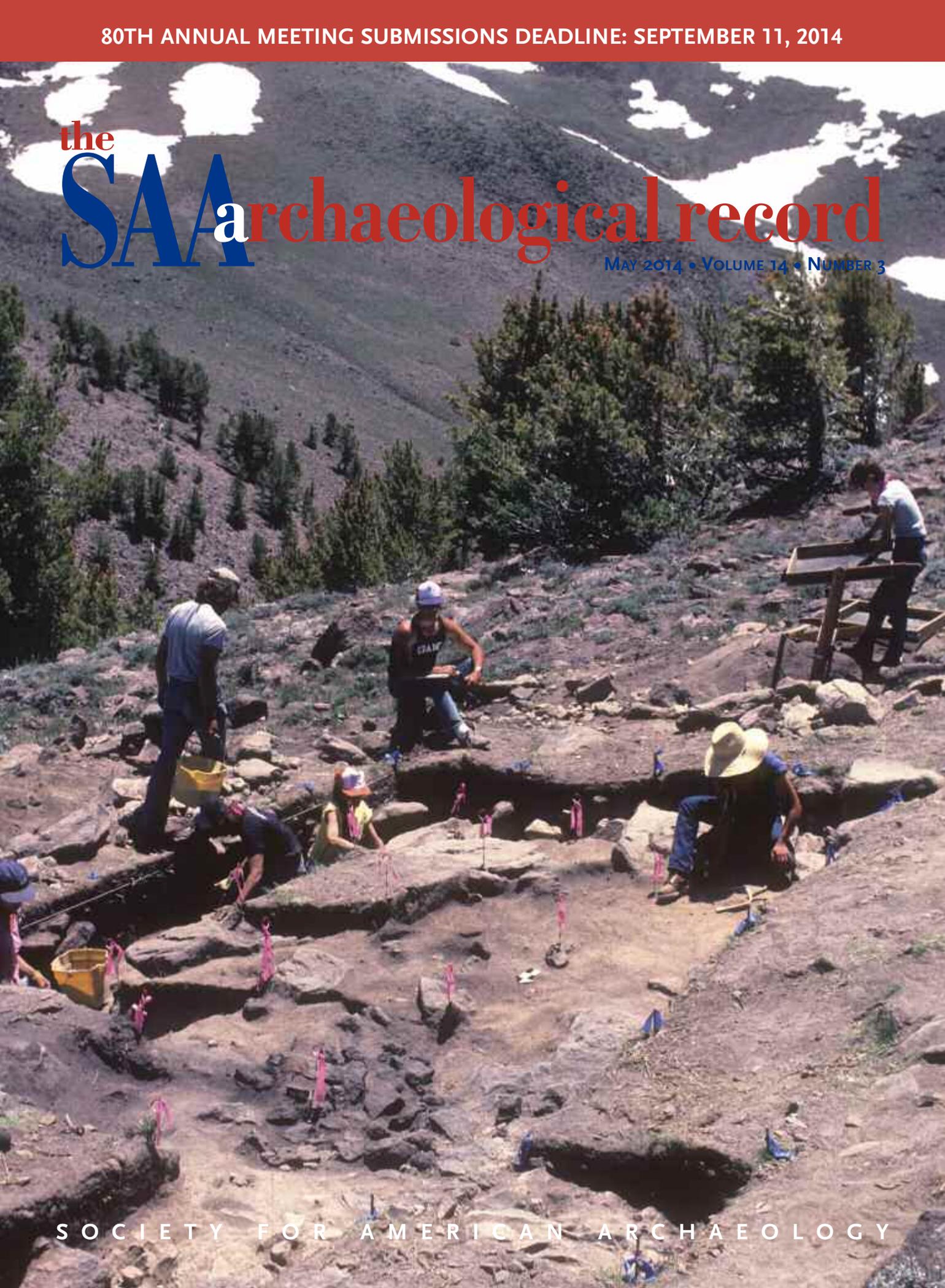


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On the cover: Summertime excavations at Alta Toquima—Figure 4 from the article, *Exploring and Explaining Alta Toquima: The Higher You Get, The Higher You Get* (photo reproduced by permission of David Hurst Thomas)

