



Subscribe to Discover Magazine today and receive your first

SEARCH THE SITE:

Magazine Subscribers and Discover.com Members Login Here

Not a

GO

Discover Magazine > Issues > mar-05 > features > Think Tank

Entire Site

Email Article | Print Friendly Version | Rate This Article | Add To My Topic Alerts | Bookmark It

▲ What Are These?

- > Home
- > Current Issue
- > Web Exclusives
- > Archive
- > My Discover
- > Discover Forum
- > Customer Care
- > Editorial Team
- > Contact Us
- > Subscribe

- Sign up for Newsletter
- Discover E-Cards
- Contests and Events
- Educator's Guide
- Letters

## Think Tank

### Great scientists discuss the breakthroughs of the last quarter century—and the next

DISCOVER Vol. 26 No. 03 | March 2005 | Anthropology

Alas, the most important development to hit archaeology in the last 25 years is one we archaeologists can be credited only with shamelessly (and sometimes naively) exploiting. [THAT'S THE ADVENT OF ARCHAEOLOGY AT THE MOLECULAR LEVEL](#). Thanks to our brethren in genetics, chemistry, and physics, we can now track population lineages in ancient DNA, reconstruct diet and local environment from a suite of stable isotopes, and use particle accelerators to determine the age of specks of organic material with astonishing precision.

[WHERE MOLECULAR RESEARCH MIGHT TAKE ARCHAEOLOGY](#) in the next 25 years will depend in part on buffeting winds that have followed a global upsurge in native rights. The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990, and legislation like it in other countries with large indigenous populations, is changing the relationship between archaeologists and the people whose ancestors we study. In some high-profile cases this has prevented the application of techniques like the analysis of ancient DNA, which stands poised to finally answer questions we've been asking for a very long time, like: Who are we? And how do we relate to one another? Some argue that native rights will be the death of archaeology. I'm not that pessimistic. Our kind will be around 25 years hence. But I would soothsay that the business of doing archaeology will be very different.

**David J. Meltzer**, professor of prehistory,  
Department of Anthropology, Southern Methodist University