
Archaeological Glossary

analysis: the stage of archaeological research that involves the description and classification of archaeological data.

anthropology: the study of humans, including the variety and distribution of physical, cultural and social characteristics.

archaeological data: materials recognized as significant evidence and collected by an archaeologist to enable interpretation of a site. There are many classes of archaeological data including artifacts, features, structures, food remains, historic documents and records, eco-facts, and environmental information.

archaeological documentation: the body of data about a site, gathered through various scientific means including measurements, written records, photography, graphic illustrations, artifact analysis, and historic documents, that enable interpretation of a site and comparison with other sites.

archaeological reconnaissance: a systematic attempt to locate, identify, and record the distribution of an archaeological site against its natural geographical and environmental background.

archaeological site: a place where humanly manufactured or modified objects, features, or eco-facts are found.

archaeologist: a trained individual who studies the past using scientific methods, with the motive of recording and interpreting previous human activity rather than collecting artifacts for profit or personal possession.

archaeology: the branch of anthropology that gathers data from artifacts and the physical remains of human activities. Archaeologists then try to connect that data to past behaviors which ultimately helps us understand how past peoples lived and how cultures developed.

archives: a place where public records and documents are kept; also, a specific body of records and documents.

articulation: the state of archaeological materials when they lie in the same relationship to each other that they had in life or construction.

artifact: an object manufactured or modified by humans.

assemblage: all of the artifacts found at a site; also, the set of a particular type of artifact, such as a “ceramic assemblage.”

association: the relationship between an artifact and other archaeological finds in a particular context, suggesting simultaneous deposition. Associations between objects are the basis for relative dating and cross dating.

attribute: a well-defined characteristic of an artifact which cannot be further subdivided, such as form, style, or technology of manufacture, which is used to classify and to interpret an artifact.

casting: a technique in archaeological conservation used to restore or to replicate deteriorated metal artifacts. An exact copy of the original item is made, usually from epoxy resin or latex rubber, from the mold formed by an external marine concretion.

ceramics: objects of fired clay.

class: a general group of artifacts, such as “weapons,” which can be further ordered into specific types.

classification: the ordering of archaeological data into groups with similar characteristics to enable descriptions and comparisons to be made.

concretion: a composite crust of minerals, corrosion products, sediments, and natural life that forms on most metal artifacts and some organic items.

conservation: the treatment given to archaeological materials by proven means to restore their original appearance, to prevent further deterioration, and to prepare them for museum displays or study collections.

conservator: a trained individual who uses scientific methods to preserve and to stabilize artifacts, and who also is responsible for recovering archaeological information through analysis of objects being conserved.

consolidation: conservation techniques for an artifact that is so badly deteriorated that its original likeness cannot be restored; the purpose thus is to stabilize the artifact against further deterioration.

context: the position of an archaeological find in time and space, established by measurements and the assessment of its associations, matrix, and provenience.

corrosion: a decomposition process that affects metals - excluding gold and, to a small extent, lead - when they are subjected to moisture in the environment. The effect contributes to the formation of a concretion around the artifact.

cross-dating: a relative dating technique based on other objects or artifact associations of known age.

cultural resource: an archaeological site viewed as a non-renewable resource of information about past human activity. Those under water are known as submerged cultural resources.

cultural resource management: the conservation and management of archaeological sites and artifacts as a means of preserving the past.

culture: in anthropology, culture refers to a set of designs for living that helps to mold one's responses to different situations and which is the primary means for adapting to the environment. In archaeology, the term is applied to complexes of archaeological data found at several sites that can be defined and compared in a context of time and space.

datum point: a location on a site from which all measurements are made and which is tied into known, local geographical data.

diagnostic artifact: an artifact which, because of its attributes, can be associated with other materials of known age and origin, thereby helping to date it relatively or absolutely.

distribution: a description of the spatial location of artifacts, features, or structures over a landscape.

eco-fact: a natural archaeological find that helps to describe a population's environment (such as faunal or floral remains) or behavior (such as ballast) but which was not humanly made or changed.

