

WHAT DOES THE ARCHAEOLOGIST LOOK FOR AND WHY?

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SUMMARY

There are many different ways of doing archaeology and at least as many ways of justifying the study of man's past. The field is not a mature science in which past work consistently contributes to present studies. An individual view of what the archaeologist looks for begins by defining what archaeology is and is not.

Archaeologists are not paleontologists; they do not deal with the remains of past life forms. The archaeologist is a student of man's behavior, a kind of anthropologist or historian, generally not much more interested in human anatomical remains than in dinosaur fossils. Of primary interest are the objects associated with individuals and groups of individuals. From the study of the material remains of past human behavior, archaeologists make interpretations, reconstructions and generalizations.

People legitimately calling themselves archaeologists can be divided into classical, historical-industrial, and prehistoric types. Classical archaeologists deal with civilizations of classical antiquity—Greece, Italy, the Middle East. Historical-industrial archaeologists emphasize the study of the remains of more recent societies, principally those of the industrialized West. Both classical and historical-industrial have the advantage of written records on which to base much of their interpretations or conclusions.

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The prehistorians deal with a much greater range of time: the entire span, dating from the arrival of man in the region under study, to the introduction of writing. Emphasis is on the systematic nature of human behavior. The vast bulk of archaeological data present in the oil shale regions of Colorado, Utah and Wyoming is prehistoric. Studies made up to now confirm earlier assumptions that use of the region by ancient and more recent prehistoric peoples was extensive and varied. To understand these prehistoric peoples, the archaeologist looks for artifacts and features that will indicate the presence of archaeological sites. Sites are localities where ancient groups concentrated their activities; the nature of those activities is shown by the kinds of artifacts and features found at the site.

Perhaps the most important contribution of archaeology is the opening of new areas of understanding about ourselves based on past human behavior. Principal areas of change have been in terms of our understanding of man's relationships with his environment, particularly the impact of material or technological development.