Chapter 14

The Archaeology of the Future

T. DOUGLAS PRICE AND GARY M. FEINMAN

1. INTRODUCTION

This volume provides a view of archaeology at the turn of the millennium, looking both backward and forward. The preceding chapters have examined the human story, and the frameworks and perspectives that archaeologists have employed to write that story, from our earliest tool-using ancestors through the rise of early empires.

In this final chapter, we examine the state of archaeology itself—how it came to this point, where it is today, and where the discipline might be going in the future. Many new ideas, insights, and answers have emerged from archaeological research to date, and many major questions remain to be answered. Are we closer to understanding the past, or are we still learning what questions to ask? In what directions is the field headed in the coming years? What is the prognosis for archaeology as a field of study?

In the following pages we present a capsule history of the discipline, portray current conditions, and prognosticate on the future of archaeology. Ultimately, the outlook of this chapter is one of optimism, celebrating the diversity and strength of the discipline and the many exciting things that we are beginning to learn about the human past.

2. THE PAST OF ARCHAEOLOGY

The evolution of archaeology as a discipline can be subdivided into several eras or phases. Prior to 1800, only a few points of light mark an initial fascination with the human past during what has been called the romantic phase. These include the celebrated examples of William Stukeley at Stonehenge and Avebury (Figure 14.1) in Britain during the first half of the eighteenth century (Piggott, 1985) as well as Thomas Jefferson excavating a mound in Virginia in 1784 (Willey and Sabloff, 1993). Such studies represent notable exceptions to the prevailing theological views that defined the origin, chronology, and course of human life.

An emergent phase of archaeology began after 1800. This era was marked by the creation of museums of antiquity, the appointment of the first university chairs in archaeology, and the initiation of more systematic fieldwork in various parts of Europe and the New World. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the museums of Europe were filling
Figure 14.1. A page from Stukeley’s field notes in 1723 showing, above, the section of an excavated barrow, and below, the barrows in the landscape around Avebury (Piggott, 1985: plate 42).