

The Structure of Archaeological Inquiry: Some basic definitions and vocabulary

What is archaeology?

Archaeology is the study of ancient human **behaviour** through the examination of the surviving material remains of the past.



Archaeology has also been called the “past tense” of anthropology

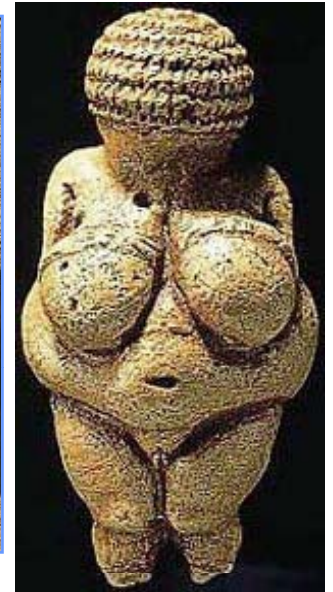
Archaeology is largely concerned with the remains of “extinct” human cultures.

Archaeology is only able to use the evidence which has survived

- Due to the nature of the evidence itself (such as flint tools)
- or by chance (as in the case of the rapid burial of the Roman city of Pompeii).

The Archaeological Record

the collective material remains left by past populations



The Archaeological Record

Each piece of data in an archaeological site comes from a unique place in time and space, and this **CONTEXT** is vital to the archaeological process.

The archaeological record is a **FINITE RESOURCE**.

Each archaeological site contains a **UNIQUE RECORD** of past human behaviour...

.... and since no two archaeological sites are ever the same, each site is important.

The Archaeological Process

It is important to note that the archaeological process is invariably a **DESTRUCTIVE ONE**.

Each time we as archaeologists survey, excavate or disturb an archaeological site, we are by necessity destroying the site.

The difference between archaeology and mere collection or even illicit digging of archaeological sites lies in the way that archaeologists **record the site as it is excavated**.

Unlike other sciences archaeology is a one-time experiment, and we are unable to replicate our work, EXCEPT through the observations, records, plans and photographs we make as we carry out our research.

THE GOALS OF ARCHAEOLOGY

Modern archaeological research has three main goals:

- 1. To construct culture history.**

Stone tools, ceramics, buildings and other *material culture* is produced by humans, and therefore a by-product of human intentionality and activity.



Material culture data reflects not only specific attributes as ‘objects’ of the past, but they are also reflective of *patterns of human behaviour*.

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- 1. To construct culture history.**
- 2. To reconstruct ancient lifeways.**

Subsistence

How people make their living and acquire food is studied by using the fragmentary remains of animal bones, plant remains and other evidence for human diet.

Environmental Modeling

Subsistence activities are dependent upon a societies relationship with the physical landscape and environment.

A considerable amount of effort on the part of archaeologists goes into studying and reconstructing the relationship between human populations and their environment.

Human Interactions

Humans both in the present and in the past act out their lives at many levels: as individuals, families, communities and also as broader cultures.

Archaeological research is concerned with delineating and reconstructing the patterning in these social relationships.

In many ways these are some of the ‘big’ questions in archaeological research.

THE GOALS OF ARCHAEOLOGY

Modern archaeological research has three main goals:

1. To **construct culture history**.
2. To **reconstruct ancient lifeways**.
3. To **explain culture change**.

One of the *key goals* of the archaeological process

But also the most complex, since it requires us to **link data to theory**

Hawkes' Hierarchy of Archaeological Inference

(Supplemental reading, especially pp.155-162).

A four-fold scale of what archaeologists might be able to 'infer' from archaeological data about human activity in the past.

1. Archaeological techniques – tedious but relatively easy
2. Subsistence/Economics – laborious but still fairly easy
3. Social/Political institutions – considerably harder
4. Religious institutions and religious life – unaided inference to this is the hardest of all



Time Team



TVO (TV Ontario, Channel 2)
Mondays at 7 pm

The Team uncovers the lost Medieval nunnery of Swardsley.

When digging a grave for the family cat turns up a large stone wall, Time Team is called in to investigate.