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Up, Up and Away !!

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Anyone who has wandered about a large archaeological site knows the frustration of feeling unable to "piece it all together", to see it in some comprehensible whole. Archaeologists themselves are not immune to this feeling, and so have traditionally made use of the aerial photograph to make clear the overall nature and layout of a site. Until recently, most of these aerial views have been taken from helicopters or small airplanes, but both vehicles present serious problems: the small airplane cannot safely fly low enough to capture important details, and the helicopter raises a great deal of obscuring dust at dry sites or ruffles the water covering submerged sites. Both vehicles also present problems of camera vibration, and results of their work so far have been less than desirable.

Alternatives to airplanes and helicopters have usually been few: some archaeologists, for example, have used tall, specially-built photo towers, but these have not been very useful above a height of ten metres. As a result, more archaeologists are now giving renewed attention to a method of aerial photography first pioneered in 1930, but allowed to remain ignored since -- tethered balloon photography.

The most prominent recent advocates of balloon photography for archaeological sites are an American husband and wife team, Professors J.W. and E. Myers, who began serious work with this method in 1973. In a recent article entitled "Balloon Archaeology" in Archaeology magazine (November\December 1980), the pair describe their techniques and their results in the years since then.

The Myers have now participated in over 40 aerial photography expeditions throughout Greece, where most of their work has been centered, and also at a few sites in Italy, Sicily, and Israel. The results have indeed been encouraging: an excellent example comes from their work on the Greek island of Naxos. There, at a site near Apollon, an ancient stone quarry contained a monumental sculpture lying on its back unfinished. In the Myers' own words: "Measuring more than ten metres in length, the colossal figure is thought by some to represent the god Apollo...while others suggest that such a robed and bearded figure is more likely to represent Dionysos...It had been photographed from many angles, but never from above. While studying the still-wet Apollon negatives at the end of a strenuous day, we realized that the statue was now "standing" facing us, viewed in the position the sculptor had intended when he conceived and carved it in the sixth century B.C." Thus, a new understanding of a mysterious artifact was achieved.

The refinements in technique now going on in balloon archaeology, as a result of the work of the Myers and others, should enable archaeologists to see "anew" sites old and recently found. It will also help to locate so far undiscovered sites whose lost features can only be seen from the air. It is clear that balloon archaeology is on its way up in the archaeological world!