



Archaeology Frequently Asked Questions

What is archaeology?

Archaeology is the excavation and study of the material remains left by past communities. Material remains include the physical things people made or used, everything from clothes to buildings. Archaeology can be divided into many specialized subfields, often dealing with a particular time period, culture, geographical area, or category of materials. We don't just study individual artifacts; our primary role is to study the relationships of artifacts to each other in order to interpret past behavior at a particular place in space and time.

Why should we care about archaeology and history?

To be human is to be curious, questioning, and inquisitive. People and cultures are living histories that have great temporal depth and inspire inquisitiveness and educate us on a number of levels. For example, communities speak languages that are inherited from the past. They live in societies with complex cultures, traditions and religions that have not been created on the spur of the moment. People use technologies that they have not themselves invented. As time progresses, people mold and shape these living histories based on individual and communal needs. Ultimately, the byproducts of these cultures that are discarded eventually become part of the archaeological record. Thus, archaeology is a facet, the underground component, if you will, of history. So history then, and by extension, archaeology, is that shared body of acquired knowledge that humans live by and pass on to each successive generation.

So understanding the linkages between past and present is absolutely basic for a good understanding of the condition of being human. That, in a nutshell, is why History matters. It is not just 'useful', it is essential!

Do archaeologists study dinosaurs

No. Archaeologists are concerned only with the material remains left by human communities. Currently these extend back to around 4 million years ago. Dinosaurs became extinct around 65 million years ago. Dinosaurs are typically studied by specially trained scientists known as paleontologists, who are experts in identifying the remains of dinosaurs and other animals that lived at the same time.

What is an artifact?

An artifact is any object that was created, modified, or even just used by a human being. It can be difficult to tell if a natural object, such as a stone, was used by a human being unless there are physical marks on it; however, its context will give us clues. Generally, the term artifact is applied to portable objects. Structures created or modified by humans that cannot easily be moved, such as building foundations, wells, agricultural terraces, pits, and post holes, are called features.



What should I do if I find something while digging in my yard (or if I am on a hike somewhere)? What do I do with it?

It is best to leave the artifact where you found it -- but record as much information as possible: a description of the artifact and its location. It is useful to draw or photograph the object, and to record its location on a map. Share this information with a professional archaeologist. If you are visiting a state or national park, inform a park ranger or their agency's archaeologist. Also, each state has an historic preservation office that records the exact location of archaeological sites. On many public lands, collecting is illegal, so it is best to find an employee of that agency so that they may protect it.

What is the most exciting thing you ever found?

Obviously, the answer to this question will vary from archaeologist to archaeologist. While it can be very exciting to think about uncovering making a highly unusual discovery, that doesn't happen all that often. In actuality, archaeologists are more interested in the relationships that a group of artifacts share, i.e. provenance, association with a particular time period or cultural group, than they are with a single shiny object. A group of related artifacts and features can help us understand exactly what happened at a site, whereas one object is just one object. Thus, a collection of "mundane" looking items to a lay person can often be interpreted to be more "spectacular" to an archaeologist.

How does an archaeologist find a site? How does an archaeologist know where to dig?

There are many ways to find a site. Often an archaeologist hears about a site from people who may have stumbled across it accidentally. For instance, farmers often find sites while they plow their fields or clear land to create fields. Hikers sometimes find sites while out exploring. Construction crews sometimes find them when they dig up an area in order to lay the foundation of a building. Pilots have found sites from the air. Usually the people who discover the sites report them to archaeologists, who then investigate.

Another common way to find sites is through purposeful survey in advance of a construction project. In this case, archaeologists actively search the project area for sites in areas that were likely to support human populations, or in places where old documents and records indicate people once lived. Old records and maps often talk about communities and settlements that do not exist today. Archaeologists physically walk over these areas looking for any evidence of human occupation, such as pieces of pottery.

Why do archaeologists have to dig to find sites and artifacts? (In other words, how do sites get buried in the first place?)

Most people are very surprised at the amount of dirt that can build up at an abandoned site. Once a structure has been exposed to the elements, even just through a broken window or a hole in a roof, the weather, animals, and humans all do their best to help the building crumble and fill up



with dirt. The artifacts and structures that archaeologists study have often been abandoned for hundreds, if not thousands, of years. During this time they decay and are covered over. Wind brings more dust to cover the remains. Sometimes floods will bring with them silt and soil. Downtown Rome today is many meters higher than the Rome of the Caesars, partly because when the Tiber River flooded, silt built up even as people inhabited the city. In addition, the area was abandoned several times in its history -- and last but not least, there was no consistent daily or weekly effort to clean up the streets, no city-wide, consistent equivalent of our trash collection today. And so a city can slowly be partly buried even while people are living there. In more dramatic cases, sites may be buried relatively quickly during catastrophic events, the way Pompeii and Herculaneum were covered over by ash and volcanic mud during the eruption of Mount Vesuvius. One way or another, by the time archaeologists arrive on the scene, the remains of a site may be covered by anywhere from one to forty feet of earth and debris.

