

A topic sure to create an argument amongst archaeologists is that of restoration: simply put, should an excavated site be left exactly as uncovered by the archaeologist; or should it be systematically restored in order to resemble more closely what it once was? Archaeologists opposed to restoration are concerned that modern reconstructions may be conceived in error and, in the end, may obscure or even destroy the actual remains; those in favour of restoration argue that the true significance of a site can best be conveyed to the public at large through careful reconstruction.

The debate is not a new one: in the early 1900s, Sir Arthur Evans created a major stir when he decided to restore, or "reconstitute" as he put it, the Palace of Minos at Knossos on Crete. After many years of costly and intensive work, Evans gave the public an imposing palace which today attracts thousands of visitors to Crete, and, more importantly, informs them of the achievement of Bronze Age Crete. On the other hand, the contemporaneous Palace of Phaestos in southern Crete, excavated by the Italian School of Archaeology, has not been restored to any degree; what the visitor today sees at Phaestos are essentially the foundation blocks of the palace. Not surprisingly, the site of Phaestos does not attract as many visitors as that of Knossos. Phaestos, however, is archaeologically a "purer" site, its authenticity not put into question by the imagination of an excavator. Indeed, some authorities today feel that Knossos is more a reflection of Arthur Evans than of Minoan Crete! Evans himself, however, believed that his reconstitution was done scientifically and accurately.

Here in Canada we can visit an archaeological site that also speaks to this problem: the Fortress of Louisbourg on Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia. Louisbourg was the major French centre in the New World in the 1740s; in the words of writer Dan Proudfoot, it was "a remarkable place. The harbour was the fourth busiest in the New World ..., and traders, merchants, and fishermen were enjoying ... prosperity and social mobility." The fortress was imposing in its massiveness: its walls enclosed an area of some 60 acres (compare the five acres of Knossos!), in which stood a town laid out on a grid plan and composed of 30 regular blocks. By 1760, however, the fortress was in ruins, having fallen victim to the British.

In the early 1960s, the Canadian government undertook to finance the reconstruction of a large area of Louisbourg, and today there are over 45 buildings restored down to minute details. Young men in period dress parade as French soldiers, while life goes on in the town much as it did in the 18th century. No wonder that thousands of tourists, both Canadian and foreign, journey to Louisbourg every year and come away with a better understanding of the history of Canada.

Should Louisbourg have been left exactly as excavated? Should Evans have left Knossos in ruins? Should the Parthenon be restored? The answer to such questions must depend on one's personal views about the ultimate function of archaeological investigation.