

# Archaeology Facts

## What is Archaeology?

Archaeology is learning about ancient people, how they lived, what they looked like, what tools they used and also learning about their culture. The word archaeology comes from the Greek - it means the study of what is ancient and it's pretty fascinating stuff! Archaeologists are the scientists who study the remains of past civilizations or groups of people.

## Up for the challenge?

Archaeology is a bit like putting a puzzle together that has lots of pieces missing. It is kind of like being a treasure hunter but a lot more like being a detective. Archaeologists look at the things people from long ago have left behind. Archaeologists are interested in how people lived, their houses, clothes, bones and even their garbage! In fact, a garbage site is one of the best places to find artifacts of the past.

Archaeologists don't have as much excitement and danger in their lives as portrayed in the movies, but it still can be pretty exciting when they do piece together the puzzle and discover something new!

## How does an archaeologist know where to dig?

Over time, things and places get covered up and buried. When something lays on the ground day after day, year after year, leaves fall on it, dust blows, and little by little it slowly gets covered up. Before an archaeologist conducts a dig, they do lots of research to determine where they might start.

First, archaeologists know that people need certain things to help them stay alive. These include easy access to water, trade and migration routes, and food sources. With this knowledge and some research, archaeologists can locate the most likely places where people may have lived.

Sometimes people, like farmers and builders, uncover something from the past and an archaeologist comes in to help with the site. Archaeologists also look at buildings, ruins, unusual mounds or sunken spots in the land. Sometimes, archaeologists can tell where old roads or walls once stood by looking at aerial photography. Other times, they can get clues from books and maps. All of these places are potential places where an archaeologist might begin their research when determining where they might conduct a dig.

## Did You Know?

Archaeologists always dig square holes? They dig in a scientific method with neat, organized, square holes on a grid system. Being super organized helps them keep records of where they make each find. That way, when they go back to the lab with hundreds of pieces they can begin putting the map together of all of the finds. This helps them develop a clearer picture of what life must have been like during the time period they are studying.

## What does an archaeologist look for when they are digging?

Once an archaeologist locates a site, does the initial research and gets permission to conduct a dig, that's when the work really begins! Archaeologists look for lots of different things when they begin a dig:

The thing that most people think of when they think about a dig are artifacts. Artifacts are things like tools or things that people could have moved or carried. Or what some people would consider to be the "buried treasure."

Archaeologists also look for evidence about past environments to find things like seeds, animal bones and soil types. These types of finds are sometimes called eco-facts.

They also look for features or things that people made or did that can't be moved. Things like walls, floors or fireplaces. These types of things are called "features."

## The Dig

Although a dig or excavation is one of the most important and widely known methods in archaeology, care has to be taken in its use. Archaeologists know that excavations destroy a site, so they only sample or excavate a portion of a site leaving the rest for future researchers who will have better tools and methods.

There are two main reasons why archaeologists look for and sometimes excavate a site.

1. They may have a research question about the past that makes it necessary to search a certain area for sites, or to excavate a site.
2. Sites may be endangered by a development project or natural causes, such as erosion, that requires data to be salvaged before the site is destroyed.

One of the best places for an archaeologist to learn about a past civilization is a "midden." A midden is the term archaeologists use for a garbage dump from the past! Yep, the garbage site! Why garbage, you ask? Well, garbage can tell us a lot about how people lived. Think about your garbage can. What would it tell people about your life? Just think, you may be the archaeologist's dream come true in a few thousand years!

Why do archaeologists dig stuff up? Can't they just look in a book?

We rely on archaeologists to tell us about things that aren't written down in books. The written word is only about 5,000 years old, and in the grand scheme of things that isn't very long! Also, there are a lot of things that are left out of books. Many times, books will be about famous people but we don't often hear about how the average person lived. And, sometimes what people say and what they do are two totally different things. Archaeologists can help do the detective work by pulling all of the information together and give us a portrayal of the past.

# Digging up bones - archaeology or desecration?

By Sheila Rae Myers

I've always been interested in the original people who inhabited the United States. I've studied everything from the scientific viewpoints of where those people came from to their customs and folklore. While I'm not by any means an expert, I've learned enough to come to respect both the ancestors of the Native Americans and those who still live in this country today. That's more than I can say for a lot of the people who are the descendents of the Europeans, Africans, and people of other nations who's ancestors came to this land.

