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Chapter 7

Book Review: *Archaeology Matters: Action Archaeology in the Modern World*

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Jeremy Sabloff's *Archaeology Matters: Action Archaeology in the Modern World* (2008) illustrates how archaeology is important to understandings of past cultures, but more importantly, how archaeology is relevant to understandings of contemporary cultures and issues. Although archaeology is typically associated with the study of prehistoric and historic sites and artifacts, archaeologists can play an invaluable role in modern society through their unique perspectives on the past. Sabloff also encourages future archaeologists to find more effective ways to communicate their goals to and engage the general public, thereby increasing knowledge and awareness of archaeology and its function. The book highlights Sabloff's desire for such broader archaeological work and outlines a number of examples detailing how such work might be carried out.

In the first chapter of *Archaeology Matters*, Sabloff calls for the implementation of "action archaeology" in today's field, and provides some examples of how such research is practiced in the 21st century. Action archaeology is defined as "involvement or engagement with the problems facing the modern world through archaeology" (Sabloff 2008, 17). Sabloff goes on to distinguish action archaeologists as those who work for living communities as opposed to those who research past communities. Whereas most archaeologists study ancient or historic cultures with only auxiliary recourse to present peoples, an action archaeologist harnesses a deep knowledge of successful human processes in the past and applies that knowledge to real-world

issues and problems facing modern communities in the present. Action archaeology benefits communities struggling with socioeconomic, demographic, or environmental issues by providing insight and action plans to be used today and in the future.

One example of such research is the Tucson Garbage Project, a “multipurpose enterprise whose interests include diet and nutrition, food waste, consumerism, socioeconomic stratification, resource management, recycling and source reduction, and the inner dynamic of landfills” (Sabloff 2008, 18), begun in the 1970s by archaeologist William Rathje (formerly of the University of Arizona). This archaeological experiment was carried out by sorting through garbage of living Tucsonans and recording and cataloguing the type and amount of waste. While such efforts seemed tedious and of little import at the time, the Tucson Garbage Project revealed some very relevant insights into Tucsonans’ food consumption and garbage disposal habits.

Another example of an action archaeologist is Clark Erickson (University of Pennsylvania), who used his knowledge of past Andean agricultural technologies to assist present day communities facing similar ecologically-threatening conditions (Sabloff 2008, 20). Erickson worked with multiple descendant communities in the Andes and Amazonia to create sustainable and environmentally-friendly approaches to agriculture. He began his experiment in the Huatta region of Peru near Lake Titicaca in the early 1980s by persuading local farmers to return to ancient agricultural methods. Erickson and his team set up a pilot project to teach the farmers how to use methods of “raised field agriculture”, a technique dating back to Pre-Columbian peoples. “This technique involved raising small plots of land above ground level by excavating shallow canals around the plots” (Sabloff 2008, 21). Prior to this, the local farmers had been utilizing traditional farming methods, but found it difficult to extend the growing season when cold temperatures arrived in the mountainous region. Erickson believed that the

raised field method would be instrumental in keeping the fields fertile, and heated for longer periods of time.

The experiment was a success; the ancient farming and irrigation techniques proved to be more efficient than the modern approaches that had led to environmental degradation. Apart from the environmental impact, Erickson's project was culturally significant in proving that the region had been complex and thriving prior to the Spanish Conquest, as well as able to sustain a large population. (Sabloff 2008, 23). Erickson's interest in long-term environmental change, human adaptation, and sustainable agriculture is a perfect example of what Sabloff calls action archaeology.

In the second chapter, titled "Lessons from the Past?" Sabloff continues to elaborate on the role of archaeology as a source of information about, and inspiration for dealing with, current problems. Citing Pulitzer Prize winning author Jared Diamond, Sabloff notes that the fall of many ancient civilizations can be attributed to "climate change, misuses of environments, and related political decisions" (Sabloff 2008, 34). While Diamond believes that our current decisions regarding the environment may be leading us down a destructive path, he remains optimistic that understandings of past cultures can help our society avoid a similar downfall. Sabloff next explains how we can learn from ancient examples of 'collapse,' such as that of the Ancient Maya. Scholars believe that the downfall of this culture is related to the human tendency for complacency, in which "the confines of normal problem solving do not always lead us to the best answers and might even blind us to the consequences of our actions" (Sabloff 2008, 40). Sabloff contends that archaeologists well versed in past instances of collapse should be able to identify the warning signs (e.g., overexploitation of resources, uncontrolled population growth, unstable political control, etc.); if archaeologists are engaged with and respected among living

communities, they can play a critical role in advising against such complacency and helping to devise measures that mitigate some of these harmful phenomena.