What tools do archaeologists use for excavation?

Archaeologists use a great variety of tools for excavation, depending on the nature of the area in which they are working. The most common digging tools are picks, shovels, and trowels. In areas where there is a lot of sediment or dirt over the sites, archaeologists sometimes use heavy equipment like bulldozers and back hoes, but only to remove earth that shows no signs of human remains. If excavation will be a delicate operation, as during the careful cleaning away of soil from a damaged painting or human skull, archaeologists use dental picks, spoons, brushes, or anything that works. They often improvise based on the situation in which they find themselves.

How does an archaeologist uncover the artifacts?

Very carefully! Many objects buried for hundreds of years may be quite fragile. Generally, archaeologists loosen the earth with a pick, shovel, or trowel in very small, shallow area, remove the loosened earth, and then loosen more. They move the dirt horizontally, in small increments, rather than dig down around objects as they appear - and when they find something, they leave it in place until they have uncovered everything else around it at the same level, and have recorded all the finds and their locations. It is very tempting to dig objects out of the ground right away, or to dig holes around artifacts, since it is human nature to want to see what you have found! The archaeologist's goal, however, is to notice all the relationships and connections between objects and features - the context of the finds -- because otherwise a great deal of information may be lost. The earth that is removed is often taken to screens where the archaeologists look for very small artifacts or other remains, such as seeds, that they may have overlooked while digging. The sifted dirt is collected into large piles referred to as "backdirt" or a "dump" or "spoilheap."

What happens to the artifacts once they are excavated? Do archaeologists get to keep the things they have found?

Generally, artifacts uncovered during an excavation are carefully collected, cleaned, labeled, recorded, and photographed, and then taken to a lab where they are analyzed. Sometimes



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artifacts are too fragile to be cleaned and have to be conserved before any further analysis can be done. Conservation techniques help to consolidate an object. After analysis, objects are usually stored in safe dry environments for future study.

Archaeologists almost never get to keep the objects they excavate, since the remains generally belong to the country in which they are found. Archaeologists are only interested in studying the objects and do not keep or sell them.

How do I become an archaeologist? How can I get involved with archaeology?

To become an archaeologist requires a great deal of study and preparation. Most archaeologists have at least a Bachelor's degree in archaeology. To achieve any sort of role as a supervisor takes an M.A. degree, and to teach at a university and to run an excavation you must have earned a Ph.D. Archaeologists who run projects and excavations generally have Doctorates in archaeology. Many universities and colleges around the country offer courses in archaeology.

Not everyone who enjoys archaeology wants to be an archaeologist full time. Interested "lay archaeologists" can usually volunteer on projects. Every year the AIA publishes the Archaeological Fieldwork Opportunities Bulletin that lists many current projects. You should also contact your local state archaeologist, who will often have information on projects ongoing in your home state.

What kinds of jobs are there for someone with an archaeology degree?

Archaeologists do much more than "dig!" Archaeologists in federal, tribal and state government agencies are responsible for managing, protecting and interpreting archaeological sites on public land. Working in museums, archaeological parks, or historic sites, archaeologists may manage collections of artifacts, work in education or public programming, or become administrators that manage programs relating to research, collections, education, and exhibitions. Colleges and universities employ archaeologists as faculty members that teach undergraduate and graduate students. In addition to teaching, academic archaeologists are active researchers in their field. They write grants to raise money to fund their fieldwork, In addition to directing excavations; they oversee the analysis and interpretation of the projects and publish the results of their work in books, and scholarly journals, as well as in popular publications that help make their research available to the public.

Where do archaeologists work?

Professional archaeologists work in a wide variety of settings. Archaeologists are employed by federal and state government agencies, museums and historic sites, colleges and universities, and engineering firms with cultural resource management divisions. Some archaeologists work as consultants or form their own companies.



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The majority of archaeologists today are employed in cultural resource management, or CRM. CRM companies are responsible for archaeology that is done to comply with federal historic preservation laws that protect archaeological sites. Archaeologists employed in CRM firms may be hired as temporary field or laboratory assistants, or may be project managers or administrators. CRM archaeologists direct field and lab work, manage staff, and are responsible for writing reports and other publications to share the results of their surveys and excavations. CRM archaeologists may also be engaged in public education and outreach efforts to share the results of their work with the public through site, tours, brochures, and exhibits.