



An Adventure in the Depths of Time Badlands Archaeology



Archaeology. The very mention of the word evokes images of buried treasure, ancient curses, or the stereotype of a pith-helmeted scholar poking around in the desert. Too often the most sensational aspects of the profession, whether the fact of the great cliff dwellings of Mesa Verde or the fiction of Indiana Jones, have become the sole elements of most people's concept of archaeology. Spectacular discoveries are quite rare in the real life science, which is normally a mixture of demanding physical labor and careful scholarship.

Defining a Discipline

The science of archaeology is best thought of as the study of past ways of life. To pursue this study, archaeologists focus on the relationship between the material objects made by past peoples and the makers' behavior. To master archaeology, one must love puzzles and be comfortable with the blank spots in human experience - what could this tool have been used for? Was it even used as a tool? For an archaeologist, ambiguity rules their professional life.

In previous centuries, archaeologists were content to simply find objects. Today, armed with computers, laboratory analysis, theories about society and culture, and a wide range of questions about human behavior, they may try to reach into the minds of those who made and used the artifacts. Thus their analysis acts as a bridge between the two sets of things: one an invisible realm that includes human ways of survival, religious beliefs, family structure, and social organization; the other a visible accumulation of material remains such as trash, tools, ornaments, and buildings. The latter group provides the raw material for understanding the former through logical reasoning. In making this all important link archaeologists have three main goals:

- To obtain a chronology of the past, a sequence of events and dates that, in a sense, is a backward extension of history.
- To begin at least to reconstruct the many way of life that no longer exist.
- To give us some understanding of why human culture has changed through time.

Archaeology in the White River Badlands

Relatively little is known of the prehistory of the Badlands region. The oldest site found dates from over 12,000 years ago; however, it was most likely a temporary camp for traveling hunters. To date, nearly 300 sites have been located that are either prehistoric or historic in age. The majority of these sites lie in the North Unit; however, this reflects management history more than significance of the resources.

Archaeological resources in Badlands National Park largely consist of bison bones, scorched rock from fire rings, scatters of worked stones, and occasional pottery. Much of this material is found on the eroded toes of dissected sod tables that form much of the Badlands landscape. The dense grassy caps that cover most surfaces in the park make visibility poor. The large quantities of bison bone at some sites suggest butchering activity. Quarry sites are also known in the area and reflect locations where rock types such as chert, chalcedonies, and gravels were exploited. A Badlands archaeological site has a “typical” appearance of soil horizons marked with charcoal - remnants of fires past. Many of these fires document the history of human-set prairie fire used to drive out game. All in all, it is highly unlikely that the Badlands were ever a permanent home for humans. This place was more likely a hunting ground through which different cultures passed seasonally in search of meat, hides, horns, and other animal by-products.

Life in a Hard Place

Very little is known about the cultural history of this area. There is clear evidence of human use beginning as early as 12,000 years before present and probably continuing to at least 500 AD. These cultures are described by archaeologists as “Plains Archaic” and are very poorly represented by tangible reminders in the Badlands. This is likely a reflection of the small amount of acreage surveyed in the park to date.

Evidence of post-paleo people is more apparent. Charcoal from buried hearths and roasting pits have produced radiocarbon ages of 2305 to 750 years before present. Some sites indicate repeated short-term occupation along the edges of the Badlands Wall where water and shelter from trees made habitation more favorable. Both archaeologists and anthropologists agree that is highly unlikely that any real villages or permanent residences will be found in the North Unit of the park due to lack of water and harsh weather conditions.

Arrival of the Lakota

The Oglala Lakota did not move into this area until the mid to late 1700s. They found the Arikara in the area and forced them northward into present-day North Dakota where the Arikara are now known as one of the Three Affiliated Tribes, joining in confederation with the Mandan and Hidatsa peoples. The Sioux Nation is made up of three linguistic groups: the Nakota who make their home in Minnesota, the Dakota who range from western Minnesota into eastern South Dakota, and the Lakota, the furthest western group. “Oglala” is one of seven bands within the Lakota linguistic group. After the introduction of the horse, these western most Sioux became master equestrians and continue this tradition today. Fiercely proud of their warrior heritage, the Lakota produced such great leaders as Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse, Red Cloud, Bigfoot, and Spotted Tail. Most texts, including park exhibits, will describe the Lakota name for this region as Mako sica, or land bad. However, as more is shared by elders, it may be more likely that the traditional name for this area was Paha ska, or the White Hills, in contrast with the sacred Paha sapa, or the Black Hills. To the Lakota, this place was far from bad. They joined grizzly bears and prairie wolves to prey upon the bison, pronghorn, elk, and other game that roamed the Badlands at will.

Land of Opportunity

Westward expansion brought thousands of settlers from points east to the Great Plains. Most were on their way to the Pacific Northwest or California; however, many tried to stake their claims in the Dakotas and Nebraska with the promise of endless resources and a better life. The Homestead Act of 1862 permitted the homesteader to claim 160 acres as a homesite. However, that soon proved to be an insufficient piece of land in this semi-arid climate and barely fertile soil. Homesteads were increased in size to 640 acres for grazing purposes. Although a few hardy souls attempted to settle the Badlands in the late 1800s, most homesteading efforts occurred in the 1910s and 1920s. The Great Dust Bowl of the 1930s drove most away. Only the most tenacious stayed. Their ancestors remain today, fiercely proud of their prairie roots. Many are of mixed heritage - Lakota and European - and maintain their ties to a beautiful but sometimes unforgiving homeland. Remnants of abandoned homesites can be found throughout the park’s expanses of prairie.

Seeing Ourselves In the Past

The quest for cause-and-effect explanations of human behavior over the centuries is perhaps the most important ingredient in archaeology for it has the potential to help us understand the present. Archaeology, in conjunction with other social and natural sciences, enables us to better understand ourselves and how we got to be the way we are. In short, archaeology is not merely the recovery and description of artifacts; it is ultimately a problem-solving science that recovers and analyzes data that reflects the vast diversity of human societies. It enables us to look at the past as it was: people just like us, struggling to carve out a life for ourselves in the world.