A modern-day example of similar environmental issues and overpopulation threatening the well-being of a human population is in Los Angeles, where residents have attempted to escape increasing pollution by moving away from the city and building up the suburbs (Sabloff 2008, 40). Both the Ancient Maya and modern-day Los Angelites seem to be plagued by an inability to consider the consequences of an “easy” solution: while the Maya continued to advance infrastructure with little regard for the strain it placed on vital resources, Los Angelites are also failing to deal with their environmental and demographic issues with a long-term frame of reference. The Maya were adept timekeepers, mathematicians, astronomers, and civil engineers, yet they were unsuccessful in developing technology that would save their culture from a period of stagnation (Sabloff 2008, 41). Sabloff warns that our society should avoid similar passivity in regards to the environment and keep striving to make technological advancements in order to sustain our way of life. Archaeologists have a role to play in all of this, as their research into these ancient cultures can help identify the warning signs of collapse, and thus help us avoid a calamitous fate.

In the chapter “How Can the Prospects for a Sustainable World be Improved?” Sabloff explains why the discipline of archaeology should be of great interest to the general public. He states, “it is hard to envision a more important endeavor than archaeologists working to increase the possibilities of a sustainable world in the future” (Sabloff 2008, 48), in particular because archaeologists can help us develop a more sustainable relationship with the earth. Another example of action archaeology is discussed, again involving modern day farmers who were encouraged to learn the farming techniques of ancient cultures in order to maximize their

efficiency. As part of the Mexican territory of Quintana Roo was being leveled to make way for the resort town of Cancun, the population of the territory grew exponentially to over half a million people (Sabloff 2008, 48). One of the main issues that arose from this demographic and attendant economic growth was the question of how to sustain a burgeoning population in this agriculturally deficient area of Mexico. Scott Fedick, an archaeologist who had conducted research in this area, discovered that the ancient Maya had been able to “exploit the local wetland environment and to use soil or algae from the wetlands to enhance production in the drier upland agricultural zones” (Sabloff 2008, 49). These archaeological findings could be utilized by modern officials overseeing development and planning in the vicinity of Cancun, as a way to support the growing population. While the thriving tourist trade supports the region economically, the Quintana Roo territory could not support the expanded population environmentally, now water is piped in from the surrounding region and new roadways have been constructed. While the developments have made it easier for archaeologists, like Fedick, to access and study the region, Sabloff is uncertain if there will be any changes related to Fedick’s insights, gained through years of research on ancient Maya farming practices, thus provided critical insight for the modern population of Cancun. Unfortunately, those officials in charge of important decisions (such as policy makers and funding agencies) often do not include archaeologists in critical decision-making, nor do they often consider lessons learned from the past. Sabloff attributes this oversight to the modern-day preoccupation with “tomorrow” or “the future” without giving the proper consideration to the past (Sabloff 2008, 55).

Chapter four addresses one of Sabloff’s most salient points, “Is Warfare Inevitable?” In an increasingly globalized world, warfare and the ceaseless quest for material goods, land, and power creates much unrest. The tendency for human aggression is not a new phenomenon

though, and Sabloff notes that “there has been an ongoing academic debate about whether such aggression is innate or is cultural behavior” (Sabloff 2008, 60). Some scholars believe that war has existed for two million years among hominids and is an “essential human characteristic,” while others believe that “warfare did not appear until the rise of the first complex political organizations-early states- about 5,000 years ago” (Sabloff 2008, 61). Sabloff and archaeologist Keith Otterbein (University of Buffalo) take a middle ground position, stating that warfare is neither an inherent human characteristic, nor an inevitable consequence of human contact. Rather, both ascribe to the position that while warfare began with big game hunting in the Upper Paleolithic, it saw a hiatus during the ice age and reappeared around 3000 B.C with the rise of the “state”, during which time political leaders were focused on gaining territorial sovereignty. Episodic war has persisted since then, culminating in World Wars I and II.

