



Careers in 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, fragments of pottery and human and animal bones, as well as environmental data to reconstruct history. Much modern archaeology is concerned with the nature of ancient cultures and how they change – posing questions about past economies, societies and ways of dealing with the natural environment. While the discipline of archaeology includes a wide range of interests and specialisations, individual archaeologists often concentrate on a particular field, such as the study of human or animal bones, stone tools or pottery, or the administration of laws protecting archaeological and historical relics. There is also often a strong emphasis on a particular part of the world.

Within Australia most archaeologists work on prehistoric material – the remains of more than 40,000 years of human occupation of this continent before European settlement. There is also a growing interest in the archaeology of the last 200 years. This branch, called historical archaeology, relies on written and pictorial records as well as the study of colonial artefacts and structures. There are also some more specialist areas such as maritime or underwater archaeology which is mostly about shipwrecks.

Professional archaeologists in Australia who work overseas are involved in a wide range of projects in countries all over the world, such as on the Pacific islands, Greece, Egypt, and Asia. Some projects are concerned with ancient art, but most are to do with reconstructing past social and economic behaviour and adding to regional culture histories. While the impressive cities, temples and statues of past empires are undeniably appealing, archaeologists are commonly concerned with the mundane activities and artefacts of daily life.

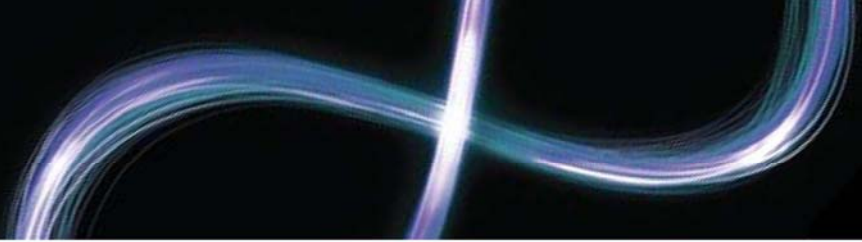
The understanding of archaeology is constantly being revised and enlarged by the addition of new information from excavations and site surveys and by the rapid development of new theoretical approaches and techniques of analysis; in many respects the subject is interdisciplinary.

The broad scope of archaeology provides many different kinds of work. The stereotype of an archaeologist is a person who finds lost cities and uncovers ancient treasures. Since the discipline in Australia is still so small most archaeologists do have the opportunity of making important discoveries in this country, although most archaeological sites are not dramatic. Within Australia it is common practice to work in collaboration with local Aboriginal communities.

Because there is strong public interest archaeological work done in Australia and overseas is often reported by the news media. The surveys and excavations carried out in the Franklin River region in Tasmania and in Kakadu National Park are examples of more topical archaeology.

All parts of Australia are being studied. Field trips in Australia may last for three months or more, and overseas for even longer. Conditions are sometimes difficult and the work arduous, but what is required is an appropriate attitude and not physical strength.

In general, archaeologists spend far more time working on the results of fieldwork than the actual fieldwork itself – five times as much if not more. Those who excavate are responsible for publishing a site report and any analyses of the finds. It is in this exercise that archaeologists make use of most of their research skills – locating and assessing the site is often the easiest part of the job. In the laboratory, artefacts have to be identified, described and drawn, and equipment like microscopes may be used. The mass of data created by analyses of the excavated material is stored in computers and statistical studies are sometimes necessary. Library work also figures prominently and is sometimes extensive. In doing their research archaeologists seldom work alone.



Excavation is a team effort. Analyses are carried out in collaboration with specialists from related academic fields (for example, human biologists, engineers, those in the botanical and earth sciences, and physical chemists), and with technical staff (photographers, draftspeople, and laboratory assistants). Some archaeologists even work with the police on forensic matters to determine whether human bones are recent homicide victims or are prehistoric.

The interdisciplinary nature of archaeology also makes it possible to enter the profession after an earlier career in another vocation. Archaeology has links not only with a number of scientific and technical subjects but also with humanities subjects such as history and social anthropology. An increasingly important educational aspect of modern archaeology is that it brings together a number of increasingly specialised fields of knowledge. While this leaflet is primarily aimed at those who are considering a career in archaeology it should be stressed that the subject links the sciences with the humanities and may interest students who want to pursue a general education.

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