



What is Archaeology?

Archaeology Program – School of Historical and European Studies

The human past can be studied in many ways. Archaeologists use cultural remains such as stone tools, pottery fragments and food debris, as well as environmental evidence to reconstruct history. Much modern archaeology is concerned with the nature of past societies and how they change - with questions related to past economies, social organisation, and relationships with the environment. While the discipline of archaeology includes a wide range of interests and specialisations, archaeologists often concentrate on a limited field, such as the study of bones (animal or human) stone tools or pottery, or confine themselves to a particular area of the world.

Within Australia most archaeologists work on prehistoric material - the remains derived from 40,000 or more years of human occupation of the continent. There is also a growing archaeology of the more recent, European period, where traditional historical evidence (written sources) is supplemented and expanded by the archaeological study of early colonial artifacts. This is called historical archaeology.

More familiar to many people is the archaeology of Europe and the Near East. Here, as in other areas such as America and Africa, there is a wide variety of types of archaeology, of both historic and prehistoric periods. In some areas studies concentrate on art, while elsewhere, as in Australia, the emphasis is on social and economic interpretations. While the impressive cities, temples and statues of complex civilisations are undeniably appealing, archaeologists more commonly concentrate on the more mundane activities and objects of daily life. Interest is continually stimulated in all areas by the constant inflow of new information from excavations and surveys, and by the rapid development of new ideas, techniques, and approaches to interpretations of the past.

The broad nature of archaeology provides many different types of work. The major ones include the most 'glamorous' - excavation of ancient sites - which provide the stereotype of the archaeologist. Most archaeologists do spend a good deal of time in the field both looking for and recording archaeological sites, or excavating them. Archaeological fieldwork is carried out in all parts of Australia, often in very remote regions. Our archaeologists also work in Africa, Melanesia, the Pacific, the Mediterranean and Europe. Field trips may last for periods of up to three or four months in any one year. Conditions are sometimes difficult and the work arduous.

More time, however, is spent working on the results of the fieldwork - analysing the finds and their context, and preparing material for publication. Here archaeologists make use of other sets of research skills. In the laboratory artifacts need to be identified, measured, drawn, classified, and perhaps examined under microscopes. Computer facilities may be used to help store and process the mass of data recorded. Library work on historical information or comparable modern societies, as well as on related sites and objects is equally important. In carrying out research archaeologists seldom work alone. Excavation is a team effort. Analysis is carried out together with specialists in related fields (for example, physical anthropologists, botanists, engineers, geologists and geomorphologists, physicists and zoologists), and with technical assistants (photographers, draughtspeople).

Disclaimer: The information contained in this publication is indicative only. The University reserves the right, before or after enrolment, to make any changes to the information, including but not limited to discontinuing or varying courses, subjects (units), staff, assessment and admission requirements. The University does not give any warranties in relation to the accuracy and completeness of the contents; nor does it accept responsibility for any loss or damage occasioned by use of the information contained in this publication.

For course information updates, visit: www.latrobe.edu.au/coursefinder

CRICOS Provider 00115M