With their long-view perspectives on cultural rise and fall, archaeologists have the potential to supply crucial information about the impetus and consequences of war, and could be used in some capacity as advisors to government and military officials, although there is an important counter-debate within the field that explicitly rejects anthropologists or archaeologists supplying potentially harmful information of any kind to military bodies, as this constitutes an ethical break to many¹. Regardless, Sabloff believes that archaeologists may be able to provide useful information on the subject of small-scale, chiefdom-like political entities, writing “much of the violence around the globe today is not between nation states but among semi-independent (if not fully independent) political groups, (what scholars sometimes label “chiefdoms”) (Sabloff 2008, 67). Some remarkable similarities exist in the organization and execution of warfare tactics in the present day as in the past, and lessons from archaeological contexts can be applied to

¹ For further information on this subject, please see the American Anthropological Association’s Executive Board Statement on the Human Terrain System Project, available at <http://www.aaanet.org/about/Policies/statements/Human-Terrain-System-Statement.cfm>.

better plan and respond to current-day settings. One of the biggest changes between ancient and modern warfare is that, unlike ancient civilizations, modern rulers and generals do not fight on the frontlines (Sabloff 2008, 68). Rather than fight (and sometimes perish) in hand-to-hand combat, modern political leaders rule at an arm's length. This is important to note, as it illustrates how technological advancements and other innovations can alter the structure and sociopolitical organization of a society.

Chapter 5 discusses the trend of civic development and urbanization in the 21st century. Urbanization can lead to increases in crime rates, toxic emissions, traffic congestion, overcrowding, and inequality and poverty (Sabloff 2008, 69). Archaeologists have 'seen' urbanization take place in the past through their research, and have the potential to provide important insight into this modern trend. Sabloff argues that civic officials need to consider historical contexts of urbanization in order to understand positive and negative outcomes on a society and the environment. Further, Sabloff notes that understanding past population dynamics during periods of urbanization can yield useful information for managing and planning similar growth in the present and future.

One aspect of urbanization that preserves well in archaeological record, and has thus been the subject of much research, is the "intense utilization of resources that is needed to support cities" (Sabloff 2008, 74). The acquisition of resources necessary to maintain a city and the ensuing toll on ecological resources has been a pressing issue for urban planners and civic officials since ancient times. Sabloff describes the city of Angkor in Cambodia, a city that flourished because of its evenly dispersed population. This approach of carefully distributing the population so as not to over-tax the environment could be helpful for other cities of similar size, such as Los Angeles and Philadelphia.

In chapter 6, another pressing issue for the archaeological discipline is detailed: that is, the destruction of heritage sites due to looting, poorly planned commercial development, general neglect, and lack of management by capable conservation experts. Sabloff attributes the rise in looting to increased interests in archaeological artifacts and the “soaring values” of ancient art on the black market (Sabloff 2008, 80). The destruction of archaeological sites are typically associated with important economic development and geo-political issues. Sabloff describes the “huge hydroelectric dams, or plans for such projects, in countries like China, Iran, Turkey, and the Guatemala/Mexico border” (Sabloff 2008, 81). Currently, the Turkish government has outlined plans to build a dam that would submerge the 12,000-year old settlement of Hasankeyf under 200 feet of water. As of August 2015, the site has been partially flooded by the dam, while not completely destroyed archaeologists are still rushing to excavate and collect as much as possible before the site is fully submerged. Similar examples of government-approved destruction of heritage sites sets a harmful example for looters, robbing these ancient sites of their cultural value and sanctioning their abuse for material gain. In this vein, looting of heritage sites can provide economic support to farmers and villagers in nearby areas, which is seen as a “quasi-legitimate” economic pursuit by some officials (Sabloff 2008, 82).

Additionally, looting of archaeological sites has become a hot button and polarizing issue due to the recent widespread looting and destruction carried out by the militant group ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria). In an article with BBC online, Iraqi archaeologist Lamia al-Gailani states “They are erasing our history” (BBC News 2015, 1). In one particularly destructive event, ISIS members bulldozed the ancient city of Nimrud using heavy vehicles after looting the site for valuable artifacts. Other notorious terrorism groups such as the Taliban and

Al Qaeda have also participated in the illegal antiquities trade (BBC News 2015). All of these groups use the profit from such sales to fund terrorist activities.

