



Use Archaeology to Uncover Hidden Adventure Ideas

by Kenneth Hite

*"You call this archaeology?"
- - Dr. Henry Jones, Sr.*

Right there on page 47 of [GURPS Cliffhangers](#) (which really needs a spiffy new and expanded edition complete with S. John Ross' terrific cinematic rules), you can see the call for archaeologists as player characters. Surely that's all the incentive you need to consider adding an archaeologist or two or six to your next game. Not, I hasten to add, a mundane archaeologist, unless you really dig using that Camel's Hair Brush - 17 skill. Think Indiana Jones, Professor Challenger, Allan Quatermain. A bold and daring archaeologist handy with gun and camera, or an eccentric millionaire antiquarian with dubious family ties to the Merovingians and a steam-tunneling machine, or an elderly scholar of prehuman epigraphy who needs only one more find to publish his history of the snake people who hide among us unseen. That's more like it.

Any devotee of *Call of Cthulhu* knows that archaeologists, like seekers of horror, haunt strange far places, all the better to get caught up in dark intrigue, ancestral curses, little yellow gods or big gray mummies and other Things Man Was Not Meant To Know, as they say in [GURPS Horror](#). Just one archaeologist PC can bring the campaign into whole new dimensions of trouble; along a similar line of reasoning, an archaeologist makes eminent sense as a protagonist for a [GURPS Time Travel](#) campaign. Digging up a strange ring in a temple to Ptah, lord of time and creation, is a fully respectable McGuffin to start hurling the characters willy and nilly through time as the ring's "chronal curse" activates at seeming random. Archaeologists would come in handy whether a cursed ring or a Timepiece chronoprojector flings the party from historical epoch to ancient scene.

*"Amazingly it proved possible to give blow-by-blow accounts of prehistoric battles and, in a more tender mood, tell how Woman shaped the First Pot. Archaeology was acclaimed as the science of rubbish, and as fast as the rubbish was dug up it was written down."
- - Colin McEvedy*

Of course, archaeologists make excellent NPCs, too. Not just evil ones in the service of Dark Gods that flew in through an incautiously open mosquito net, or foolish ones tampering with Things Man Dare Not Meddle In. Just plain interesting ones, like this

brace from Real History (tm). I'm not even mentioning pure-dee crazy folk like Henry Bligh Bond, who communicated with the dead while serving as architect-archaeologist at Arthurian Glastonbury in 1907, or the androgynous American transvestite Antonia Frederick Futterer who claimed to have found the Ark of the Covenant atop Mount Pisgah in the 1920s. Nor the ties between Jack the Ripper, the Templars, the House of Rothschild, Jerusalem archaeology and Finnish psychics of the Edwardian age.

Nabonidus

King of Babylon from 556 to 539 B.C., Nabonidus (or Nabunaid) may have been the first archaeologist. He dug up cylinder seals and tablets from the Sumerian and Akkadian civilizations preceding his own Babylonian empire, tried his best to decipher the languages there, and assembled an immense library of ancient inscriptions (and ancient they were, too: Nabonidus' oldest inscriptions were as long ago to him as he is to us). Of course, all this pottering about with potsherds made him neglect the empire's defenses, and Cyrus the Great of Persia polished him and the rest of Babylon off. Nabonidus also neglected the gods Marduk and Nabu (ungratefully, since Nabu was his personal patron god), causing the priests to accuse him of impiety and blasphemy. I usually imagine him as a harmless old dodderer messing around with stelae, but the GM could make him an incisive mad genius teasing out Ancient Knowledge or even a devotee of Black Lore found in certain pre-Sumerian texts.

Giovanni Battista Belzoni

Six-foot-seven, and according to the stories able to support nine people and a steel cage (over a ton of weight) on his back, this Italian traveling strongman-turned-Egyptologist also designed hydraulic machinery and studied, briefly, for the priesthood. Ahh, in those days, resumes had to be a lot longer, and probably vetted by the censors. During his brief yet glorious archaeological career through Egypt from 1815 to 1819, Belzoni excavated the temple of Abu Simbel at Syene, discovered the tomb of Seti I in Thebes, opened the Pyramid of Chefren at Giza, and transferred the Cursed Memnon from Egypt to the British Museum. After this last task, he decided to seek the legendary city of Timbuktu by crossing the Sahara, but died of dysentery (or of Memnon's Curse) in Benin in 1823 at the age of 34. Belzoni is most famous for his gleefully destructive methods: his memoirs speak of blasting open sealed doors with hydraulics or gunpowder charges, crushing whole necropoli full of mummies while searching for treasure, and generally inviting a whole litany of Pharaoh's curses upon himself. He'd make an excellent "cheerful but deadly" Ally, Contact or Patron of the PCs; they have to restrain his enthusiasm for black-powder archaeology while searching desperately for the artifacts that he's excavating.

"The reader is perhaps curious to know how old cities sell in Central America. Like other articles of trade, they are regulated by the quantity in market, and the demand; but not being staple articles, like cotton and indigo, they were held at fancy prices, and at that time were dull of sale. I paid fifty dollars for Copan."

