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Faith Today

Digging In

By Katharine Bird
NC News Service

"When I'm on the site that's a thousand years old it's like being on a scavenger hunt, seeking the unknown," said anthropologist James Bellis of the University of Notre Dame in Indiana. "It appeals to my fancy."

"My interest as an archeologist is in the history of our species," Bellis said. "For archeology is the study of past cultures, people's ways of life, through their material remains — the garbage people left behind," he explained.

"It's hard to cheat with garbage," Bellis added. "We can learn a lot not evident in written records. Everything left behind tells us about people's behavior."

Archeologists are the only persons who can approach the earliest ages of the human saga, the part predating written history in 3000 B.C., Bellis continued.

"Anything we call ancient events is current history" for him. But studying people in any long-gone age convinces Bellis that they were "virtually identical to us" in many ways.

"There's a lot of history between Homeric Greece and us, but we can recognize them as us," he said. Both the ancient Greeks and people today have similar brain size and body shape; both ate domesticated foods — pigs and chickens and fruit; both used metal and wove woolens to make cloth; both had inside fires and lived in permanent communities with relatives.

Bellis recalled a book by anthropologist Loren Eiseley, "The Firmament of Time" (Athenium Press, 1960). Eiseley wrote about looking into a Neanderthal grave and noted that these early human ancestors "laid down their (dead) in grief, placed stones to guard the head and food for the journey."

For Eiseley, it was as if the Neanderthals were sending a wordless message from 40,000 years ago, saying: "We too were human; we too suffered; we too believed the grave was not the end; we too, whose faces fright you now, knew human agony and human love."

That description stands as a prime example of what can be learned from archeology for Bellis. "We discover what human nature is," he said. And that can tell us a lot about ourselves.

For archeology teaches us that

"all societies deal with similar kinds of problems," he said. This helps people develop a perspective on themselves and their own times, he added.

His archeological studies have convinced Bellis that "human cooperation and compassion are enormously critical to our survival" as humans.

He thinks there is "far more evidence of cooperation than of antagonism" in early human history.

This runs counter to some popular beliefs that portray the earliest human ancestors as warlike and brutal. "People forget that the Neanderthal man was about 70 years old, had arthritis and was toothless," Bellis said. Warriors seldom get the time to develop such characteristics.

Bellis said that when people discover he's an archeologist, they almost always react by saying, "Oh, that's what I wanted to be!"

That's because people see archeologists through romantic eyes, in the "frame of the Indiana Jones movies which appeal to the mythology of archeology," Bellis said. Such movies portray archeologists as "soldiers of fortune" on the trail of high adventure.

In reality, he said, "most archeologists spend their lives in dusty basements" going methodically through bones and pottery and samples of pollen.

At the same time, people have a genuine interest in those who preceded them. And, for Bellis, this is because of what we can learn about ourselves. "If you want to know how we got here today," Bellis said, it is important to know where we have come from.

He observed that people had "9,000 years to get used to living in more or less permanent communities with agriculture" as their base and only 200 years to learn how to get along in gigantic metropolitan centers.

"Archeology gives us the perspective of that long time line," Bellis concluded.

(Ms. Bird is associate editor of Faith Today.)

To an archeologist, the "garbage" of ancient cultures reveals a great deal about the drama of human life thousands of years ago. But anthropologist James Bellis, interviewed by Katharine Bird, also believes that if we look closely we can see ourselves reflected in the remnants of the past.

