

What Is Archaeology?

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Archaeology is the scientific study of the human past through material remains. Archaeologists are interested in people that lived before today, from your grandparents to the ancient Egyptians who built the pyramids to our ancestors who made the first stone tool. Archaeology does this through looking at things lost or discarded by those people such as broken pottery, stone tools, or bent nails, which are called artifacts. For many of the people in the past, the only way to know about their lives is through archaeology because they left no written record. Archaeologists are committed to a scientific understanding of the past to insure that what is reconstructed about past lives is as accurate as possible.

With a focus on people, archaeologists do not study dinosaurs. Dinosaurs were long extinct before our earliest ancestors so archaeologists have little knowledge of dinosaurs and leave the excavation of dinosaurs up to the paleontologist. The focus on people also means that a broken piece of pottery is as valuable to an archaeologist as a golden medallion. Archaeologists are frequently asked whether they have found any gold yet by visitors to a "dig." We are not digging for gold, but rather information. The value of an artifact found at an archaeological site is in what it can tell us about people in the past.

The ability of an archaeologist to learn about people in the past is dependent on what artifacts can be found at the sites that are excavated. The artifacts found in the ground are very rarely a complete representation of the items made and used by people. Many items rot or deteriorate in the ground such as clothing, wood tools, and baskets. Archaeologists attempt to gain as complete a picture as possible of people's lives in the past from what does survive in the ground, which might include stone tools, metal items, and pottery. The frequency of these items and their distribution can tell an archaeologist about the activities that took place and how those activities might have changed over time.

The removal of artifacts from an archaeological site significantly impacts what archaeologists can say about that artifact and how that site might be interpreted. A stone tool removed from its original location does not provide the same information as one found in place. What is found with that stone tool is as important for interpretation as the stone tools itself. Also, if stone tools are systematically removed from a site, then the lack of those tools will be misinterpreted by the archaeologist.

Items on the surface of an archaeological site are likely out of place. These artifacts do signify that there may be something buried below the ground. If artifacts are found on the ground surface, contact a professional archaeologist for recording, the site. In this way, you will insure that there is the best chance to learn something about the people who lived there. Never dig in the ground at an archaeological site! In some locations it is against the law and in any case you will unknowingly destroy information. If you are interested in archaeology, consider joining an organization such as the Mississippi Archaeological Association. You'll be able to go on digs with professional archaeologists and learn firsthand about the past in your area.