaeological interpretation. Some of the more extreme postprocessualists even argued that there is no real past at all: The past is merely a subjective construction in the present. Ecological and “systemic” views of the past were similarly rejected as a “robotic view of the human past.” Postprocessual critics favored developing more empathetic and humanistic approaches, which give priority to human thoughts, decisions, and other highly subjective elements.

Archaeology's postprocessual critique rejected the evolutionary, anti-historical, objective, science-based, and ethical neutrality of the processual agenda. Instead, postprocessual archaeologists emphasized empathetic approaches, multiple pathways of belief. They questioned how “value-free” archaeology really is: Do archaeologists discover “a real past” or do they “construct” that past based on present-day experiences and biases? For what political purposes do archaeologists interpret the past?

Archaeology, Second Edition, explored several of these postprocessual approaches, particularly within the realm of historical archaeology (where the

presence of documentary evidence made the subjective, humanistic approaches more productive). The processual agenda continued to provide a relatively consistent and relatively coherent framework for understanding the past. I continued to argue that “archaeology is anthropology or it is nothing.” I still believed that the diverse archaeological approaches fit into the single set of three stepwise and sequential objectives mentioned before: construct cultural chronology, reconstruct extinct lifeways, and define cultural processes. I continued to teach that “the canons of established scientific methods” provide the best way to understand the human past. In the second edition of *Archaeology*, the processual agenda remained intact, but the postprocessual critique had clearly begun to make inroads.

So Why a Third Edition?

*Any jackass can kick down a barn, but it takes a good
carpenter to build one.*

SAM RAYBURN (1882–1961), SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE

Today, the field of Americanist archaeology has changed so dramatically that it is difficult to know where to begin. This time around, I found my basic text required modification from top to bottom. Neither the original processual agenda nor the subsequent postprocessual critique were sufficient to explain what’s going on in modern Americanist archaeology. Although it’s not an easy story to tell, I’m enjoying the diverse and yet eclectic theoretical blend that characterizes contemporary archaeology.

The “processual agenda” and “postprocessual critique” stand as important historical milestones in a complex dialogue about how to encounter the human past. Both were historical events, firmly grounded in specific places and particular times. But most of the underlying issues—science and humanism, objectivity and empathy—have concerned thoughtful archaeologists for more than a century.

*Archaeology is about facts; if you want the truth, go next door
to the philosophy department.*

INDIANA JONES, FICTIONAL ARCHAEOLOGIST (IN THE MOVIE
INDIANA JONES AND THE LAST CRUSADE)

For years, archaeology has been buffeted by a number of “theoretical schools,” each claiming for itself a privileged status in defining what constitutes adequate explanation in archaeological research.

It is no longer useful—nor even possible—to pick Americanist archaeology apart into such tidy subdivisions. Americanist archaeology is today neither processual nor postprocessual: It usefully employs modified versions of both. The vast majority of those practicing Americanist archaeology fall somewhere toward the middle: There are very few hard-core processualists or die-hard postprocessualists around these days. The surviving parts of processual and postprocessual archaeologies comprise what is today our approach to the past.

Archaeology, history, and anthropology appear as increasingly arbitrary partitions of the necessary elements of comprehensive understanding.

ANDREW SHERRATT, ARCHAEOLOGIST (ASHMOLEAN MUSEUM,
OXFORD UNIVERSITY)

So it is that today's Americanist archaeology is best characterized as multiple paths leading toward an understanding of the past. Archaeologists today wrestle with several important questions: To what extent do we "discover" an objective past? Or, are we "creating" alternative pasts from the same data? What is the proper mix of humanism and science in archaeology? What social responsibilities does the archaeologist have to properly use the past in the present? Each of these questions has been around for a century, and no clear-cut resolution appears on the horizon.

This is a strength, not a weakness. Learning to live with mutually irreconcilable views about the past is not an easy thing, but it's the only way that archaeology will survive in the upcoming millennium.

What's New in This Edition?

*My concern now is to find cases and inventions,
gathering them as they occur to me. . . . Therefore you will
not wonder nor will you laugh at me, Reader, if here I make
such great leaps from one subject to the other.*

LEONARDO da VINCI (1452–1519), PAINTER, SCULPTOR, ARCHITECT,
ENGINEER, AND SCIENTIST

Here are some of the new features that have been added to the third edition.

New emphasis on the rapidly evolving relationship between archaeologists and Native American people. These discussions illustrate the dynamic (and sometimes contentious) relationships between native people and the archaeologists who wish to study them. Evolving linkages highlight the increasing importance of newer, multicultural modes of explaining and understanding the American past.

New integration of scientific and humanistic approaches in archaeology. Although some believe that it's necessary to choose sides—either be a scientist or be a humanist—I hope to convince you that the choice isn't really necessary. Modern archaeology spans a broad philosophical spectrum, with both scientific and humanistic strategies contributing significantly to modern archaeological theory.

Emphasizes the increased importance of cognitive archaeology. In recent years, a so-called "cognitive revolution" has swept across Americanist archaeology. Concerned with defining an "archaeology of the human mind," cognitive archaeologists pursue a broad agenda, seeking to understand the importance of ritual and religion, symbolism and iconography, and the development of human consciousness.

