Classical vs. Modern Archaeology

A Classic Excavation

In 1922, Howard Carter and Lord Carnarvon solved a three-thousand year old mystery. They entered the tomb of Egyptian Pharaoh Tutankhamen. His tomb was filled with valuable treasures made from jewels and gold. In the middle of the treasure was Tutankhamen’s mummy in a solid gold sarcophagus.

The excavation of Tutankhamen’s tomb is an example of classic archaeology. Its main goal was not to learn about life in the past. Instead its main goal was to find spectacular and valuable artifacts. It was a search for wealth.

❖ What was Howard Carter’s goal in excavating the Egyptian tomb?

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The New Archaeology

Today, most archaeologists are not looking for valuable treasures to add to their collections. Instead, they are trying to find out about the lives of all kinds of people – both rich and poor, famous and ordinary.

Modern archaeologists eagerly search for and study kitchen midden. In the past, kitchen midden would have been thrown away as worthless trash. Today we know that kitchen midden holds many clues about the daily lives of ordinary people.

Modern archaeologists also work closely with other scientists. These include:

➢ Geologists: those who study the earth and soil conditions.
➢ Botanists: those who provide information about plant life throughout time.
➢ Zoologists: those who provide information about animal life throughout time.
➢ Chemists and physicists: those who help determine the age of artifacts.

Koster, in western Illinois, is a good example of a modern archaeological dig. There was no gold or mummies in Koster. Instead, archaeologists have found things like pollen,
snail shells, and fish scales. These clues are evidence that there were 15 different settlements on the site. The oldest dates back to 6500 B.C.E. The dig has given the world valuable insights into the life of the early inhabitants of North America. It has also shown how people adapted to and changed their environment over time.

- How has archaeology changed during the past century?