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William D. Lipe

In Defense of Digging Archeological Preservation as a Means, Not an End

Tonto National Monument, AZ.



The passage of the Antiquities Act was a critical early victory in the battle to save archeological sites in the U.S. from wasteful destruction, because it established a national policy to protect and regulate the use of such sites on the public lands. The battle still continues, and in fact, there will be no end to it, because authentic archeological sites of any particular period can only be protected or lost, not created anew. Site protection today has many more legal tools to work with than it did in 1906, but population growth and the increased pace of development mean that the threats to site survival are also more pervasive.

Passage of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) in 1966 led to the development of a fairly comprehensive set of procedures for considering the effects of federal undertakings on archeological sites, of weighing the values embodied in these

sites against other socially desirable ends, and of protecting site integrity when feasible. Although cumbersome and faulty in some respects, these procedures have greatly increased our ability to protect sites from destruction due to federally-related economic development, and in our ability to study some of those that cannot be saved.

The inclusion of archeological sites in a larger historic preservation system has and will continue to have positive results, but I believe that there also are certain problems in the way that archeological preservation is currently being carried out in the U.S. These problems are rooted in the particular kind of social value that most archeological sites have, and in the way that archeological preservation programs have come to deal with this value.

I think that a starting point for federal archeological preservation programs is consideration of the primary social contribution of archeology, i.e., the production and dissemination of new information about the past based on the systematic study of the archeological record. Many archeological sites have associative or educational values in addition to or independent of their research value, but most sites in fact gain their primary social value because they have the potential to contribute new information about the past when subjected to archeological study. This, of course is a basic tenet of the Antiquities Act and is described in Section 3 of the statute. In order for an Antiquities Act permit to be granted, carefully conducted and recorded investigations, curation of the

material recovered, and the intention of increasing knowledge were required.

Under the NHPA, if sites are preserved on the grounds that this makes it possible for them to be studied in the future, one measure of a preservation program's success is whether anything useful or at least interesting to scholars and the general public has been learned by the subsequent study of those sites. It follows that decisions about the physical preservation of archeological sites should take into account how these sites can contribute to public understanding and appreciation of the past through archeological study or interpretation. The public benefits of preserving any particular archeological site may not be realized for a long time, or perhaps never; my point is that programs of archeological preservation need to consider both the means (preservation) and the ends (increased public understanding and appreciation of the past), and not assume that the latter will somehow take care of itself.

Of course, research excavations represent a shift from preservation of the non-renewable archeological record to its consumptive use. Excavations affect the physical integrity of the archeological record, albeit while generating various proxies for it, ranging from maps, notes, and provenienced collections to synthesized descriptions of archeological contexts. Excavating carries significant ethical responsibilities for archeologists: the work must be well justified; it must be carried out frugally with respect to the kind and amount of archeological record affected, and results must be disseminated, with collections and notes ultimately assigned to a public repository (SOPA 1996; Kintigh 1996; Lynott and Wylie 1995). Existing records and collections may often suffice to support contemplated research, and should be considered before new work is undertaken on sites (Lynott and Wylie 1995:30). Nevertheless, what enables archeologists to justify the preservation of the archeological record is their ability to read new information out of it by judicious use of archeological methods, including excavation. An archeology without excavation is one that cannot fully achieve its potential social contributions.

On the basis of previous published statements (e.g., Lipe 1974, 1984, 1985), I am not a likely candidate for promoting the indiscriminant excavation of sites that have been preserved in place by federal programs. That is not my point. I don't want to argue against a conservation ethic, but to consider whether our current zeal for preserving archeological sites may not in some cases be undercutting our ability to realize the values for which they are being preserved. I believe that public support for archeological preservation will (and

should) be proportional to public perceptions that there is something useful (or at least interesting) to be learned by archeological study of the archeological record of the past. I see several trends in federal preservation programs that may in some cases work against generating and disseminating the archeological information that is the presumed long-term goal for most site preservation. These are: (1) treatment of site preservation as an end in itself; (2) policies that preclude consumptive research except at "threatened" sites; and (3) "banking" of sites or groups of sites for some undefined future time.

