

At Play in the Field of Archaeology

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One could characterize an archaeologist as an adult who has managed to turn the child's most entertaining forms of play into a lifetime pursuit. Children build fantasy worlds and find them real; archaeologists reconstruct past worlds and make them real to others. Children visit houses under construction and imagine how they would furnish them and who would live in them; archaeologists study the extant foundation walls and imagine how the buildings were completed; they study the artifacts and try to imagine how they were used in the context of the buildings. Children build sand castles, vying with each other for the biggest and best; archaeologists recreate past castles, vying with each other for the most important, the most complex, or simply the oldest.

Children collect stamps, fascinated by what they tell about the countries of origin and the dates of manufacture, immensely enjoying the business of cataloguing. Archaeologists record the events of an excavation, take photographs, make drawings, and compile computer records, subsequently poring over these records and imagining their contexts.

Children complete jigsaw puzzles, struggling to finish the edges and fill in the interior. Archaeologists routinely find themselves faced with a jigsaw puzzle, without a picture to follow and lacking all the pieces, whose outline they can only imagine.

Just as children take incidental objects such as discarded toilet paper rolls and make them into exotic objects such as telescopes and megaphones, archaeologists take odd and unknown objects and attempt to understand what they once were and what they might represent. Children organize and arrange tea parties, setting out cups and saucers, determining what vessels

to use for what function. Archaeologists identify and classify ceramic vessels, generally the single most plentiful type of object recovered, and attempt to determine what they were used for and how and where they were made. Children build villages outdoors and amuse themselves by peopling them with stores and customers. Archaeologists study the extant walls and imagine how the buildings and rooms were used. Children create their own scripts when they play and might pretend to develop another or secret encoded language; archaeologists study decorative patterns on pots or syllabic graffiti and attempt to interpret what such patterns and symbols meant. Finally, the child's desire to hear bedtime stories of people long ago and far away becomes the archaeologist's desire to verify those stories (as Schliemann did with Troy) or to write new stories (as Evans did with the Minoan civilization).

The effort of archaeologists is divided between intense fieldwork on the one hand, and, on the other, more leisurely reflection on the excavated materials. During fieldwork, archaeologists routinely work long hours under adverse conditions, and when the time comes for a break, it is well appreciated. Jokes and laughter provide excuses to sit back and enjoy each other's company, and visitors and newcomers are pressed for news from home, an old newspaper, and even current jokes. Close collaboration during the fieldwork, often carried out by a few who are responsible for special activities such as recordkeeping, may lead to friendships for life. The almost private world these collaborators work in, the intensity of the effort, and certainly the excitement of the possible outcome mimic the best worlds of children's play.

Similarly, one member of the excavation

may undertake additional tasks alone. During a recent excavation at I Faraglioni, Ustica, the author's undergraduate assistant supported her in the recordkeeping and, as happens to all who work with sherds, became enamored of those that fit together and the potential for reconstruction that lay before us. He subsequently took on as a task the reconstruction of as much of the pottery as was possible. His efforts with one pithos (a large water-storage vessel) stand out especially (see Figure 1). We pulled all the possible sherds together and he began the reconstruction, a true three-dimensional picture puzzle. Day after day he became engrossed in the work and, like the child oblivious to the setting sun, had to be reminded of the time and told to come in for dinner. The pithos stands complete today, and photographs of him laboring over it are displayed in my office.

Collaborative brainstorming may arise at any moment. My colleagues and I recently spent part of an afternoon puzzling over an odd object of which at least thirteen examples have been recovered from the site (see Figure 2). Previously suggested examples of use (as a cooking stand or as an object to assist in spinning) cannot be supported. For well over an hour we tossed out ideas, following wild thoughts and imaginative reconstructions. We are left with an object that must have had some real practical function, and although our efforts were to no avail this time,

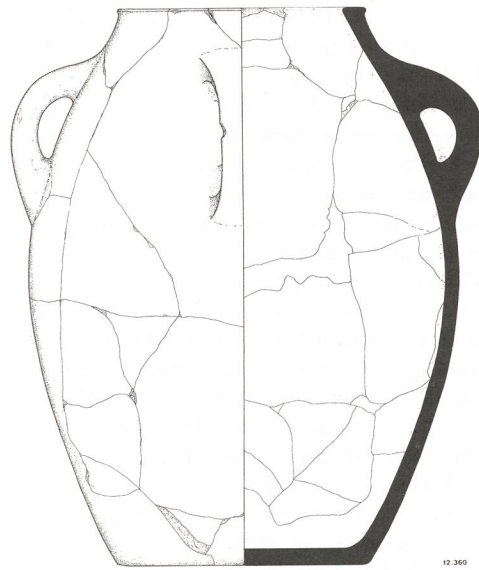


Figure 1. Drawing of reconstructed pithos from I Faraglioni, Ustica, Sicily (height approximately 50 cm)

the enjoyment of this session remains.

