

## ARCHAEOLOGY IS FOR THE LIVING

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*The job of archaeologists is to help the current generation understand the past. The idea that archaeologists in the future will somehow be smarter, better informed, and more technologically advanced is naïve and counterproductive. To many archaeologists, preservation and management are seen as ends in themselves. I argue that there can be no management without research and that while preservation is a worthy goal, it is not as simple as commonly conceived.*

Archaeologists are conservationists at heart. This is partly due to our concern about fragile things of the past and partly due to our shared lineage with environmentalists and other freethinkers of the 1960s. But too much energy spent in defense of the archaeological record can mean little time left over for actually figuring it out. My position is that we can't preserve what we don't understand and we can't assume that archaeologists of the future will be any better than us.

Archaeology has a schizophrenic conservation mindset, in that the archaeological record is seen as being in need of protection from destructive research, but at the same time, the quickest path to archaeological research is imminent destruction of a site. Because of conservation-minded regulations, agencies are reluctant to allow research unless there is a management tie-in, and private landowners are reluctant to allow research because of potential financial liabilities.

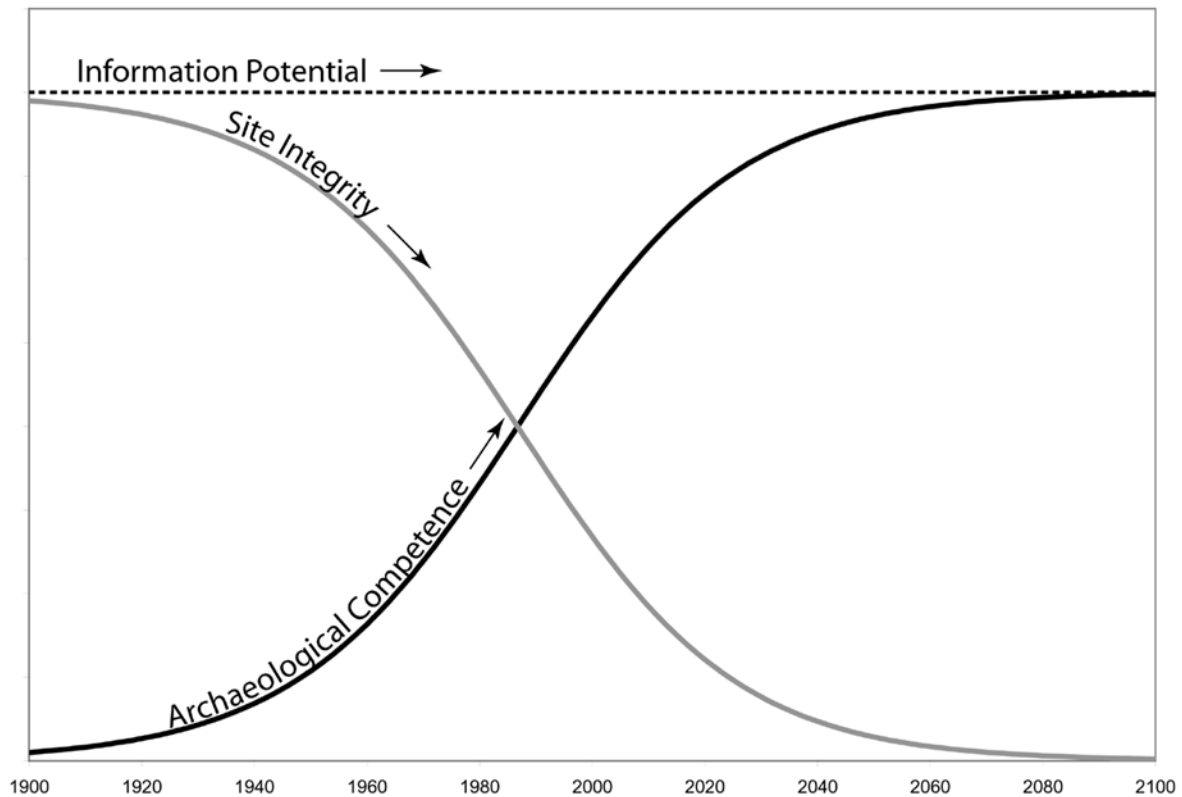
The majority of archaeological work that does occur is "project driven" (i.e., "destruction driven"), and the participation of archaeologists and others is compelled by regulation rather than chosen by careful consideration. Also, we don't get to decide when and where to dig, which often results in large collections of questionable importance hastily removed from intact sites. Under this sort of arrangement, it is tempting for us to use salvage as an excuse to cut corners. After all, when the alternative is a bulldozer, we all feel like good archaeologists. But I would argue that the standard for archaeological excellence should not be one step above a bulldozer.

The end result of this system is a large volume of research of variable quality driven by non-archaeologists. My point is that the continuing destruction of the archaeological record, as well as the curation crisis, has more to do with environmental regulation and the pace of development than it does with archaeologists.

I realize that, like many seemingly irrational behaviors, much of this is related to money. Who is going to pay for archaeological work? Who gets stuck with the real cost of perpetual curation? Who stands to make money and who stands to lose money when archaeological work is performed? Are money and time spent on archaeological research more likely to be wasted on a pie-in-the-sky graduate student or a CRM firm worried about the bottom line?

These are all worthy questions that have to be answered according to each unique situation, but how they are answered also depends on some implicit assumptions of the conservation mindset. Two largely unexamined assumptions are depicted in Figure 1. If we accept the idea that the archaeological record is deteriorating at some rate, and that archaeologists are continually getting better at what they do, then depending on the rate of each process, the end result could be no net change in information potential through time. Either a highly intact site was excavated by a marginally competent archaeologist 50 years ago, or a severely degraded site will be excavated by a top-notch archaeologist of the future, theoretically yielding the same amount of information in either case.

Even if you find this absurd and unsupported conclusion unconvincing, the point is that we don't have an accurate way of predicting either of these two variables. In the absence of that, we are just



*Figure 1. The solid black line represents the hypothesized increase in archaeological competence through time, while the solid gray line represents decreasing site integrity. The dashed line is the sum of the two other lines and represents the information potential of a site at any particular point in time. Note: No units are implied or known, and the span of years was chosen arbitrarily.*

operating on faith: faith in an archaeological record in decline, and faith in an archaeological community that, over the last 50 years, has transformed from activists to bureaucrats and from scientists to stewards.

If we believe that future archaeologists will be better than us, then we become servants to the future—supplying those archaeologists with data and an intact archaeological record. If instead we work towards actually understanding the past, then we work for ourselves and the public at large. In conclusion, I think that the job of archaeologists is to help people that are alive today understand the past. Otherwise, we are admitting defeat by saying we won't get any answers in this lifetime. So what are we waiting for?