1. Site preservation as an end in itself.

In most cases, when a historic building is preserved in place, this will have been because of its outstanding esthetic and/or associative values. The public benefit of having preserved it is relatively direct—it stands as a visually understandable, public representation of the qualities that have made it worthy of preservation. Public appreciation of these values can be enhanced, of course, if additional interpretive and contextual information about the building is made available, and if public access is granted to the building's grounds and interior. Further study of the physical structure itself by scholars may require permission for access and for conducting at least some intrusive investigations. Such study, if the results are adequately disseminated, may further enhance both scholarly and public understanding and appreciation of the structure. Even if these latter enhancements are not forthcoming, however, the major public benefit of preservation can often be achieved by physical preservation alone.

For archeological sites having information potential as their primary value, the benefits of preservation are seldom so direct. Physical preservation of most archeological sites simply maintains their physical integrity until they can be studied at some indefinite time in the future. Most archeological sites, even if they have associative as well as informational value, either lack visual characteristics, or have very slight visual impact that relates to their value and cannot readily stand as visual public representations of those values. As noted above, the social benefit of preserving archeological sites is usually so they can be studied in the future, and for a few sites, so they can be publicly interpreted in the future. Furthermore, both the scholarly and public benefits of archeology are less focused on specific preserved sites than on the story that the sites and artifacts of a particular period and region can tell in aggregate. Preservation of sites is essential if archeology is to carry out its mission of continuing to provide new information and interpretations of the past, but

preservation alone is only the starting point for this mission.

Because the scholarly and public benefits from archeological preservation are generally more diffuse and indirect than is the case for historic buildings does not mean that archeology is unpopular. The extensive public interest in things archeological is amply documented by the circulation of *Archaeology Magazine* (over 200,000 subscribers), the hundreds of thousands of visitors to archeological museums and parks each year, and by the popularity of video and print treatments of archeological finds and interpretations. For much of this public benefit, formal research is the mediator—that is, researchers provide and authenticate the interpretations and contexts on which popular books, videos, and articles are based. Even when the “real thing”—specific artifacts and sites—are publicly displayed, they usually require more subsidiary interpretation—in the form of signs, guides, etc.—than do most preserved historic buildings.

It seems to me that federal archeological preservation programs will be most successful if they can treat both sides of the means-ends equation—if they balance in-situ preservation efforts with a continuing flow of public benefits, including scholarly studies, site tours, interpretive treatments in the print and visual media, and museum displays. Because archeological knowledge and insights are generally based on populations of sites rather than on single ones, each and every preserved site does not have to be the object of study or interpretation. The best scale both for research and interpretation may often be statewide or regional, involving multiple agencies and the SHPOs.

The Section 106 process currently produces an enormous amount of new information about the archeological record—not only from data recovery projects, but from preservation-oriented inventory and evaluation studies as well. The

descriptive reports resulting from this work are increasingly being done to a very high technical standard. Yet even reports representing hundreds of thousands of dollars of research are often difficult to obtain, and may lack concise synthetic and problem-oriented summaries useful to scholars. I think we need to find ways to present the necessary descriptive documentation more efficiently, and to place substantially greater emphasis on concise summaries that can be widely circulated. Funds from multiple projects also need to be pooled to support really high-quality regional or statewide interpretive treatments—print, video, museum—that are directed to school students and the general public.

