

## *What is Archaeology?*

Archaeology is a study of our past. It is the study of HOW, WHEN, WHERE and WHY a particular culture lived. It is the study of people from very small groups like a small Celtic village to large civilizations as big as the Romans, Greeks or Egyptians. Over the past two to three centuries many have thought of archaeology as merely treasure hunting, and it was in the early stages, yet now it has developed into a scientific study not only of objects, but of the people who used them and how they lived.

*Let this thought help you:*

Imagine you are transported back in time to Deir el Medina around 1200BC, a vibrant village of workers and craftspeople whose whole job was to construct the tombs of the Pharaohs in the Valley of the Kings in Egypt. You would see men coming and going in groups to the Valley of the Kings, children playing board games, cats wandering amongst the houses and women going about their duties in mud brick houses. You would wander about, observe what is going on, and perhaps even follow a team of workmen on their job constructing the tomb of the Pharaoh. You would look over the shoulder of the scribe as he wrote the wages of each worker on a piece of papyrus as he paid their money for the week. Apart from the restrictions of the language you would very quickly learn about life as a tomb worker in ancient Egypt.

Now imagine, the people have miraculously disappeared, leaving behind all their belongings, the food still on the table, the tools on the ground where they dropped them. How much could you learn from this scenario? It certainly wouldn't be as easy as the first scenario but much could be gleaned by observing the tools where they lay, observing the food on the table, tasting the drink in the jars and so forth.

Now imagine this same scenario, but time has passed, no one has returned to the village.

The weather has taken its toll; the food on the table has decayed and most has disappeared, if not consumed by insects. The sand storms have heavily weathered the mud brick walls of the houses, the roofs have collapsed in. A heavy deposit of soil and sand has buried much of what has remained. A few nomads passing by have looted items from the village.

Next imagine the sand has completely buried the village during the last sand storm, it has disappeared from sight altogether. It remains buried this way for thousands of years, until one day after yet another storm a local villager notices a row of mud bricks sticking out of the sand. Out of curiosity he scrapes away the sand and finds a piece of jewelry, an oil lamp and broken pieces of limestone with a strange yet familiar writing on it. He hastens back to the local township to show his friend who he knows deals in antiquities, treasures from the past. Maybe he can sell the items and buy that television that he has always wanted. The dealer's friend gives him a small amount of money, yet enough to buy the small television he has always wanted, yet the dealer knows the true value of these items, not just their monetary value but their academic value that the Museum in Cairo would love to find out about. Perhaps he should keep this discovery quiet, after all he could have his friend tell him where he found the items and make himself rich, or should he tell the archaeologist at the Cairo Museum so that the world may learn more about the fascinating history of Egypt's magnificent past.

*What do you think?*

Archaeology is a little like traveling back in time to learn how people lived thousands of years ago, but unlike the first scenario all they have to work with is what remains, they don't have the luxury of time travel to experience the original living breathing people in their original context. They work with what remains, by examining, analyzing and researching then theorizing what life was like so long ago.

Different archaeological sites are in different levels of preservation. Look at Pompeii for example, after excavating the city the houses were in an amazing advanced state of preservation.

Now imagine yourself as an archaeologist, who has just been sent by the Cairo Museum to excavate this village of Deir el Medina and find out as best you can what life was indeed like in the tomb builders' village. What processes would you use to make sure that every tiny piece of information was gleaned from your excavation?

The item you are about to excavate from the block of soil before you is a replica of an item that was used thousands of years ago by a person with hopes and dreams just like you. The item may be a jug from which they poured their wine or their water or an oil lamp that illuminated their bedroom at night, a statue that adorned the tomb of their mother that they had just buried or even the tomb of their Pharaoh. Your job today is to very carefully excavate the soil from whatever is buried within your block of soil. Be careful as the item contained within it could be an ancient treasure that could shed new information on life in ancient Egypt. It could be made of precious stone, or plated in gold. (All items in these kits are replicas and none contain items of value). Once you have excavated the item you will need to clean and restore it if necessary, and then research what you have found. What can you learn from the item about its original owner and about the people from the civilization from where it came?

Archaeology has these goals:

1. To describe what you have found and to somehow classify it or categorize it so that it can be studied. *Your job in excavating your kit is to describe what you have found and to fit it into a category so that you can further research your item.*
2. To work out the function or purpose of what you have found. *When you excavate and restore the item/s in your kit, your next job after working out what it is would be to find out what it would have been used for. You may excavate an ancient Roman spoon, which you would first compare with a spoon as used today, but your research would need to find exactly how it was used in its original context.*
3. To explain how and why these ancient societies or cultures changed over time. *As in the example of the spoon mentioned above, you need to understand how an item was used in the time frame from which you excavate it versus that same category of item as it is used today. Roman forks and spoons were not necessarily used the same as they are today. They were used more commonly for cooking and less so as eating utensils, but the object is to try to find out why.*

Remember HOW, WHEN, WHERE and WHY!

WHAT have you learnt about the culture you are studying in relation to the object you have just excavated?