TEACHING ARCHAEOLOGY IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

SOCIAL RELEVANCE

Elizabeth Terese Newman and Benjamin West

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This article continues the series on SAA's Seven Principles of Archaeological Curriculum, introduced by Kathryn Kamp, Kellie Jenks, and Tammy Stone in the January 2014 issue of the *SAA Archaeological Record*. Here, we discuss the fourth principle, Social Relevance, originally described in the *SAA Bulletin* in 1999 and then expanded upon in book form in 2000 (Bender and Smith 2000; Davis, et al. 1999).

Introduction

In a day and age when state governors call for the defunding of anthropology programs at public universities and the U.S. Congress debates funding social science research through the National Science Foundation, the ability to articulate the social relevance of archaeology is more pressing than ever. As professionals, we need to be able to articulate archaeology's relevance, but, just as importantly, we also need to train our students to articulate it as well. When confronted with the question, "Is archaeology socially relevant and why?" many of the undergraduate anthropology majors we informally surveyed responded immediately in the affirmative to the first part of the question but struggled with the second. Everybody seemed to believe that archaeology matters, but few could get beyond the justification that those who are ignorant of the past are doomed to repeat it. For those of us who have dedicated our lives to studying the past, this may be sufficient justification, but for many who live in the present and worry about the future, that particular argument can come across as a tired trope. Both we and our students need to be able to justify how and why the study of the past fits into the present. Further, the undergraduate archaeology classroom, often well-stocked with students from other majors seeking to fulfill general education requirements in an alluring field, is an ideal place to spread the message beyond the confines of our own field. If

we look across the college curriculum, we can find many opportunities to "proselytize."

Making Archaeology Socially Relevant

In 1999, the Undergraduate Education Work Group at the SAA Workshop "Teaching Archaeology in the Twenty-First Century" highlighted the importance of communicating the social relevance of archaeology to our students and to the wider general public. They explained, "If we are to justify the existence of archaeology as a discipline and gain public interest and support, then we must effectively show how archaeology benefits society" (Davis et al. 1999). The authors expressed concern that such justifications were left implicit in the presentation of class materials, on the assumption that the relevance would be self-evident to students (though it often was not). Our informal survey suggests that this concern continues to be valid.

The 1999 Work Group listed six suggested subtopics which would allow for an emphasis on the social relevance of archaeology: environment as a catalyst for both the rise and fall of past societies; the relationship of warfare to politics, economics, and "other historical circumstances"; the history of cities and urban life; the applicability of archaeological method to current public policy in areas as diverse as forensic/war crimes studies and garbage/waste management; systems of social inequality in the past and their implications for the present; and the history of human health and disease. Though it has been 15 years since this list was drawn up, all six subtopics are clearly still relevant, even urgently so, in the modern world, and all could draw on a wealth of archaeological cases in a variety of classroom settings.

In the SAA Curriculum Committee's recent survey of course syllabi (see Kamp 2014 for a summary of results), the topic

of social relevance in archaeology took fourth place in order from most to least emphasized of the original seven proposed principles. It is most often dealt with in topical and theory courses and least often emphasized in methods courses or during field schools. This trend may be a symptom of a certain level of discomfort with operationalizing this principle at all levels of the profession, or, alternatively, a sign that social relevance is, indeed, often left as an implicit lesson rather than made an explicit one. That said, the original guidelines laid out by the 1999 Work Group suggest that social relevance should be emphasized in large enrollment and introductory courses where the principle was likely to reach the widest audience—from majors to non-majors—though they targeted only world archaeology and area archaeology courses as the likely and appropriate venues for the introduction of the principle (Davis et. al. 1999). On this front, we can count ourselves doing well, as social relevance was the most popular component of the seven principles on the survey of introductory syllabi and, within its own category, appeared most frequently on topical, though not area, courses. In spite of this, we must not be complacent. The social relevance of archaeology, and the importance of being able to accurately express that social relevance, is clear. In the next section, we will focus on the implementation of two of the original six suggested subtopics as examples for integration across the college curriculum.