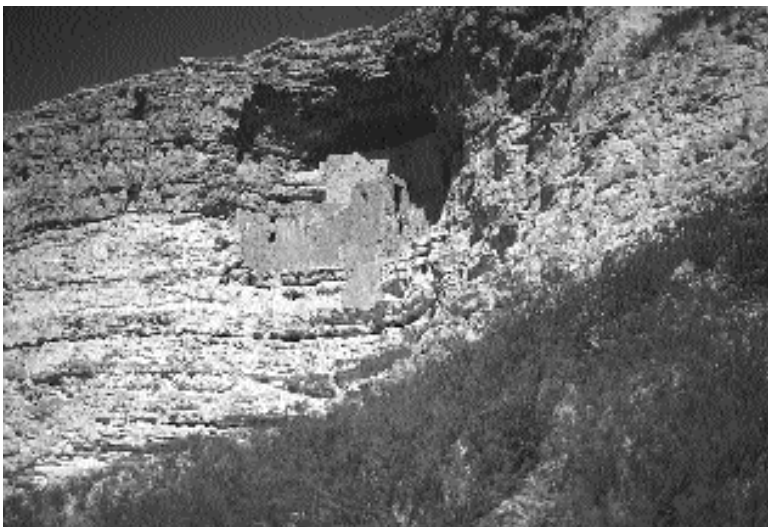
As research archeologists and cultural resource managers, we generally lack the training and talent to produce the kinds of interpretive products that the public expects. Yet we have the information on which these products are based, and we control access to the artifacts, photographs, and sites that provide the tangible link between an interpretive story and the authentic record of past cultures. I think that we need to work much harder to develop friendly interfaces between our worlds and those of the interpretive specialists who have their own incentives for helping us deliver the benefits side of preservation. These include scholars, museum directors, freelance writers, video producers, and K-12 teachers. Developing those interfaces, and opening up our various “systems” so the interfaces work can’t be an add-on, volunteer, or afterthought process—it has to be part of our basic responsibility. A number of federal agencies, SHPOs, archeological organizations, and individual archeologists have begun developing and delivering interpretive products, often in conjunction with interpretive specialists from “outside the system.” But much more remains to be done.

All these things are easy to say, of course, but hard to put into practice because they involve changing some of our priorities and some of our systems. I know that funds are increasingly squeezed for archeological resource programs at both the federal and state levels. But I think that rethinking both the means and ends sides of preservation programs may help us find solutions that don’t require more money. And in any case, if we do not begin to put more emphasis on the ends, i.e., on delivery of public benefits, we may find our funds even more reduced.

2. Limiting consumptive archeological research to “threatened” sites.

Although there is a great deal of variability in whether or how federal land-managing agencies and SHPOs apply this principle, and whether it is espoused by archeologists as a matter of profes-

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sional ethics, it clearly has gained currency in the past 20 years or so. Although I can probably take some of the blame for this (Lipe 1974), I now see it as another symptom of treating preservation as an end in itself.

That is, it seems to me that pledging to dig only on sites that are otherwise threatened has the unintended effect of trivializing archeological research and its contributions to society.

Essentially, what we are saying is that any other socially approved activity, plus the prospect of looting, ranks higher as a reason for excavating sites than does the prospect of learning something about the past through good archeological research on an important archeological problem. Therefore, the widening of a state highway, or the digging of a stock pond, are acceptable reasons for excavating at a site in order to mitigate the impact of the construction, but that having a good research question and design are not acceptable reasons, if the site would not otherwise be altered. I think this puts us in a really weak position when we try to argue that archeology and archeological knowledge are valuable, because de facto we have said that research is a less important way of consuming the archeological record than is digging a stock pond or widening a highway.

Furthemore, given the institutional structure of American archeology today, confining research to threatened sites is a guaranteed way to exclude the academic sector from excavation, except in those rare cases where academic departments maintain contract archeology programs. Many academics simply ignore the "threatened site" principle now, and this is driving a further wedge between the CRM and academic parts of the field.

An additional point here is that some types of problem and some kinds of archeological record are very unlikely to be accessible to research under the "threatened site" rule. My own research currently focuses on locating, mapping, and dating A.D. 1100-1300 Puebloan community center sites in the northern San Juan region. These sites generally have from 50 to more than 500 structures, and most are on public land. During the A.D., 1200s, a very large majority of the Puebloan people who were living in the area lived in these villages. I think that learning about these sites is essential to understanding community and inter-community organization in the northern San Juan region of SW Colorado and SE Utah during this period. Yet these sites are not "threatened" by public projects, because they are too big. Properly, they are avoided by pipelines, powerlines, highways, and the like, because "mitigating" them would just be too expensive. So in general, this is a victory for conservation archeology. With regard to threats from looters, the middens of many of

these sites have been dug over for 100 years or more by pothunters looking for burials with associated artifacts. On public land, this threat is diminishing, but it is still there. However, most of the research problems I and my colleagues at the Crow Canyon Center are interested in require excavating not in middens, but in and around structures, which the pothunters generally have left alone.

