

**Exploring Careers in History:
Uncovering Archaeology
Pre-Workshop Reading**

Imagine trying to learn about the lives of your ancestors from a fork, a piece of an alarm clock, a bone from a pot roast, or an automobile hubcap. It would be impossible to create a complete picture from so few pieces. But this is what archaeologists try to do. Archaeologists learn as much as they can about people who lived long ago. They do this by studying artifacts—tools, weapons, and other objects those people left behind.

Archaeology is the study of ancient human behavior. To determine how ancient people lived, archaeologists try to establish what events happened in the past and when, where, and why they happened.

Archaeology is a complex science. It relies on careful research, planning, excavation, and documentation, as well as sophisticated technology. A modern archaeologist can determine the direction of the wind on the day of an ancient hunt, precisely where a stone spear point came from, or what time of year a village was occupied.

Kinds of Archaeologists

Archaeology is a vast and complicated field, so it would be very difficult for an archaeologist to be an expert in every area of study. Most archaeologists study a specific region of the world or a specific time period.

Archaeologists who focus on a particular region include Egyptologists, who specialize in ancient Egyptian civilization. Mayanists study the ancient Maya civilization in Central America. Classical archaeologists study the ancient Greek and Roman civilizations. Industrial archaeologists investigate sites dating from the Industrial Age. The Industrial Age dates from the Industrial Revolution in the late 1700s through today.

Other kinds of archaeologists include zooarchaeologists, who are experts on the bones of ancient animals. There are also historical archaeologists. They use written records as well as archaeological research to reconstruct the past. And there are underwater archaeologists. They examine shipwrecks, sunken ports, and other archaeological sites on the bottoms of lakes, rivers, and oceans. There are also specialists in ancient plant remains, prehistoric fishing, the manufacture of pottery and stone tools, the environments of the past, and many other aspects of the ancient world.

Choosing and Surveying a Site

Archaeological sites are everywhere. Some have been known for a long time. These include Stonehenge in England; the Temple of Athena on the Parthenon in Athens, Greece; and the great city of Teotihuacán in Mexico. Other sites are not so obvious. Sometimes they consist of little more than a handful of discarded stone tools or broken clay pot fragments.

Some archaeological sites are discovered by accident. This may occur during highway construction, quarrying, and other activities. For instance, excavation for a subway in Mexico City revealed many traces of Aztec civilization.

Nature also uncovers archaeological sites, such as when an earthquake formed Olduvai Gorge in East Africa.
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Africa 100,000 years ago. The gorge cuts through the bed of an ancient lake, around which early humans lived about 2 million years ago. However, archaeologists find most sites with a deliberate search, or survey.

Aerial and satellite photography are important tools. They help in discovering sites that may not be recognizable from the ground. Such sites may be ancient travel routes or the widely scattered remains of a settlement. For instance, airborne radar was used to detect the remains of swamp gardens that the Maya built.

Once a site has been identified, fieldworkers can pinpoint its location using the Global Positioning System, or GPS. GPS is a network of orbiting satellites that continually transmit signals to all points on Earth. Using a GPS receiver, fieldworkers can determine the exact longitude, latitude, and altitude of the site.

Careers in Archaeology

Movies and television often portray archaeology as exciting and adventurous. In fact, it is a demanding science. It requires years of study and long days of searching and excavating in the field.

An advanced academic degree is required for a career in archaeology. Courses are taken in subjects such as anthropology, geology, history, and biology. Many archaeologists also study conservation methods and the legal requirements for protecting and managing archaeological sites.

Further education is typically needed to become a specialist. A classical archaeologist studies art history, classical literature, and the Greek and Latin languages. An Egyptologist needs to be able to read Egyptian hieroglyphic writing.

Until recently, most archaeologists were employed by universities or museums. They spent much of their time conducting excavations and field surveys or working in the laboratory. Today governments and large private companies employ large numbers of archaeologists to protect, and manage archaeological sites. Many others follow archaeology as a hobby.

Archaeology Today

Modern-day archaeologists seek to manage and preserve sites for future generations by limiting how much they excavate and dig at a particular site. They use increasingly sophisticated methods to explain and reconstruct the past.

In the future, archaeology will continue to focus on preserving the past by protecting sites and artifacts. Research will intensify in parts of the world where much of human history remains unknown, such as in China and Central Asia and Southeast Asia. Every new discovery provides a clearer and more complete picture of ancient people and the world in which they lived.

