

📖 Topic Page: [Archaeology](#)

Definition: **archaeology** from *Philip's Encyclopedia*

Scientific study of former human life and activities through material remains such as artefacts and buildings. An archaeologist excavates and retrieves remains from the ground or seabed; recording and interpreting the circumstances in which objects were found, such as their level in the soil and association with other objects. This information can then be used to build a picture of the culture that produced the objects.



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in [Encyclopedia of Anthropology](#)

Summary Article: **archaeology**
From *The Columbia Encyclopedia*

(ärkēŏl'Əjē) [Gr.,=study of beginnings], a branch of anthropology that seeks to document and explain continuity and change and similarities and differences among human cultures. Archaeologists work with the material remains of cultures, past and present, providing the only source of information available for past nonliterate societies and supplementing written sources for historical and contemporary groups.

History of Archaeology

The discipline had its origins in early efforts to collect artistic materials of extinct groups, an endeavor that can be traced back to the 15th cent. in Italy when growing interest in ancient Greece inspired the excavation of Greek sculpture. In the 18th cent. the progress of Greek and Roman archaeology was advanced by Johann Winckelmann and Ennio Visconti and by excavations at Herculaneum and Pompeii; in the 19th cent., by the acquisition of the Elgin Marbles. The study of ancient cultures in the Aegean region was stimulated by the excavations of Heinrich Schliemann at Troy, and of Arthur Evans at Crete. The work of Martin Nilsson, Alan Wace, and John Pendlebury was also significant in this area, and the decipherment of the Minoan script by Michael Ventris raised new speculations about the early Aegean cultures.

The foundations of Egyptology, a prolific branch of classical archaeology because of the wealth of material preserved in the dry Egyptian climate, were laid by the recovery of the Rosetta Stone (see under Rosetta) and the work of French scholars who accompanied Napoleon Bonaparte to Egypt. Investigations that have reconstructed the lives and arts of elite segments of ancient Egyptian society and rewritten Egyptian history were carried on in the 19th cent. by Karl Lepsius, Auguste Mariette, and Gaston Maspero, and in the 19th and 20th cent. by W. M. Flinders Petrie, James Breasted, and others.

Interest in the Middle East was stimulated by the work of Edward Robinson (1794–1863) on the geography of the Bible and by the decipherment of a cuneiform inscription of Darius I, which was copied (1835) by Henry Rawlinson from the Behistun rock in Iran. Archaeology in Mesopotamia was notably advanced in the 19th cent. by Jules Oppert, Paul Botta, and Austen Layard and in the 20th cent. by Charles Woolley, Henri Frankfort, and Seton Lloyd. The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, beginning in 1947, aroused new interest in biblical studies (see biblical archaeology).

Interest in complex New World cultures was stimulated by the publication by John Stephens of an account of his travels (1839) in Central America, which excited the interest of archaeologists in the Maya. In the 19th cent. studies began of the Toltec and the Aztec in Mexico and of the Inca in South

America. In 1926 the discovery of human cultural remains associated with extinct fauna near Folsom, N.Mex. (see Folsom culture), established the substantial depth of prehistory for the New World (see Americas, antiquity and prehistory of the).

Modern Archaeology

In contrast to the antiquarianism of classical archaeology, anthropological archaeology today is concerned with culture history (i.e., the chronology of events and cultural traditions) and the explanation of cultural processes. A variety of different dating techniques, both relative (e.g., stratigraphy) and absolute (e.g., radiocarbon, obsidian hydration, potassium-argon), are used to place events in time. Attempts at explaining evolutionary processes underlying prehistoric remains began with the conclusion advanced in 1832 by the Danish archaeologist Christian Thomsen that cultures may be divided into stages of progress based on the principal materials used for weapons and implements. His three-age theory (the Stone Age, Bronze Age, and Iron Age) was essentially based on prehistoric materials from Scandinavia and France.

Concerted investigations began in the mid-19th cent. with the stratigraphic excavation of such remains as the lake dwelling, barrow, and kitchen midden. At first the sequences of culture change uncovered in Western Europe were generalized to include all of world history, but improved techniques of field excavation and the expansion of archaeological discoveries in Africa, Asia, and the Americas challenged the universality of rigid classifications. Technological traditions ceased to be regarded as inevitable concomitants of specific cultural stages. Later interpretations of prehistoric human life emphasize cultural responses to changing demographic and environmental conditions (see ecology). Thus the Paleolithic, Mesolithic, and Neolithic periods are evaluated in terms of subsistence technologies, and explanations are sought for the causes underlying these transitions. Among the most important work done in the mid-20th cent. was that of Louis and Mary Leakey, who located the skeletal remains of humans in East Africa dating back 1.7 million years; since their work additional discoveries concerning the predecessors of *Homo sapiens* have revealed the great antiquity and diversity of human evolution. Contemporary archaeologists are also concerned with the emergence of various forms of complex social organization, including chiefdoms, class stratification, and states. In recent years, a number of archaeologists have turned from traditional concerns and have made efforts to reconstruct ideological elements of extinct cultures.

Advances in the recovery and analysis of botanical remains have allowed investigators to model changes in the prehistoric environment with increasing precision, improving the accuracy of such explanations. Paleobotany, the analysis of ancient plant remains, and ethnobotany, the study of the cultural utilization of plants, therefore play a vital role in modern archaeology. Faunal analysis, the recovery and analysis of animal remains such as bone, also plays an important part in the study of prehistoric ecology and subsistence patterns. The careful analysis of botanical and faunal material, combined with advances in the analysis of genetic material, have led to the detailed understanding of the process of the domestication of plants and animals in both the Old and New World. Genetic studies of ancient human remains, when feasible, have contributed to the understanding of patterns of human migration and the spread of associated aspects of human culture. The use of remote-imaging technologies, both on aircraft and satellites, has become an important tool for identifying some archaeological sites, and laser scanners and 3D cameras are now used to document and create reproductions of archaeological sites, especially endangered sites.

Modern museums with valuable collections include the Metropolitan Museum and the American Museum of Natural History in New York City; the British Museum; the Louvre; national museums in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, rich in remains of the Iron Age; the Vatican and Capitoline museums, Rome; collections from Pompeii and Herculaneum at Naples, Italy; and museums in Athens, Cairo, and Jerusalem. Many universities have established schools and museums of archaeology. Organizations such as the National Science Foundation, the Smithsonian Institution, and the National Geographic Society in the United States promote archaeological studies.

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