Does the fact that the structural portions of these sites are not currently "threatened" mean that we should not use well-justified consumptive research to learn something from them? I don't think so. Archeologists at the Crow Canyon Center are engaged in testing a few of these sites, to examine models based on surface evidence and on excavations done elsewhere. They are successfully developing techniques for obtaining critical information from these sites by excavating far, far less than one percent of them. I think this is perfectly justifiable under a conservation model, which is driven by the continuing success of research, which requires continuing frugal use of the archeological record. If the research stagnates, then some of the justification for saving the sites for the future disappears.

Let's face it—modern archeological research is one of the smallest current and future threats to the integrity of the archeological resource. We should focus our efforts on fighting looting and getting archeological values considered in project planning, and not spend our energies on keeping other archeologists from doing well-justified, consumptively frugal, research. What I am calling for is a recognition that well-justified, problem-oriented, consumptive research on judiciously selected "non-threatened" sites is ethically acceptable. It must be well-designed, well-done, well-published, and the collection well-curated, of course, but if it is, it can make a substantial contribution to the "benefits" side of regional preservation programs, by fostering both scholarly and public interpretive studies.

3. Banking sites for the future.

The practice of "banking sites" consists of prohibiting consumptive research until some indefinite time in the future when our archeological techniques will presumably be better and our problems will be more sharply defined (cf. Lipe 1974). This is related to the notion of mitigating the impacts of development projects on sites by redesigning the project to avoid them rather than by carrying out "data recovery." There are two practical and one logical problem with the "banking" approach if it is carried out unthinkingly. The logical problem is that one can continue to make the argument about saving a site for the future *ad infinitum*, provided archeological data recovery

techniques continue to show promise of improving. So one is left in the paradoxical position that the information value for which the site is being saved can never be obtained, because a better job could always be done sometime in the future; hence, study must be further postponed forever. I think that resource managers and research archeologists can get out of this impasse if they set a time certain for when the future will be declared to have arrived or they simply set a high threshold for the conduct and publication of projects involving consumptive research. I have no problem with some classes of sites or some spatial sets of sites being held to a higher standard for consumptive research, but feel that open-ended banking is likely to be counterproductive.

The practical problems with “banking” are whether effective site preservation will, in fact, be carried out as well, so that the research option stays open and whether persistently keeping a class of sites or a large spatial set of sites off-limits to research will undercut the basic justifications for protecting those sites. Quite a bit has been written about the first point, and I think that most of us are becoming more skeptical of site avoidance as the preferred way of mitigating development impacts, unless it is coupled with a protection plan that has a good chance of succeeding. The other problem, I think, is beginning to show up in the National Park Service, which as a general policy, discourages consumptive research in the parks, if comparable studies can be done outside them. Because relatively little impact-driven research gets done either, this increasingly means that we have to write the prehistory of some areas without much recent information from the national parks in those areas. I think the parks are special, and I would encourage that consumptive research be held to a higher standard in them. But a policy that either directly or de facto shuts off even frugal, well-justified research on important archeological resources ultimately does not serve archeology or the public good.

Conclusions

In sum, what should drive archeological preservation is the social benefit that archeology can provide to society over the long run. That benefit is primarily the contribution of knowledge about the past derived from systematic study of the archeological record. *In situ* preservation of archeological resources is a tool for optimizing that benefit. The Antiquities Act aimed to protect archeological sites on public lands from wanton destruction. It required that the investigation and removal of archeological artifacts and other remains be done carefully, using scientific excavation methods and techniques. These requirements were based upon the policy that the main public

benefit of archeological resources was a social good reached through improved understanding of the American past. The world has changed plenty since 1906. One change is our increased appreciation of the need to conserve non-renewable archeological sites. Yet, the basic value of archeological sites to the American public has not changed.

Archeologists must accept an ethical obligation to try to minimize the impacts of development projects on archeological sites, and to fight against looting and vandalism. And they must recognize that archeological sites sometimes have associative as well as research value. To the extent that preservation is justified by a site's information potential, those preservation efforts need to be coupled with a longer term focus on the generation of knowledge from archeological study of the populations of sites that are preserved. Long-term, frugal consumption of the archeological record by well-justified research—both problem-oriented and mitigation-driven—must be an accepted and integrated part of the preservation program. If the research doesn't get done, or if it gets done and we don't learn anything from it, or if only scholars learn from it and the public is shut out, then preservation will have been in vain, because its goals will have not been achieved.

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