

Jones, Martin
THE MOLECULE HUNT:
Archaeology and the Search for Ancient DNA
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An engaging and well-written account of the scientific underpinnings that inspired Michael Crichton's *Jurassic Park*.

Martin Jones, who lives in Cambridge, England, is a Professor of Archaeological Science at Cambridge University and chairman of the five-year International Ancient Biomolecule Initiative. While much of Crichton's novel remains speculative, the science behind it and the ongoing search for ancient fragments of DNA are quite real disciplines, and Jones has been at the forefront of their development. Back in the 1960s, as an unmoderated dialogue between archaeology and biology was just beginning, Jones was slogging through Somerset fields with shovel and wheelbarrow, remarking that "the past is dirty, sticky, tactile, and quite often smelly." His account of this period, at the inception of the science of bio-archaeology, is as beguiling as any fiction writer's and is leavened with a good deal of wit. At times, Jones' recounting of the gradually unfolding tale of the maturation of this new field reads like a piece of good detective fiction. Even when relating some of the normally dry-as-dust internecine squabbles between rival academics at Oxford and Cambridge, the author's observations are apt and very nearly poetic. Comparing one scholar's "mining" of a vast global data-set to another's concentration upon a single short segment of the DNA molecule, Jones draws an analogy to the understanding of flight, stating that one scientist was "looking across the skies at a multitude of airborne forms, while the other was dissecting the wing of an individual bird." While the questionable goal of replicating dinosaurs remains a long way off, in the meantime the new science has been responsible for removing most of the obstacles in the way of examining a "living prehistory" in intimate detail. The coarser tools of the archaeologist's trade have been replaced with the sieve and the float, and the residue that was once scraped and toothbrushed from artefacts now yields fascinating data and insights into what it was like to be human in the long ages before civilization.

Thanks to Jones' elegant prose and straightforward approach, the "hard science" in this tale of bio-archaeology's coming of age remains well within the grasp of the layman.