The early settlers started out as being friends to the native population, but quickly turned to hatred, pillaging, and murdering in order to obtain the land they wanted for their "new" country. The history books are full of the "viscous attacks" perpetrated by the natives on the white populace, but hardly ever mention those attacks were in retaliation for the horrendous acts done by the settlers. Sure, some attacks were unprovoked, but most weren't. They were forced to defend their land in any way possible from the unknown people were moving in and stealing what was rightfully theirs.

Before the arrival of the first European explorers and settlers, Native American tribes were spread to every corner of this country. If you research the current distribution, you'll see the tribes are compressed into much smaller areas - reservations where many of them were forced to go by the United States government. Left behind were their homes, the possessions they couldn't carry with them, and their honored dead.

Over time, many of the artifacts were destroyed; however, many still remain and are being uncovered every day in farm fields and at construction sites. Other artifacts and graves are being found by the archaeologists who locate prospective sites and start digging. After the pictures are taken, measurements made, etc the collection is usually sent to a museum for further study. Or so they say. Many of those artifacts and bones end up in cabinets and boxes never to be looked at again.

So why do archaeologists want to dig up and study the skeletons? Here are a few of those reasons:

- Locate and map where the various tribes lived.
- Discover how the people lived.
- Study the culture through artifacts.
- Recreate the way the people looked through forensic sculpting, etc.
- Learn more about the diseases which killed some of them.
- Map migrations through DNA.

All of the information that can be gathered through archaeological study can be fascinating. But there are other ways to learn all of those things. Instead of getting one's hands dirty and desecrating the burial sites, go ask the descendents. Many of them know the truth and will share the information. Instead of ending up with "educated guesses" about things that can't be easily explained, the scientists would have almost instant answers.

There are two main arguments given as to why archaeologists should be allowed to dig up Native American sites. Neither one makes much sense when taken in context with the larger picture of history and/or the bias caused by the religion and race of the skeletons being studied.

The first argument presented by some of the scientists is the fact the gravesites are located on property not owned by the tribes who want the digging to stop or the artifacts and skeletons returned to their care. This is very true; however, think about the basis of that argument. If the sites are on that particular piece of property, it means the tribe lived there prior to the invasion of the "white man". Our ancestors stole the land from the people who were already there and now we want to claim they never owned it in the first place. Worse, since we now own it we have the right to say what gets done with the stolen items lying beneath its surface?

Next comes an argument that can be represented by the comments given to USA Today.

Some anthropologists say more remains will become off limits, imperiling study of the diets, health, migrations and other habits of ancient peoples without guaranteeing that the remains will wind up with their true descendants. "There really

isn't any balance anymore," said Keith Kintigh, associate director of the School of Human Evolution and Social Change at Arizona State University. "The public and scientific interest in (the remains) no longer have any weight."

I've already mentioned ways to study the things Mr Kintigh mentioned without desecrating ancient burial sites. As for the point he made about not knowing whether or not the remains would be returned to the true descendents I ask "Who cares?" The remains need to be returned to a people who belong to a culture that is the most similar to the one from which they belonged. It has to do with respecting the dead more than it does who is paying those respects.

Now I'm going to get down to some of the nitty gritty discussion most people don't want to hear. Why not? I'm going to put the shoe on the other foot as the saying goes.

As I suggested in the first section of this article, most people who aren't Native American would be more than a little angry if an archaeologist started digging up all of the places where their ancestors are buried. In the earliest times of exploration and settlement by Europeans, many people who died were buried practically where they fell. Often there were no markers placed on the graves and those weren't in established cemeteries. My guess is there are bodies scattered all over this country waiting to be discovered.

What happens when these sites are found? They undergo the archeological study the same way as do the Native American sites. Yet rarely, if ever, are the skeletons placed in museums. If no descendents can be located, the remains are reburied - either in an established cemetery or a cemetery is established right on the spot and protected from further damage. Interesting? A vast difference from the way we treat the remains of the people who were here before us.

