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Archaeological Excavation

J. P Droop (1882–1963) was a classical field archaeologist. After graduating from Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1904 he worked as a field archaeologist for the British School at Athens, and was appointed Chair of Classical Archaeology at Liverpool University in 1914. This volume was intended as a guide to practical archaeological excavation and was first published in 1915 as part of the Cambridge Archaeological and Ethnological series. At the time of publication, archaeology was starting to become a more scientific and academic discipline, as can be seen in Droop's arguments on the importance of archaeological context and knowledge of stratification on site. The development of excavation as a scientifically based practice is shown by the emphasis on planning of the site, in contrast to earlier guides to excavation. This volume provides insights into the development of the theory as well as the practice of archaeology.

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J. P. DROOP

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore,
São Paolo, Delhi, Dubai, Tokyo

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781108010283

This edition first published 1915
This digitally printed version 2010

ISBN 978-1-108-01028-3 Paperback

Cambridge Archaeological and Ethnological Series

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATION

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ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATION

BY

J. P. DROOP, M.A.
Late Student of the British School at Athens

Cambridge:
at the University Press
1915

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
C. F. CLAY, MANAGER
London: FETTER LANE, E.C.
Edinburgh: 100 PRINCES STREET

New York: G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS
Bombay, Calcutta and Madras: MACMILLAN AND Co., LTD.
Toronto: J. M. DENT AND SONS, LTD.
Tokyo: THE MARUZEN-KABUSHIKI-KAISHA

To

R. M. DAWKINS

"all-sagacious in our art,
Breeder in me of what poor skill I boast."

INTRODUCTION

THE time has perhaps gone by when it was necessary, if it ever were, to put forward a defence of the pleasant practice of digging, a defence of it, that is to say, not as a harmless recreation of the idle rich, but as a serious business for a reasonable man. In all ages the maker of history and the recorder of history have alike received due honour. To-day a place is found, not equal, of course, in glory but in the same hierarchy, for the reverent discoverer of the dry bones of history; and on Clio's roll of honour next to Homer and Agamemnon there is now a place for Schliemann.

In the last forty years excavation has been carried on very extensively in Italy, in Greece, and in Egypt, to say nothing of the work that has been done in the more northern countries of Europe, or in fields further to the east; and the time has come when it may be of some interest to set forth the principles that have been, or at least should have been, the basis of the work.

The reservation must be made; for in Greece, at least, and in Egypt it was unavoidably, but none the less deplorably, the case that the great men of the past lacked the experience that is now ours. Excavation, like surgery, is an art, but, unlike the surgeon, the excavator has no unlimited supply of

new subjects ready to benefit by his growing skill. The number of sites that have been spoiled will not bear thinking of, sites that bring a vicarious remorse to the mind that remembers by what ignorance they were very lovingly but very shamefully mishandled, so that their secrets, instead of being gathered up, were spilled and lost. The pity of it is that in the old days excavation was not recognised as an art; the excavator took a spade and dug and what he found he found; what could be more simple or more satisfying? To-day he knows, or should know, for the reservation is again necessary, that what he finds is not more important than the conditions in which he finds it. On the old plan it is as if a man were shown the symbols $(a + b)$ $(a - b)$ and, when asked what he saw, replied: $a + b$ and $a - b$. There is no intention here of suggesting that all the great men of the past were fools and that wisdom has been reserved for the present generation; far from it, but in a business in which accumulated experience joined with common sense carries a man three-quarters of the way the results in the days of no experience were of necessity much as if it had been so.

The writer's training has been entirely gained in Greek lands, with the addition of one season in Egypt, so that any illustrations with which he may point his remarks must be drawn from a comparatively narrow field, but he believes that the broad principles that should underlie archaeological excavation do not vary with locality, and this all the more because one of them is that the nature

of every site must be taken into careful consideration before any lessons can be safely drawn from the yield of the work.

From the stress laid in the following pages upon stratification the reader might be excused for thinking that all sites have been stratified by past generations with a nice comprehension of the needs of the excavator. Unfortunately it is not so. Many sites show no strata and in many more the strata that once existed have been destroyed by rash digging for foundations or by other baleful activities, though ancient builders were not so criminal as their modern successors. But because where strata do not exist digging is easy, and because where strata do exist digging is most difficult and the results of digging most fruitful in knowledge, I believe that to be able to dig a stratified site well is to have attained to the highest and most remunerative skill in this particular work; therefore I make no apology for laying stress on the importance of stratification; its presence should always be assumed until the worst is known, for no scientific harm is done by the assumption and much may be saved. It need hardly be said that this refers only to the process of digging, not to the subsequent study of the finds; for the man who worked out his results on the assumption that his finds must have been stratified would soon make a great, but not an enviable, name. The fact is, of course, easy to ascertain as the excavation proceeds, chiefly by the consistency or otherwise of the results; consistency is the main point, and too much faith

should never be given to isolated phenomena, even if not contradicted, for nothing is more necessary to remember than that any individual object or set of objects may have got out of place. One or two iron knife-blades were found mixed with the Middle Minoan pottery at the cave above Kamares, yet we forbore to proclaim to the world that the Middle Minoans were an iron-using people; there, however, there was no stratification to be contaminated, but sometimes the most scandalous finds turn up; a mediaeval coin, for instance, has been known to try to compromise the purest of neolithic deposits.

This essay has been written with the idea chiefly of entertaining the many who by their interest and subscriptions have helped in the work of recovering the past, and partly in the hope that, if it makes even slightly for the accomplishment of better work in the future, it may not have been written in vain; and the writer has dared to put his views with the more freedom because he has never been in charge of an excavation, and therefore need not fear the reproach that what he preaches he did not practise.

Lastly—at the present time such a book as this should not appear without an apology for its impertinence; yet this will perhaps seem less gross to those who look confidently to a future in which we shall be free once more to care about the past.

J. P. D.

LONDON.
August 1915.

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