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## MUSINGS AND VISIONS FROM THE DIRECTOR'S DESK

While media images of archaeologists come and go, from the pith-helmeted, absent-minded professor poring over piles of potsherds to the Indiana Jones clone with bullwhip and pistol, one perception of archaeology endures: that it is an esoteric pursuit with little or no relevance to modern life. Fortunately, these images are quite divorced from reality. Archaeologists are neither ostriches with their heads buried in the sand nor gold-seeking adventurers. Rather, their research often has general intellectual relevance and sometimes even specific practical relevance to today's world.

Archaeological research provides strong support for the aphorism that "good science is good humanism." By providing new understandings of successful and unsuccessful human adaptations to a wide variety of natural and cultural environments through time and space, archaeologists can offer insights into a number of modern concerns and show that "lessons of history" is more than just an empty refrain. Among the goals of the fieldwork of Dr. Robert Sharer, Curator of the American Section, at Copan, of Dr. Wendy Ashmore, Associate Curator of Maya Archaeology, at Xunantunich, and of my own research at Sayil is understanding how and why the ancient Maya built complex urban centers and successfully exploited their tropical environment for more than a millennium, as well as understanding the causes of the collapse of Classic Maya civilization. The answers can potentially point the way for more productive utilization of this land than is being undertaken at the present time. For instance, millions more people once lived in the rainforest of what is now the Peten area of Guatemala and the adjacent parts of Belize and Mexico than reside there today. I believe that the successful agricultural practices that sustained the Classic Maya for centuries can offer important lessons for modern farmers. However, the overpopulation and overuse of the environment through time can also provide critical cautionary tales for our time.

Another important example of the practical relevance of archaeological research can be found in the superb fieldwork of Dr. Clark Erickson, Associate Curator of the American Section, in the Andes. Dr. Erickson studied the agricultural practices of the ancient people who lived on and near the shores of Lake Titicaca in present-day Peru and Bolivia, particularly their use of raised fields to intensify agricultural production. He has shown how various consequences of using raised fields, such as the elevation of mean temperatures around the fields, provided longer growing seasons and thus better and more consistent yields. He also has helped reintroduce these techniques to modern peasants. The revival of ancient agricultural techniques already is providing more food for the area and holds great promise for the future. Moreover, Dr. Erickson is continuing this important research in a new field program in the tropical headwaters of the Amazon River.

This case is just one example of how archaeological research is relevant to the modern world. While not all archaeological fieldwork has such practical value, most archaeological work can provide people today with new understandings of the achievements and failures of the past. Why, for instance, did cities arise, and what was their adaptive value? Insights into questions such as these cannot help but offer useful perspectives to current planners and politicians as they attempt to grapple with the many problems that beset the world today.

*Jeremy A. Sabloff*

*The Charles K. Williams II Director*