How many cemeteries do you know about which came about because of the number of bodies which needed to be buried because of a disease epidemic? There are many. There are also many cemeteries established on the land where great battles occurred - Gettysburg and the Little Big Horn are just two examples. Let's go dig up the influenza victims to see what changes in bone structure were caused by the ravages of the disease. Then we'll dig up the battlefield casualties and figure out what damage was done by the weapons. While we have them dug up, we can also study the bones and figure out what types of diseases the men suffered from because of living in close quarters without modern vaccines. Does this sound a little ridiculous? Then why are we okay doing it to other cultures, but not our own?

By now some of you are going to point out that we do dig up more modern cemeteries and the bodies get moved. You want to know why I think it's wrong to relocate the bodies of even older remains. I don't have a problem with that. Quite a few of my ancestors have been dug up and moved to other cemeteries when those cemeteries stood in the way of "progress". One was flooded after the creation of a dam. Those ancestors didn't get moved to a cardboard box in a museum. Instead, they were placed in new coffins and buried in other cemeteries out of the way of further harm - with respect and dignity.

I remember watching a documentary about the Titanic and how everyone decided to leave the bodies of the deceased remain where they lay. Sure, it would've taken a huge and possibly dangerous undertaking to bring them to the surface, but the fact remains it was and is possible. No one wants to desecrate the site or the memory of those people by bringing up the remains and letting people perform scientific studies on them. It doesn't matter that we could learn what they experienced in their final moments or recover DNA to possibly identify all of the people who were stowaways.

Why is it we think we have to dig up bodies that have been buried for thousands of years in order to learn about the past? How long do the remains have to be buried before they're labeled as scientific specimens instead of human beings deserving of an eternal rest in the ground where they were buried? Perhaps in a thousand years our descendents will dig up our bones and scatter them throughout whatever museum system exists in their time in history.

What it all comes down to is the fact that, regardless of how old a skeleton is, it's still a human being worthy of respect. The remains should, at the very least, be handed over immediately to the people who are willing to take the time and effort to give the remains a proper burial according to their customs.

Sure, there are times burial sites are in the way and the remains have to be moved. That's the only reason there should be to disturb the dead. If that isn't the case, we should allow the dead to rest in peace no matter how many centuries have passed between the burial and the discovery.

## Chinese Refuse to Open the mysterious Tomb of Their First Emperor and the Remaining 6,000 Terracotta Soldiers

Some things are best left undisturbed.

According to the Chinese government, that includes the remaining 6,000 terracotta soldiers and the rest of Qin Shi Huang's colossal burial site in Xi'an, China.

China's first emperor was buried over two thousand years ago in the most opulent tomb complex ever made in China.

Even its protection system is impressive - an underground moat of poisonous mercury to keep out looters.

It contains a sprawling city-size collection of underground caverns containing everything the emperor would need for the afterlife.

The Qin emperor chose to bury clay reproductions of his armies, concubines, administrators and servants with him in the tomb.

The first of the 8,000 life-size terracotta statues was unearthed in 1974 by farmers digging wells near Xi'an.

To date a total of 2,000 soldiers have been dug out of the earth - but now work has stopped.

'The big hill, where the emperor is buried — nobody's been in there,' archaeologist Kristin Romey, curatorial consultant for the Terracotta Warrior exhibition at New York City's Discovery Times Square told website Livescience.

'Partly it's out of respect for the elders, but they also realize that nobody in the world right now has the technology to properly go in and excavate it.'

Archaeologists are being kept on a leash until new technologies have been developed that can safely uncover precious artifacts without disturbing them.

'It's really smart what the Chinese government is doing,' said Romey.

'When we went into [Egyptian King] Tut's tomb, think about all the information we lost just based on the excavation techniques of the 1930s.

However, she believes technology has almost reached the stage where tiny, robotic cameras could be sent in.

'I wouldn't be surprised if you had some sort of robotic visual survey going in there at some point,' she said.

Another issue that is preventing archaeologists from diving into the central tomb that holds Qin's palace is a suspected moat of hazardous mercury that is thought to surround Qin's central burial spot.