Case One: Environmental Change

“Sustainability” is a buzzword on many college campuses these days, and it is an ideal field into which archaeology may be integrated to highlight the social relevance of the field. On some campuses, Sustainability has become a stand-alone program; on others, and more commonly, students with the goal of working in a sustainability-related field (be it clean energy, business, or city planning, to name just a few) are trained in environmental studies programs. Students in these programs are often so focused on the present and the future that they forget that the past also has things to teach us. Offering courses that attract such students and at the same time meet university general education requirements is an effective way of extending the message that archaeology is relevant outside the confines of the department.

Students in these fields especially, but also in a wide range of fields relating to the physical and natural sciences, spend much of their classroom time learning about the impacts of climate change on our world today and grappling with potential solutions for the future. Most are unaware that pre-modern societies have also been confronted with a wide range of environmental issues—from natural disasters to climate

change—and have dealt with those issues with varying degrees of success. Courses exploring past social responses to climate change offer these students an opportunity to put their studies about the present and anxieties about the future into perspective, and archaeologists have done an excellent job of publishing volumes suitable for the classroom that address questions about environmental change in the past, discuss human responses, both good and bad to those changes, and articulate the relevance of these studies to modern policy decisions (e.g., McAnany and Yoffee 2010; Redman 1999; Schwartz and Nichols 2006).

Case Two: Social Inequality

Just as archaeological treatment of human-environmental relationships increasingly complements the curricula of the social and physical sciences, archaeology’s application of social theory from many fields in the humanities and the social sciences permits students to consider the archaeological dimensions of larger questions in their other non-archaeology classes. Social inequality, as it has been constructed along lines of gender, race and ethnicity, and caste and class, possesses significant time depth and variation. Works from the last several decades render these categories and their origins increasingly visible in the archaeological record and call into question the “natural” inequality we see in the present (e.g., Hastorf and Johannessen 1993). Courses that explore constructions such as race or masculinity and that trace their variation over time will benefit from the addition of archaeological sources into syllabi. Along the same lines, students performing coursework in archaeology, either toward a degree or as a component of a liberal arts curriculum, should enjoy options that tackle the same issues of power and privilege encountered in classes outside of the anthropology program.

Archaeology contributes perspectives and evidence that enrich the discourse surrounding those topics in other disciplines. For example, works regarding the origin of states and the emergence of social inequality (e.g., Marcus and Feinman 1996) pose new questions and offer challenging answers to students in disciplines such as Philosophy and Political Science who are accustomed to reading theorists like Hobbes, Montesquieu, and Rousseau. Archaeologists borrowing research questions from history and sociology offer new data sets to students of these disciplines, documenting struggle and strife in the historic past in ways that documentary research alone can never establish. These contributions can acquire increased relevance if the research area is local, helping students perceive how archaeological knowledge serves to enhance and form community and a

sense of place among many populations, a process that can encourage contemporary peoples to ally themselves in previously unrecognized ways for social and political change (Gadsby and Chidester 2011).

Conclusion

In 2000, the Society of American Archaeology published the edited volume *Teaching Archaeology in the Twenty-First Century*, (Bender and Smith 2000). In it, Anne Pyburn described the discipline of archaeology as “under siege;” according to Pyburn, we were in a precarious position, with shrinking funding from the National Science Foundation, fewer and fewer academic jobs for PhDs, and politicians and a general public who put us on the defensive by viewing our work as “frivolous” (Pyburn 2000:121). Though nearly 15 years have passed since Pyburn’s article was published, it seems that little has changed. Perhaps we are all doing a good job of demonstrating archaeology’s relevance in our college classrooms, but, if so, then that work has evidently allowed us only to maintain the status quo. Perhaps we could become more effective in integrating our studies across the college curriculum and highlighting the contemporary relevance of archaeology to students in disciplines as diverse as Physics and Philosophy, and, thus, 15 years from now, find ourselves and our discipline feeling more confident and less embattled. Regardless, clearly articulating the social relevance of archaeology for ourselves, for our students, for our communities, and across the college curriculum as a whole is not simply good practice. It is vital to the continued health of our field.

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