and a growing emphasis on the value of the contexts in which finds are discovered, and most of the elements of modern excavation were in place.

**Suggested Internet links and further reading:**
Greene 2002:87-92
Renfrew & Bahn 1994:29, 90

## 3.2 Modes of excavation

**KEYPOINTS:**

- **Trenches** can be used for taking cross-sections of linear features, in 'keyhole' excavation and as a way of establishing the edges of a site (and may be considered as part of a survey strategy).
- **Area excavation**: emphasises horizontal aspect, clear picture of layout and relationship between features. Vertical aspect achieved through layer-by-layer excavation, section drawings and accurate recording.
- **Box-grid excavation**: immediate reference to stratigraphic sequence, but the presence of baulks can limit effective communication between excavators and obscure features, not suitable for deeply layered sites. **Quadrant excavations**, a variant of the box-grid method.

Archaeological investigations are probably best understood as a 'nested' system. 'Sites' are very often made up of a group of smaller elements, such as pits or hearths. Designated as **features**, these become the target of separate close examination. At the same time, it's important to start thinking in terms of how our site was a part of the surrounding landscape and how the relationship between a location and its context may have changed over time. A site isn't something self-contained. A site is essentially a centre of past activity and as such it is likely to have been part of a wider network of settlement or commerce. We need to start asking ourselves questions like, *why* were people here, as much as when?

Unravelling the history of how a site was formed is one of the (at turns, exciting and mystifying) challenges that archaeologists face. Establishing the correct succession of layers (or **contexts**) is essential to understanding the sequence of events, the first appearance of features and changes in the form and use of any structural remains that have been found. We'll look at the methodology that archaeologists use to describe this sequence in a while, but for the moment we need to start by looking at the way the itself digging is actually carried out.

We'll begin by looking at some of the smaller-scale excavation methods, before moving on to consider two larger-scale kinds of excavation that appeared out of the developments in field-techniques at the turn of the twentieth century and which are still in use today: the 'area' and 'box-grid' kinds of excavation. Note that it is not unusual to employ a combination these techniques, depending on the stage of excavation or variations on them to meet the particular constraints of the site location. Our discussion of these will be rounded off with a look at underwater excavation.

The term **trench** can refer to any hole dug by an archaeologist – it's something if a generic term. However, in a stricter sense it means a rectangular excavation that's usually much longer than it is wide. Trenches are a good way of examining linear features such as roads or the remains of fortifications. As such, they're dug at right angles through what is being investigated, creating a cross-section. By digging several cross-sections spaced out at intervals along a feature, the archaeologist can gather information about the feature's structure and its history. How it was made and maintained? Were parts of it broken? Were other stretches re-built, and if so, was this done in the same or a different method?

This kind of selected placement of trenches can also be a valuable strategy when the layout of a site, such as a Roman fort, follows a fairly predictable structure. Sometimes called **keyhole excavation**, it is through this means that archaeologists can focus their attention on particular areas of known interest. At the other extreme, the digging of a series of small **test trenches** can often form part of a survey strategy to establish how far a site extends.

**Open-area (or simply 'area') excavation** methods were developed during the first half of the twentieth century, particularly in Scandinavia where the landscape contained many ancient rural settlements that did not follow a set plan, making it important to as much as possible about the relationship between separate features.

Image: Greene 2002:93

This does not mean, however, that great swathes of land are stripped bare in the process of excavation; the size of the area opened depends on many things, including the kind and likely extent of the features in question. Practical concerns, such as funding or scheduling (if it is a research excavation, work may be carried out for comparatively short period of time each year (a **field-season**). The likely depth of the site – determined by survey work or appearance in the case of example a Near Eastern 'tell' (mound) site – can also affect how wide an area of it can be effectively dug. There are also ethical reasons why an entire site should not be excavated. Once it's gone, it's gone. Many archaeologists aim to leave a part of the site untouched, so that there are untouched areas for future investigation, perhaps using new or more sensitive excavation techniques. It's worth noting that one practical problem with area excavation can be the issue of access. Exposing wide areas of archaeologically sensitive ground at the same time can make it a tricky business to ferry excavated soil out to the site perimeter without stepping on something. The way the excavation proceeds needs to take into account the movement of people across the site, by identifying 'safe' routes in and out.