

What is Archaeology?

Archaeology is the study of past human cultures. Archaeologists learn about people from the past by studying the things they left behind. These things are called artifacts. An artifact is anything made, changed, or used by people. Historic artifacts are generally at least fifty years old. Prehistoric artifacts were made or used before the people had written records. Another term similar to “prehistoric” is “pre-contact”, which means the time before native people had first contact with Europeans.

**Many people think archaeologists study dinosaurs.
But archaeologists do not study dinosaurs!
They study only past human cultures.**

Archaeologists learn about past cultures on an excavation or “dig”. You see, over time many artifacts become buried by natural and cultural deposits (created by nature and by people). In fact, in a protected site, up to three inches of deposits could build up in a hundred years. These layers of dirt and cultural deposits, or stratigraphy, are recorded and analyzed. As a rule, the layer on the bottom is the oldest and the layer on the top is the youngest. Seeing in which layer an artifact is will help show its age.

An excavation is a controlled scientific process, using a grid to help record the location of every artifact that is found. Artifacts are then collected and studied. Through this process, we learn about the people before our time.

**Wait a minute – if artifacts are underground,
how do archaeologists find them?**

Well, not all artifacts are covered by soil. To look for evidence of past human activity, archaeologists do a survey. A survey is an organized walking inspection of the ground, while looking for artifacts. They do a survey with the purpose of finding and recording archaeological sites. After finding a site, it may or may not be excavated. Not all sites need to be excavated. Once a site has been excavated it is gone – although the artifacts and information are preserved. But if people pick up and keep artifacts when they find them, archaeologists may never know what lies beneath.

**Help archaeologists add a piece to the puzzle of the past –
never collect artifacts.**

Here are some things archaeologists study:



Bone

Animal bones are often found on archaeological sites. These bones can tell scientists what kinds of animals lived in that area. They can also tell archaeologists what kinds of animals the people were eating. Finding bones can be exciting; however, if you think you have found human bones, do not touch them. Tell an adult about it and they can call the police. If the bones are old, an archaeologist will be called to investigate.



Cordage

Cordage is made from rolled plant fiber. Artifacts made of cordage are sometimes found in dry caves. Cordage was made from different materials such as the fibers of milkweed and dogbane, yucca leaf fibers, and juniper and sagebrush bark. People also used human hair and animal sinew. An archaeologist can get a lot of information from cordage -- they can even tell if the maker of the cordage was left- or right-handed!



History

Historical archaeologists use written records and oral histories, along with artifacts to learn about past peoples. Usually, these people had a written language. Historic artifacts are from at least fifty years old to one hundred years old (depending on your state). Are there any historic artifacts in your family that have been passed down through the generations?



Lithics

Lithic means stone. The study of stone tools gives archaeologists information about the tool-maker. By looking at the wear marks on a tool, archaeologists can tell what it was used for. They also classify stone tools by different types. Even stone flakes (thin pieces that came off while tool-making) are important.



Pottery

Pottery is made from clay and a piece of broken pottery is called a pot sherd. Pot sherds give archaeologists information – from the source of the clay or the paint, to the age of the pottery, to the people who made the pot. But this information will be lost if the sherd is taken away from the archaeological site.



Rock Art

People from the past made rock art. There are two kinds of rock art – petroglyphs and pictographs. Petroglyphs are designs pecked onto a rock. Pictographs are designs painted on a rock surface. Rock art helps archaeologists learn about people from the past.



Tree Ring Dating

Scientists can figure out how old a tree is by counting the rings inside. The study of tree rings is called dendrochronology. Scientists can use this method on wood found on archaeological sites. This tells them about the age of the other artifacts within the site.