Archaeology is an especially satisfying discipline, as the problems, skills, and enjoyments derived from play seem equally embedded in this work. Many people tell me today that, when young, they had wanted to become an archaeologist, yet this choice had not occurred to me when I was a child. The idea formed late for me, although, having been admonished not to touch a pithos in a museum, I distinctly remember vowing to "have all the pots I want to touch someday." A few years later I turned to archaeology, when I discovered that people other than Heinrich Schliemann and Arthur Evans (with their wealth) could and did practice archaeology, and, more importantly, when I realized that if I were to spend my life doing something, it should be something that was fun and that I wanted to do.

Although as a child I never thought of archaeology, still I was a child who organized and arranged tea parties, who with my brothers built a village in our backyard, who surreptitiously visited houses under construction in the neighborhood, and who collected stamps. Jigsaw puzzles filled many rainy days, and mystery books then and now are distinct pleasures.

Is it any wonder that many children aspire to be archaeologists and many adults recall such a desire? The archaeologist has transformed some elements of children's play into an adult's lifework.

Archaeology takes many forms. There are field archaeologists, who excavate and then study what they have found, putting the remains into the larger context of the known world; there are the armchair archaeologists, whose main passion is studying the remains of antiquity that others have recovered. Then there are field archaeologists whose work takes them to different countries for extended but not permanent periods of time. There are also archaeologists who live at home and practice daily in their own countries. In the United States these archaeologists are often connected with the U.S. Forest Service or contract archaeology firms; in Italy, for example, they are connected with the government superintendencies that oversee all excavations in the country.

It is the field archaeologist who practices on foreign shores who thrills the layperson and attracts the new recruits. However, an excavation is not summer camp. Indeed, it has been likened to boot camp: early hours, long days working hard in the sun, evenings spent preparing for the next day, combined with camarade-

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rie and a shared sense of purpose. While not summer camp, field excavation and the world of the archaeologist encompass many of the same skills and characteristics of summer camp: exploring the world, creativity, fantasy and imagination, challenge and risk-taking, and even skill mastery and achievement.

An excavation is often short term, intense, taking place at a great distance from the home of the players—a situation ripe for technical, practical, and even social problems to occur. Skills that are used when things run well (creativity, problem solving, and interactive social skills) are doubly needed when equipment fails, food supplies are limited, tempers are short, or staff become ill. I recall one particularly trying time when new equipment lacked a crucial cable. The developer of this equipment was in Tennessee, and we were on a small island off the coast of Sicily. Telephones were available along the country roads, but without phone booths, traffic (e.g., earth movers, motorbikes) made any conversation difficult. Before we resorted to that option, we attempted our own repairs, and only when this failed did we call Tennessee to request a new cable. That came, fortunately with another colleague who had yet to leave the States. We continued to have problems and one day found ourselves in the local bar, setting up the computer beside the telephone in order to better speak with the developers, the only solution we could imagine.

Every member of an excavation team is actively involved in finding a solution to problems, however odd the implementation might be. On excavations, as in most situations, there is a real need for all to work together for the common good (whether making up for the cook who has come down with chicken pox, splicing a cable, or filling in for the sherd washers). Routine group discussions consider not only immediate problems and possible solutions but interpretations of material recovered and stratigraphy revealed, as well as future strategies for excavation. Imagination based on knowledge is critical to the ultimate interpretation of the site as well as to daily efforts and routine problem solving. Just as sports teach children a team approach to winning, multidisciplinary colleagues must work together to interpret the remains of a site into a unified whole.

The tools of excavation range from picks and shovels, brushes and glue, to high-tech equipment, often the same tools that a child has in the sandbox and art room. Many of today's archaeologists as children did not have comput-



Figure 2. Black and white photograph of an alare from I Faraglioni, Ustica, Sicily (height with handle approximately 27.5 cm)

ers to play with; they learn now as adults. This learning often takes the form of games or play, albeit under somewhat different conditions than children experience. Tomorrow's archaeologists will have become acquainted with the model-building, simulation capabilities of computers as part of their play and will more readily incorporate them into their professional work.

Every toystore is filled with picture puzzles and model-building kits of cars and airplanes, castles, fortresses, and bridges, and today, of course, computer versions of the same. Other computer games allow children to walk into worlds long past, and some even simulate archaeological excavations. Some kits available to children present a pot to be reconstructed. The adult who has become an archaeologist continues to create models, models of history that are more challenging than the model kits because there is no set of instructions, no real idea of what the model represents, and, most difficult, no certain knowledge that all the pieces are present. As we excavate new areas and create or refine our models, changing the parameters as new evidence presents itself, there is no doubt that many characteristics of play such as imagination, creativity, problem solving, risk-taking, challenge, construction of meaning, and flexibility of thought are fundamental to the discipline. What delighted us in the many and elaborate games we played as children continues to captivate us as adults.

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