

Moral justifications for archaeological excavation sites

[Experience](#), [Human Nature](#)



Can archaeological excavation of sites not under immediate threat of development or erosion be justified morally? Explore the pros and cons of research (as opposed to rescue and salvage) excavation and non-destructive archaeological research methods using specific examples.

Many people believe that archaeology and archaeologists are mainly concerned with excavation – with digging sites. This may be the common public image of archaeology, as often portrayed on television, although Rahtz (1991, 65-86) has made clear that archaeologists in fact do many things besides excavate. Drewett (1999, 76) goes further, commenting that ‘it must never be assumed that excavation is an essential part of any archaeological fieldwork’. Excavation itself is a costly and destructive research tool, destroying the object of its research forever (Renfrew and Bahn 1996, 100). Of the present day it has been noted that rather than desiring to dig every site they know about, the majority of archaeologists work within a conservation ethic that has grown up in the past few decades (Carmichael *et al.* 2003, 41). Given the shift to excavation taking place mostly in a rescue or salvage context where the archaeology would otherwise face destruction and the inherently destructive nature of excavation, it has become appropriate to ask whether research excavation can be morally justified. This essay will seek to answer that question in the affirmative and also explore the pros and cons of research excavation and non-destructive archaeological research methods.

If the moral justification of research excavation is questionable in comparison to the excavation of threatened sites, it would seem that what

makes rescue excavation morally acceptable is the fact that the site would be lost to human knowledge if it was not investigated. It seems clear from this, and seems widely accepted that excavation itself is a useful investigative technique. Renfrew and Bahn (1996, 97) suggest that excavation 'retains its central role in fieldwork because it yields the most reliable evidence archaeologists are interested in'. Carmichael *et al.* (2003, 32) note that 'excavation is the means by which we access the past' and that it is the most basic, defining aspect of archaeology. As mentioned above, excavation is a costly and destructive process that destroys the object of its study. Bearing this in mind, it seems that it is perhaps the context in which excavation is used that has a bearing on whether or not it is morally justifiable. If the archaeology is bound to be destroyed through erosion or development then its destruction through excavation is vindicated since much data that would otherwise be lost will be created (Drewett 1999, 76).

If rescue excavation is justifiable on the grounds that it prevents total loss in terms of the potential data, does this mean that research excavation is not morally justifiable because it is not simply 'making the best use of archaeological sites that must be consumed' (Carmichael *et al.* 2003, 34)? Many would disagree. Critics of research excavation may point out that the archaeology itself is a finite resource that must be preserved wherever possible for the future. The destruction of archaeological evidence through unnecessary (ie non-emergency) excavation denies the opportunity of research or enjoyment to future generations to whom we may owe a

custodial duty of care (Rahtz 1991, 139). Even during the most responsible excavations where detailed records are made, 100% recording of a site is not possible, making any non-essential excavation almost a wilful destruction of evidence. These criticisms are not wholly valid though, and certainly the latter holds true during any excavation, not only research excavations, and surely during a research project there is likely to be more time available for a full recording effort than during the statutory access period of a rescue project. It is also debateable whether archaeology is a finite resource, since 'new' archaeology is created all the time. It seems inescapable though, that individual sites are unique and can suffer destruction but although it is more difficult and perhaps undesirable to deny that we have some responsibility to preserve this archaeology for future generations, is it not also the case that the present generations are entitled to make responsible use of it, if not to destroy it? Research excavation, best directed at answering potentially important research questions, can be done on a partial or selective basis, without disturbing or destroying a whole site, thus leaving areas for later researchers to investigate (Carmichael *et al.* 2003, 41). Furthermore, this can and should be done in conjunction with non-invasive techniques such as aerial photography, ground, geophysical and chemical survey (Drewett 1999, 76). Continued research excavation also allows the practice and development of new techniques, without which such skills would be lost, preventing future excavation technique from being improved.

An excellent example of the benefits of a combination of research excavation and non-destructive archaeological techniques is the work that has been

done, despite objections, at the Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Sutton Hoo, in eastern England (Rahtz 1991 136-47; Renfrew and Bahn 1996, 98-99). Excavation originally took place on the site in 1938-39 revealing many treasures and the impression in sand of a wooden ship used for a burial, though the body was not found. The focus of these campaigns and those of the 1960s were traditional in their approach, being concerned with the opening of burial mounds, their contents, dating and identifying historical connections such as the identity of the occupants. In the 1980s a new campaign with different aims was undertaken, directed by Martin Carver. Rather than beginning and ending with excavation, a regional survey was carried out over an area of some 14ha, helping to set the site in its local context. Electronic distance measuring was used to create a topographical contour map prior to other work. A grass expert examined the variety of grass species on-site and identified the positions of some 200 holes dug into the site. Other environmental studies examined beetles, pollen and snails. In addition, a phosphate survey, indicative of likely areas of human occupation, corresponded with results of the surface survey. Other non-destructive tools were used such as metal detectors, used to map modern rubbish. A proton magnetometer, fluxgate gradiometer and soil resistivity were all used on a small part of the site to the east, which was later excavated. Of those techniques, resistivity proved the most informative, revealing a modern ditch and a double palisade, as well as some other features (see comparative illustrations in Renfrew and Bahn 1996, 99). Excavation later revealed features that had not been remotely detected. Resistivity has since been used on the area of the mounds while soil-

sounding radar, which penetrates deeper than resistivity, is being used on the mounds themselves. At Sutton Hoo, the techniques of geophysical survey are seen to operate as a complement to excavation, not merely a preliminary nor yet a replacement. By trialling such techniques in conjunction with excavation, their effectiveness can be gauged and new and more effective techniques developed. The results at Sutton Hoo suggest that research excavation and non-destructive methods of archaeological research remain morally justifiable.

However, simply because such techniques can be applied efficiently does not mean that excavation should be the priority nor that all sites should be excavated, but such a scenario has never been a likely one due to the usual constraints such as funding. Besides, it has been noted above that there is already a trend towards conservation. Continued research excavation at famous sites such as Sutton Hoo, as Rahtz notes (1991, 140-41), is justified since it serves avowedly to develop archaeological practice itself; the physical remains, or shapes in the landscape can be and are restored to their former appearance with the bonus of being better understood, more educational and interesting; such exotic and special sites capture the imagination of the public and the media and raise the profile of archaeology as a whole. There are other sites that could prove equally good examples of morally justifiable long term research archaeology, such as Wharram Percy (for which see Rahtz 1991, 148-57). Progressing from a straightforward excavation in 1950, with the aim of showing that the earthworks represented medieval buildings, the site grew to represent much more in time, space and

complexity. Techniques used expanded from excavation to include survey techniques and aerial photography to set the village into a local context.

In conclusion, it can be seen that while excavation is destructive, there is a morally justifiable place for research archaeology and non-destructive archaeological techniques: excavation should not be reduced only to rescue circumstances. Research excavation projects, such as Sutton Hoo, have provided many positive aspects to the development of archaeology and knowledge of the past. While excavation should not be undertaken lightly, and non-destructive techniques should be employed in the first place, it is clear that as yet they cannot replace excavation in terms of the amount and types of data provided. Non-destructive techniques such as environmental sampling and resistivity survey have, provided significant complementary data to that which excavation provides and both should be employed.

Bibliography

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