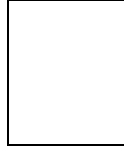


CHAPTER III



AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL PROJECT

FIELD WORK

PURPOSE

Chapter III takes the student on an archaeological project. It begins with fieldwork, moves to the laboratory where the artifacts and other data are analyzed, and ends with the reconstruction of the site and of the culture whose remains it contained. Although fictitious, this project is not very different from many that have taken place in Georgia. It attempts to show the student that along with the excitement of archaeological research, there is much hard and meticulous work.

This chapter also attempts to answer some of the questions most frequently asked of archaeologists:

- How do you decide where to dig?
- How did you know there was a site in that location?
- Why do you keep the excavation so neat?
- How much work is required in the laboratory?
- How can archaeologists reconstruct a past way of life from nothing but artifacts?
- Why shouldn't I dig if I find a site?"

CONCEPTS AND INTERPRETATIONS

Every aspect of our fictitious archaeological project is simplified for classroom presentation. For example, archaeologists seldom undertake an excavation unless the project stands to answer some questions of current importance. This means that each project begins with the development of a detailed "research design" (a statement of problems to be explored and techniques and methods to be employed). In describing our project in Chapter III, we do not go into pre-fieldwork planning. The teacher should explain to the students, however, that much preparation precedes work in the field, and that this preparation is based on a sound knowledge of current archaeological method and theory.

Another aspect of archaeological research well worth emphasizing is that the resource is irreplaceable and non-replenishable. Many other scientists can return to their original source of data to make additional observations or to correct an omission. An historian, for example, can reexamine the same documents to check some passage that he overlooked the first time around, or a botanist can revisit a plant community years later to review his original findings. The archaeologist, however, is compelled to destroy his original subject as it is studied. Once a layer of soil has been removed and artifacts have been lifted from their context, there is no second chance.

The destructive nature of archaeological research, therefore, requires that the work be carefully controlled and that very accurate records be kept. These records--notes, drawings, maps, and photographs--form a permanent record of the appearance of the site at the time of the excavation.

Many archaeological projects are conducted by one or more archeologists, assisted by college students. Usually, the students have received many hours of classroom training before they participate in fieldwork. Field projects in which professors are teaching students at the same time they are conducting research are called "field schools." Several university-sponsored field schools are conducted each year in Georgia. Most field schools take place in the summer, when weather conditions are the most conducive to outdoor work.

After the completion of fieldwork, the archaeologist and his students spend many hours in the laboratory, darkroom and drafting room. Artifacts must be cleaned, preserved, and cataloged; photographs must be developed and cataloged; and the final, inked copies of maps and drawings must be made. Most archaeologists would agree that for every hour spent in the field, at least four hours are required in the laboratory.

Following laboratory work, many more hours are spent analyzing and interpreting the data that has been compiled. Analyses are based on the questions asked prior to the fieldwork and on other questions that have arisen as the field and laboratory work progressed. Modern archaeologists use many different kinds of statistical tests and computers in their analyses. This means that young students who are interested in becoming archaeologists must take their mathematics courses seriously.

Not only is it important for archaeologists to know basic statistics and quantitative methods, but they also should have a general knowledge of geology, botany, zoology, and ecology. This knowledge is necessary because humans live in complex relationships with the physical world. Soil conditions, climate, hydrology, the availability of natural resources, and many other environmental variables affect the distribution and organization of human populations. Thus, archaeologists must know when to call upon specialists in other areas of science, and what questions to ask these specialists.

The last phase of an archaeological project is that of reconstruction and interpretation. What have the field observations and laboratory analyses revealed about the behavior of the human group in question? The archaeologist looks for patterns and relationships in the data by asking:

- Are more examples of a certain kind of artifact found on one part of the site than another, or in one stratum than another?
- Are certain items found together more often than certain other items?

The project at the end of this section can be used to show the student that the distribution of different kinds of artifacts on the floor of a single prehistoric house can reveal where certain activities took place when that house was occupied. In this example, the student will find that it is not the presence or absence of something that is important, but the relative amounts by area.