In addition to funding terrorism, the lay-public should also be concerned about looting because of its impact on tourism. As the largest industry in the world, tourism is responsible for more than six trillion dollars spent in 2005 and “nearly 85 percent of countries having tourism as one of their five leading sources of foreign exchange” (Sabloff 2008, 85). By destroying heritage sites, which are typically also tourist attractions, communities stand to lose thousands, even millions, of dollars in tourist money. Also, by preserving these sites, we are also helping to preserve the unique culture and identity of ethnic groups and nations.

How can archaeologists continue to make themselves relevant in the modern world? This is the question posed by Sabloff in chapter 7. There are a number of ways this can happen. First, archaeologists are gaining a larger role in “promoting economic development, and especially eco-tourism” (Sabloff 2008, 93). Archaeological tours of ancient sites like that of the Delphi or the Athenian Acropolis in Greece, or Machu Picchu in Peru, are popular spots for tourists and would not be possible without the participation, cooperation, and encouragement archaeologists. Second, archaeologists have and continue to play a key role in the advocacy and testimony of Native American groups in cases of land ownership (Sabloff 2008, 94). For the people of the Acoma, Laguna, and Isleta Pueblos in the American Southwest, archaeologists have been pivotal in helping these groups gain back their native land titles by establishing historical context and understanding of these communities. Among the Aleut Nation of Alaska, archaeologists have helped to uphold the legality of native subsistence practices, such as salmon fishing (Sabloff 2008, 94). By encouraging interaction with and education of the majority Caucasian public, “archaeologists also can contribute to better understandings of the history of different minority

groups” (Sabloff 2008, 94). Archaeological projects such as the African Burial Ground of New York in the early 20th century allowed descendent communities to regain a previously silent part of their pasts, the momentum from of which drove the creation of new minority rights activist groups. By promoting cultural awareness and tolerance, archaeologists and archaeological projects have the potential to begin bridging the gap between minority and majority groups. A key attribute of archaeology is its ability to reveal the intertwined connectedness of all human stories.

In the epilogue, Sabloff addresses some of the common misconceptions held by the general public about archaeologists and the discipline of archaeology, namely that archaeologists are like the fictional media characters of Indiana Jones and Lara Croft, traveling to far off lands to plunder pyramids and find treasure. While such pop culture icons are important for cultivating general interest in the profession, Sabloff argues that much more public outreach and education must be undertaken to so as to develop a greater awareness among the public about the field of archaeology, as well as its relevancy and importance for identifying and solving modern-day issues (Sabloff 2008, 110). If the public continues to think of archaeologists as pre-occupied only with the distant past, then the field will continue to be seen as irrelevant. This final call to arms targets archaeological amateurs and interested students who are the intended audience of the book, reminding them that it is of paramount importance to make archaeology relevant today if we want to engage in this field of study in the future.

The strongest points in this book are the action archaeology examples, such as the importance of archaeology in establishing land titles for Native Americans. These examples help to reinforce Sabloff’s argument that archaeology is a significant discipline that has the potential to yield important gains in today’s world. The arguments presented were clearly thought out;

Sabloff's impartiality when discussing other archaeological texts gave credence to his thesis. However, while the examples outlined were numerous and presented in a convincing manner, the scope of the book was quite broad and may seem overwhelming to someone new to the field of archaeology. The argumentative thrust of the book could have been sharpened had Sabloff chosen a just few key examples to discuss at length, rather than describing a number of examples in a cursory way. Furthermore, the majority of the examples of action archaeology described took place in the New World and the reader is left wondering whether action archaeology has been applied in Europe, Africa, Asia, or Oceania.

As an accessible and quick read, this book will no doubt appeal to a wider audience than just students of archaeology, which seems to be Sabloff's intention. Certainly, the book is a great starting place for anyone who wants to gain foundational knowledge about the discipline in a short and insightful package. While Sabloff acknowledges that much change must occur within archaeology for the field to remain relevant, he remains optimistic that the younger generation of archaeologists can succeed in this endeavor. I would recommend this book to anyone who is interested in archaeology.

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