electrolysis: a conservation technique applied to metal artifacts to remove corrosion products, stabilize remaining metal, and reconvert corroded metal into stable compounds.

excavation: the process of uncovering an archaeological site scientifically, in uniform layers, by removing the matrix, observing the provenience and context of finds therein, and recording them in a three-dimensional way.

feature: a unique, interrelated area of a site, containing identifiable archaeological or environmental evidence. The remains may be very clear cut, such as a skeleton or a ship's hull, or rather subtle, such as iron stains in the matrix.

grid method: a technique of archaeological excavation in which a scaffold with uniform units, conventionally two-by-two meters in size, is placed over a site to aid in mapping, recording, and provenience identification.

historical archaeology: the study of material remains from cultures that had writing and that left documentary evidence. In American archaeology, it refers to events post-dating 1492.

history: the study of the past through written records.

hypothesis: an unproven theory or proposition that is tentatively accepted to explain certain facts or to form the guidelines of further investigation; must be supported by observable data to remain viable.

material culture: pertaining to the technology and artifacts of a population.

matrix: the soil deposit in which an archaeological find is situated.

prehistory: the millennia of human history that preceded the development of written records.

primary context: an undisturbed association, matrix, and provenience.

provenience: the documented position of an archaeological find in time and space, recorded three-dimensionally.

radiocarbon dating: a dating technique based on measurement of the decay rate of the carbon isotope, Carbon 14, into stable nitrogen (N12). The resulting dates are calibrated from radiocarbon ages into calendar years using tree-ring chronologies (dendrochronology).

relative dating: the dating of sites or artifacts based on their sequential relationship to other known examples, but not tied to calendar years. Relationships commonly are established through stratigraphy, assemblages, or stylistic or technological characteristics and evolutions.

remote sensing: archaeological reconnaissance techniques using tools that detect the presence of features or materials which may be buried or camouflaged. Magnetometry, sonar, metal detection, resistivity, ground penetrating radar, and aerial and infrared photography are examples of remote-sensing devices.

research design: a systematic and well-formulated plan for conducting scientific research based on a series of questions.

sampling: the process of selecting part of the evidence from a field of study as a basis for generalizing about the whole. Since it usually is infeasible to collect or to analyze all possible data, sampling is a basic archaeological technique, and may be “systematic,” based on a need to gather evidence for specific questions, or “random,” based on the presumption that all data are absolutely equal, uninfluenced by external variables, and therefore may be selected for study entirely randomly.

scientific method: the operational method of science used for observing and testing phenomena based on the construction of hypotheses, the gathering of data in scientific means, and the possibility of replicating any results.

secondary context: a context of archaeological material that has been disturbed by subsequent human activity or natural phenomena.

selective excavation: archaeological excavation of parts of a site, intended to give a systematic sampling of the entire area.

seriation: a process in which artifacts are placed in a chronological order based on similarities and evolutions in such aspects as form, technology, or association.

site plan: a map illustrating the relationship of components of an archaeological site. Usually a single, horizontal representation of primary features, structures, or artifacts, a site plan also can reflect vertical relationships through the use of overlays of various strata.

site survey: reconnaissance of a potential or obvious archaeological site, including recovery of diagnostic artifacts and basic recording, to enable evaluation of its archaeological significance.

small finds: the term applied to artifacts that can be picked up and transported from a site, as opposed to features or structures; also, on sites which have abundant artifacts, it can refer to particularly unique or unclassifiable object.

stratigraphy: the term applied to the superimposed layers of matrix in an archaeological site. The “theory of superposition” of such layers is fundamental in archaeology, suggesting that objects found in deeper sediments are older, thus establishing a relative, chronological relationship among materials in the vertical column.

test pit: a small, local excavation made at a site, either to sample or to probe the whole, or to help to determine where large-scale excavation should be undertaken.

total excavation: the complete excavation of an archaeological site, including all components. Sites with large features, such as structures or a shipwreck hull, often are not excavated totally, but rather the features are recorded *in situ*.

typology: the process of grouping artifacts with similar attributes into “types” to compare them with other groups. The types established by an archaeologist may or may not coincide with the “typology” that was perceived by the original maker or user.