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FIELD METHODS IN Archaeology



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CHAPTER

4

Site Survey

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As stated in [Chapter 1](#), **archaeology** can be defined as the recovery and study of the material remains of societies and cultures. It is that branch of anthropology that focuses on the things people made and used—often, though not always, because those material remains are all that is left of a now extinct society.

A key assumption in **archaeology** is that these material remains reflect both directly and indirectly on the culture that produced them. In other words, there is a comprehensible relationship between the “hardware” left behind by a culture and the culture itself.

People do not ordinarily behave randomly but follow patterns established within their societies. Tool manufacture, hunting practices, house construction, religious worship, village location, and so on, are behaviors that tend to conform to societal patterns, standards, or requirements. Behavior follows rules established within societies and, therefore, is patterned. Because the archaeological record is, at least, an indirect reflection of that behavior, the archaeological record also is

“bright spots” distorts our understanding of a pattern of land use.

Nonsite-based “landscape” or “distributional” archaeology has become popular in the American Great Basin and the southwestern United States, as well as in parts of Africa. This is almost certainly the result of environmental factors. In these areas, the pattern of land use was dispersed and continuous because the features of the landscape that attracted humans tended to be more dispersed. With fewer deeply stratified sites and with a higher proportion of surface sites of different ages mixed together across the landscape, it is apparent why such a perspective might be useful in these geographic areas.

In other regions—the northeastern United States, for example—the archaeological record is more clustered into distinct “sites” because the features of the landscape that attracted human use were themselves discontinuous or more clustered, and different time periods often are separated stratigraphically. Here too, however, a landscape or distributional approach is of great utility because it reveals more of the landscape signature of a region, provides a more representative sample of elements of land use, and thus, provides a clearer view of an entire settlement pattern rather than focusing only on the discovery of the archaeologically richest locations (Dewar and McBride 1992; Feder and Banks 1996). Elsewhere, Crumley et al. (1987) have applied with great success a landscape approach in their survey of the Burgundy region of France.

Although here we will continue to use the entrenched concept of the “archaeological site,” it must be said that landscape or distributional archaeologists make an important point for all archaeologists conducting surveys. Our focus should be not on the discovery of sites (in the narrow sense of village locations) but on the broad question of how human groups used the landscape. We should not let apparent clustering of remains in some discrete locations obscure the fact that people likely perceived and used their regions quite broadly. Survey strategies designed for finding only expansive, densely clustered archaeological remains (i.e., village sites) may guarantee that such clusters are all we find and that we miss significant elements in a land-use pattern. Densely occupied villages, if they exist within a pattern of land use, are likely to be only one element within that pattern. This must be kept in mind when developing a survey