Focuses attention on the rapidly growing field of historical archaeology. More than a dozen specific case studies are introduced to illustrate why the field of historical archaeology has become one of the most vital aspects of Americanist archaeology. These examples demonstrate how (and why) historical archaeologists have taken a major role in crafting archaeological theory for the future.

Underlines the increased participation by women in archaeology. Several sections have been added to demolish misleading Hollywood stereotypes—to illustrate how the fallacies of Indiana Jones are being replaced by the realities of Indiana Joans. In several places, we demonstrate how feminist archaeology is changing our perception of gender in the past.

Accentuates the importance of applied archaeology. America has come to recognize that her common cultural heritage is under threat from the demands of contemporary life. Two new chapters show how archaeologists throughout the Americas have assumed a very practical role in modern society, helping to preserve our common cultural heritage. Here, we emphasize the role of archaeologist as manager of cultural and heritage resources, informing students about the broad range of employment possibilities in archaeology and stressing the role of conservation archaeology as a practical extension of the more traditional academic and museum-oriented archaeologies. In the final chapter, we present several new directions in “applied” archaeology, including *forensic archaeology*, the rediscovery and reintroduction of ancient agricultural technologies, and some ethical difficulties in “taking archaeology public.”

Includes a new chapter on the archaeology of African America. This important addition (1) shows the factual and theoretical basis for a rapidly developing new direction in archaeology (especially in urban America), (2) details how local communities are actively participating in archaeology to learn about their own past, and (3) emphasizes how the new brand of “grassroots” archaeology is available to anybody interested in participating—even avocational archaeologists and kids.

Emphasizes the importance of remote sensing as a nondestructive way of learning about the past. We examine in detail the increasingly sophisticated technology that is enabling archaeologists to find where sites are, what they contain, and how the remains are articulated—all without disturbing the site. Remote sensing technology is rapidly becoming a cost-effective way of doing archaeology in a noninvasive, nondestructive manner.

Emphasizes new developments in archaeology at the molecular level, showing how human diets are being reconstructed from human bones through the analysis of isotope levels and the extraction analysis of ancient DNA.

Adds dozens of In His/Her Own Words boxes. These first-person excerpts broaden the focus of my own largely first-person approach and also emphasize the importance of seeking multiple voices and explanations about the past.

The graphics have been significantly upgraded. We’ve spent considerable time and effort gathering some neat photographs of *real people doing real archaeology*. Although some archaeologists do indeed look like movie actors, most don’t. As you look through these pictures, you might be surprised to see what real archaeologists look like.

Everything is explicitly tied into the Internet. Throughout these pages, you'll find dozens of *Archaeology on the Internet* boxes that provide on-line amplification of subjects I'm discussing in the text—"virtual tours" of sites being considered in the text, FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions) about theoretical or methodological advances, more complete discussions and/or bibliographies, relevant professional and avocational groups, and places to find the newest developments in Americanist archaeology.

To improve readability, we have streamed the bibliography. I've deleted bibliographic references from the body of the text and acknowledge my sources in a lengthy bibliographic essay at the end of the book. Thus, without interrupting the flow of the narrative, I can credit those whose work was used directly and also acknowledge those who helped inform and shape my own reporting and writing.

Each chapter now begins with a Preview and ends with a comprehensive Summary.

The new What's in a Name? features discuss the importance of respecting the wishes of various constituent groups for self-identification.

A new chapter on ethical concerns in archaeology. The final chapter looks in depth at the complex issue of "Who Owns the Past?," a storyline developed throughout this entire book. It also focuses on the profound implications of the *Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act*—NAGPRA for short.

A new feature entitled Archaeo-Mythbusters. These boxes are designed to explode some of the more humorous modern myths about archaeology and archaeologists.

*From the moment I picked up your book until I laid it
down, I was convulsed with laughter. Some day I intend
to read it.*

GROUCHO MARX (1895–1977), HUMORIST

Who Helped Out?

Despite the personal flavor of these pages, don't think that the book was completed by a single pair of hands—no book is. Many people helped, and I must include several words of thanks.

The overall presentation was vastly improved by a contingent of top-notch colleagues and friends who provided advice and critical reviews of the manuscript. I am particularly grateful to Paul Goldstein, Steve Lekson, and Janet Spector, each of whom slogged through the entire revised draft and contributed measurably to the final product. For input on the various Internet links, I thank Joelle Clark, Network Subcommittee E-Mail Coordinator for the Public Education Committee of the Society for American Archaeology.

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D. H. T.
St. Catherines Island, Georgia
November 1997

A Note About Human Remains

This book discusses, in several places, important new frontiers of bioarchaeological research. But we also recognize the need to deal with human remains in a respectful and sensitive manner. Several Native American elders have requested that we refrain from publishing photographs or other depictions of American Indian human remains. In specific response to this request, no such images appear in this book. Should other groups express similar concerns, these requests will be addressed in further editions as appropriate.

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