

Archaeological Methods ^[1]

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Due to the nature of archaeology, archaeological methods tend to differ greatly from the methods used in other types of anthropology, such as sociocultural anthropology. Archaeological methods tend to focus more on quantitative data, lab work, and scientific analysis.

Since archaeologists focus on studying and recreating the past, particularly in times and cultures before the existence of the written word, they must look at material remains for clues about a culture.

Gathering Data

First, archaeologists must gather data on the topic they wish to further research.

Oral history is an important source of data for many archaeologists. In some cultures, which did not employ the use of the written word, history and information was passed down orally from generation to generation. If ethically permissible, archaeologists can conduct interviews to learn more about a society's oral history and determine whether it could have archaeological relevance.

Besides oral history, field surveys are another common method to determine where excavations should be done. Surveying is done through the use of evidence, sampling, GPS, transects, and other techniques, to determine where archaeological research should be done. Archaeologists look for locations where it is most likely to find archaeological sites, which could contain artefacts and other types of material remains.

When anthropologists are depicted in movies, television, and other media, it is often in the context of excavations. Excavations are how material remains are found by archaeologists, and involve the digging, exposure, and recovery of material data. This data could include artefacts (objects from the past), ecofacts (biological information from the past), or landscape alterations that can provide clues about past cultures.

When conducting excavations, stratigraphy is an important idea used by archaeologists. Since it's known that the newest matter will lie closer to the top of the soil, stratigraphy is the idea that knowing the location of different remains in soil can help us to understand the different ages and contexts of these remains.

Archaeological Analysis

Today, computers and other complex technology are common tools of analysis.

Radiocarbon dating, often simply called carbon dating, is one of the most well-known techniques of analysis in archaeology. Radiocarbon dating helps archaeologists determine the age of different artefacts. If an artefact has organic material, and thus the radioactive element of radiocarbon, then this method can be used. Since radiocarbon decays over time, determining its structure in an artefact gives archaeologists clues about the potential age of that object.

Another established method of dating is potassium-argon dating. While radiocarbon dating is limited to more relatively recent remains, potassium-argon dating can be used in objects over hundreds of thousands of years old. Similarly to radiocarbon dating, potassium-argon dating looks at radioactive decay to determine the age of material remains.

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