



INTRODUCTION

A BUNCH OF AMATEURS

Dumb Luck and Happy Accidents

This is a book about chance discoveries by ordinary people that led to huge leaps in our knowledge of human history. These ordinary people included construction workers, farmers, soldiers, cave explorers, hikers, and yes, even kids. Most of them were just going about their day-to-day lives—digging a ditch, fixing a fence, searching for a lost goat—when they stumbled across an archaeological bonanza.

Before we proceed further, though, there's something you should know: Archaeological discoveries don't typically happen

this way. Archaeology is a slow, deliberate, and careful field of study. Discoveries that make the news usually happen after years of painstaking work. So think of this book as an archaeological highlight reel.

Some of the ordinary, everyday people in this book found actual buried treasure—gold, jewels, and works of art. Others found stuff that you

and I would not describe as treasure but an archaeologist definitely would—a battered heap of metal, crumbling strips of papyrus, dusty old bones. Safe to say, if a discovery is included in this book, it has proven to be priceless, because it has changed what we thought we knew about the past.

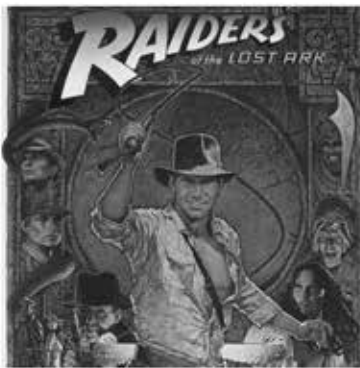
The fossils, artifacts, and ancient human remains that the people in this book discovered have helped answer many questions. But they've also raised new ones.

It's okay not to have the answers. That's the point. In fact, the real goal of this book is to show you that while the past doesn't change, the stories we tell about the past *do* change. As new discoveries are made, archaeologists and historians continually reinterpret and reframe their perspectives on human history.

Another goal of this book is to encourage you to do some further digging. You may be inspired to grow up to study archaeology. Or you may decide to do more research about a particular historical period that interests you.

The Key Thing

Sometimes chance discoveries happen when the earth's surface is disturbed suddenly or unexpectedly, revealing a glimpse of something from the past that had been hidden. One archaeologist calls these sudden or unexpected glimpses “keyholes.” A naturally occurring keyhole might be created by erosion, a fallen tree, or an earthquake. A human-made keyhole might be created by construction workers, well diggers, or farmers. An aerial keyhole can provide a new view from above. It shows anomalies on the earth's



Real-life archaeologists don't operate quite the same way that they do in movies.

surface that had previously been undetectable by those at ground level.

In every one of the discoveries in this book, someone noticed something out of the ordinary. They looked, and then they saw—not always the same thing.



LET'S TALK TERMS

Before you dig in, it will help to review a few of these words, because you'll see a lot of them in this book.

Anomaly: In an archaeological sense, an anomaly is a part of a landscape that looks different or peculiar and that might have been altered by humans in the past. It could be a strange depression, an oddly shaped lump, or a flat-topped mound.

Anthropology: the study of people, both living and from the past, specifically their language, culture, and biology.

Archaeology: a branch of anthropology that studies the stuff left behind by humans who lived in the past. It includes things people built, used, or made, including pottery, artwork, buildings, or everyday items.

Artifact: something from the past that people left behind, especially an object that is of interest to an archaeologist. Usually artifacts are fairly portable, like a piece of pottery or a stone tool.

Feature: It's like an artifact, but bigger. A feature can be anything made by people, such as a road, building, or burial mound.

Fossil: the preserved remains of a once-living thing, usually found in the layers of the earth.

Paleoanthropology: the study of ancient humans and once-living humanlike relatives.



A BLAST FROM THE PAST



THE DISCOVERY

The year is 1709. The place, a small fishing village in southern Italy, near Naples. A mountain called Vesuvius looms above the village. Local people have heard stories about the mountain that date back to the days of ancient Rome. They've heard that Vesuvius might be a volcano. According to those stories, the volcano had destroyed and buried some towns centuries ago, but no one has a clue as to the exact location of those ancient towns. The area around Vesuvius is now fertile farmland, where grapes and olive groves thrive.

On this day in 1709, some workmen are digging a well. Deep below the ground, they find some old and expertly cut pieces of

marble. You'd think they'd say, "Aha! The ancient towns!" But on this day in 1709, no one puts two and two together.

A few years pass. The Spanish Bourbons now occupy this part of the Italian peninsula. The new ruler of the area is King Charles III. He's heard rumors about the marble that got dug up, and he enjoys redecorating as much as the next king, so he orders the digging to resume.

It soon becomes clear that the marble found in 1709 came from an ancient Roman amphitheater. Workers find more marble, and also beautiful Roman statues and other pieces of art.

Sure enough, they've rediscovered one of the ancient towns that had been destroyed back in 79 CE. It will later turn out to be a town once called Herculaneum (pronounced her-kyuh-LAY-nee-um). But no one especially cares about the history of what's down there. They just want to dig up the treasures. Workers—many of them forced laborers—dig tunnels haphazardly and carry off priceless Roman artifacts for the Spanish king's treasury. There's no archaeologist in sight. No attempt is made to note where things are found. No one records plans or maps or elevations. It's just a game of Finders Keepers.

More people hear of the discovery of the ancient town. In 1748



King Charles VII of Naples (later known as King Charles III of Spain), posing cheerfully with a possibly plundered marble column.