

Smithsonian horizons



Today the tools of archaeology go far beyond the spade; they are a sophisticated blend of techniques borrowed from many disciplines

What do the fundamental outlooks and concerns of archaeology contribute to the coming of one of its practitioners to the Secretaryship of the Smithsonian? Begin with what archaeology is not, or at any rate is no longer. Sometimes—but now so rarely that archaeologists cannot justify going to look for them—great works of art or hoards of buried treasure are unearthed. Today, finds of that kind—if scientifically excavated rather than illegally dug up for sale to dealers—almost always are placed in museums in their countries of origin. Sometimes, again, it has seemed important to work toward filling in the gaps on maps or chronological charts. But except for remote corners and unusual circumstances, the need for descriptive inventories of the remains of human activity during successive epochs is long past.

What replaces these objectives? Most important is the desire to achieve an understanding of the human career: How did changes in the human condition occur? Are there general explanations for change, or only particularistic ones? What was the role of the natural environment? Of technological discoveries? Of conflict, within and between groups? Did key developments spread irreversibly across the world, or was progress an accumulation of isolated, local advances? Is "explanation" a valid goal at all, or must we live with ambiguity and accident? A purely descriptive approach is of little help in addressing questions like these. Instead, progress comes primarily by posing new questions and refining new methods.

Apart from the fact that the Smithsonian traditionally has had a major stake in archaeology, this means that the modern Smithsonian's connection with the field is vital and natural. Archaeologists deal with the relics of behavior patterns. Always those patterns are incompletely preserved, and usually they focus on some secondary activity, like the disposal of trash, rather than on the primary social relationships we would like to discover. Seeking to identify what gave the patterns significance in their own time, we must turn to historians, regional planners, cultural anthropologists, or to colleagues in many fields of biology. Archaeology today, in other words, is characteristically a hybrid. It thrives on the cross-fertilization of disciplines that is virtually the Smithsonian's trademark.

Take my own work, much of it connected with the history of cities and irrigation agriculture in Mesopotamia. The archaeological component is relatively elementary. What principally informs the effort lies elsewhere: in history revealed in economic and administrative texts; in an understanding of the potential and limits of traditional agrarian regimes in the region; in studies of alluvial geomorphology, soil salinity and landscape formation. Today even the most important tools of discovery—airial photography and satellite imagery—have been borrowed from other disciplines.

The long-term support and stimulation of this kind of integrative effort is what the Smithsonian is all about. Its dual status, created and partly supported by Congress but largely subject to independent governance, gives it exceptional opportunities for encouraging the international collaboration that such efforts depend on. So it's a great pleasure to have come aboard.