

The role of the historian

Should we be excavating?

Excavating historical sites such as Pompeii has led to a wide variety of understanding of the past. Because of the preserved records and artifacts found, historians have been able to accurately piece together what happened during the eruption of Vesuvius in AD 79, a time in which records were handwritten so, if not preserved, could have been lost. However, is excavating more really necessary? It can be argued that such sites have already been excavated enough, and if all knowledge has been gathered, excavating more might just be a waste of money and time.

There are various pros and cons related to excavating. Firstly, in the most simple terms, excavating is one way to preserve the past. If a site is not excavated, there is a high chance that the site will be forgotten. However, sometimes when excavating a site, what excavator is trying to preserve might itself get destroyed in the process. This is where the problem lies. Excavating is inherently destructive, but the need to gain knowledge is also high. Excavation is also very expensive. It is highly labour intensive, and apart from this, money is required for the equipment, travel etc. Furthermore, these excavations may also run for a long time, which is another factor which labels it as expensive. It can be argued that this money should instead be used in some other way, for example to improve the economy of a lower income country. Notwithstanding, due to new technologies being consistently found, there may be a way to excavate sites without having to go about it the traditional way. One example of this is the use of sonar waves. In recent times, sonar waves have been used to map out hollows or bumps in the sub-surface which might be of interest to archaeologists. By doing so, Archaeologists might not need to excavate the whole site, but only certain sections, so not ruining the whole site. Another example is the use of ground based radar. This detects variation in the composition of the soil and also indicates the

depth at which the variation occurs. This may enable the archaeologist to know exactly where any new artifacts lie hidden. By using such technologies, the archaeologist will not destroy the whole site, and even might protect it.

So, in my opinion, I believe it is important that we continue excavating. By excavating, it is possible to find out about major events in the past that no one knew about. Finding out about potentially catastrophic events may also help in predicting future ones that could save the lives of many. I also feel that there is no point in preserving artifacts. Once all knowledge has been gained, it might be futile to preserve objects. Excavating may also evolve in the near future to be something that is not as destructive as it is now, which will result in more knowledge being acquired..

References:

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