

The archaeologist

The archaeologist is first a descriptive worker: he has to describe, classify, and analyze the artifacts he studies. An adequate and objective taxonomy is the basis of all archaeology, and many good archaeologists spend their lives in this activity of description and classification. But the main aim of the archaeologist is to place the material remains in historical contexts, to supplement what may be known from written sources, and, thus, to increase understanding of the past. Ultimately, then, the archaeologist is a historian: his aim is the interpretive description of the past of man.

Increasingly, many scientific techniques are used by the archaeologist, and he uses the scientific expertise of many persons who are not archaeologists in his work. The artifacts he studies must often be studied in their environmental contexts, and botanists, zoologists, soil scientists, and geologists may be brought in to identify and describe plants, animals, soils, and rocks. Radioactive carbon dating, which has revolutionized much of archaeological chronology, is a by-product of research in atomic physics. But although archaeology uses extensively the methods, techniques, and results of the physical and biological sciences, it is not a natural science; some consider it a discipline that is half science and half humanity. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that the archaeologist is first a craftsman, practicing many specialized crafts (of which excavation is the most familiar to the general public), and then a historian.

The justification for this work is the justification of all historical scholarship: to enrich the present by knowledge of the experiences and achievements of our predecessors. Because it concerns things people have made, the most direct findings of archaeology bear on the history of art and technology; but by inference it also yields information about the society, religion, and economy of the people who created the artifacts. Also, it may bring to light and interpret previously unknown written documents, providing even more certain evidence about the past.

But no one archaeologist can cover the whole range of man's history, and there are many branches of archaeology divided by geographical areas (such as classical archaeology, the archaeology of ancient Greece and Rome; or Egyptology, the archaeology of ancient Egypt) or by periods (such as medieval archaeology and industrial archaeology). Writing began 5,000 years ago in Mesopotamia and Egypt; its beginnings were somewhat later in India and China, and later still in Europe. The aspect of archaeology that deals with the past of man before he learned to write has, since the middle of the 19th century, been referred to as prehistoric archaeology, or prehistory. In prehistory the archaeologist is paramount, for here the only sources are material and environmental.

The scope of this article is to describe briefly how archaeology came into existence as a learned discipline; how the archaeologist works in the field, museum, laboratory, and study; and how he assesses and interprets his evidence and transmutes it into history.