- - John Lloyd Stephens, Incidents of Travel In Central America

Armed with these potential PCs and NPCs, adding an archaeologist or two to any campaign should be a snap. For the truly ambitious GM, however, nothing will do but a full-fledged Archaeological Campaign!

Incidents of Travel

For a low-powered, more "plaza-level" campaign, let the PCs be an archaeological team excavating an important site in a remote and dangerous countryside. Classic narratives like John Lloyd Stephens' stories of Mayan exploration in the 1840s or Sir Aurel Stein's crisscrossings of Central Asia in the 1910s-1930s can inspire bandit attacks, storms and animal encounters, delicate negotiations with the locals, and so forth. Low-key, for sure, but there's very little in science more interesting than the birth of archaeology.

Testimony of the Bullwhip

Or you can tart things up with the [GURPS Cliffhangers](#) route and chase Nazi occultist excavations from Greenland (lost Hyperborea) to Tibet (and the entrances to the Mystical Kingdom of Agartha); dust off your copy of [GURPS Places of Mystery](#) and start adding Gestapo.

These Dinosaurs Ain't Big Enough For The Two Of Us

The Bone Wars not only mark one of the more interesting episodes in the annals of American paleontology, but make a great jumping off point for a somewhat skewed [GURPS Old West](#) campaign. First, the facts: between 1877 and 1889, the neo-Lamarckian shipping heir Edward Drinker Cope (1840-1897) and the staunch Darwinian Yale University professor Othniel Charles Marsh (1831-1899) paid rival gangs of professional fossil-hunters to dig out Camarasaurus, Diplodocus, Apatosaurus and Stegosaurus bones from the same stretch of the Como Bluff west of Laramie, Wyoming. Marsh and Cope mostly stayed in the East and ordered their men by telegram to bribe, suborn, intimidate and sabotage their rivals (Cope's last major field trip West in 1876 saw him successfully dodging Sitting Bull while discovering Monoclonius). In 1889, Cope's bankruptcy left the field to the weakened Marsh factions, and the Bone Wars ended. In the campaign, however, the PCs play fossil claimjumpers in service to one or the other camp - - the GM can introduce Indian attacks, gunfights, or anything else his fertile imagination conceives. Replay *A Fistful of Dollars* as the PCs play faction against faction and goad everyone into a shootout over the perfect skeleton of a Stegosaurus worth tens of thousands of dollars. Or retell the story of the Regulators and Billy the Kid, with hired gunslingers brought in to stop the characters' digs, rather than to bust up farmers' homesteads. Any Western you can think of works with "bones" instead of "gold" or with a gunfight between Marshes and Copes rather than Earps and Clantons.

"We've got top men working on it." "What men?" Top men."
- - *The Government, to Indiana Jones*

Strike Force Cheops

This last possibility is a [GURPS Black Ops](#) archaeological campaign frame; the Company keeps quite a close eye on certain excavations near sites of known Prima import such as the Pyramids of Giza and the Dropa Shan Mountains of Mongolia. Where possible, they cover up the evidence and intimidate witnesses; where impossible they scour the place clean, taking powerful items back to The Lab for analysis and reproduction if they have time. Strike Force Cheops mixes black ops from all departments, with a higher percentage of Science types, especially geologists, epigraphers, linguists and bona fide archaeologists. The Lodge, unfortunately, also considers many major Prima sites to be "places of power," and the Company has to clear their cells out of the way before stopping a team from Indiana University from releasing the Hoarfrost Dragon from the chambers beneath

Machu Picchu, for example.

Alternately, the PCs could work as agents of the Masters of [Warehouse 23](#), crisscrossing the world to secure dangerous relics indicative of impossible pasts. In this variant, the archaeological hit squad depends less on Massive Retaliatory Death and more on the vast stores of knowledge and artifacts held within the Warehouse's confines. This version could run as straightforward escapist adventure with enemies ranging from the CIA, to a cabal of black magicians using the artifacts for Evil, to the Saurian Aliens looking for all the stuff they left behind last time they showed up a few millennia ago (or an alliance of all three, of course). Or, it might turn into a sort of "West End Tribute" as *Paranoia* meets *Indiana Jones*; the Warehouse itself is driven only by omnivorous collective rapacity, but its paranoia prevents it from adequately briefing the characters on either the true nature of the site they're going to loot ("Don't let the capital letters fool you: It's just like any other tower in London"), their opposition ("When people say things like 'guarded by the entire Afghan army,' you *know* they're exaggerating") or their tools and allies ("Now, wearing this amulet will put your soul in touch with the spirit of the High Priest of Set, and we're confident that he'll be glad to tell you where to dig and how to deactivate the curse"). One gets the sense that the [IOU](#) Archaeology Department (squabbled over between the College of Metaphysics and C.T.H.U.L.H.U.) operates on much the same principles. Can you dig it?

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