

Archaeology Summer Camp



Lesson 3: What is an artifact?

When archaeologists talk about the objects that were made or used by humans and left behind a long time ago, they actually refer to them as **artifacts**. There are many different kinds of artifacts, from hand-made tools and pottery to projectile points and baskets and are often on display at museums. Artifacts can range in ages depending on what group they belonged to but for the most part, archaeologists will recognize an object as an artifact if it is more than 50 years old.

Artifacts are important because they can tell us a lot about past cultures, even if all we find are small pieces, which is often the case. When studying an artifact, we can figure out where it came from, what it was used for, how long ago the people that were using it were here, if it came from another region and these two groups were trading with each other and what materials, plants and rocks were around the area that were used to make these artifacts. It lets us get an idea about how people lived back then and depending on the artifact, what they ate, how they dressed, what activities they were engaged in and even how their culture and lifestyle changed over time.

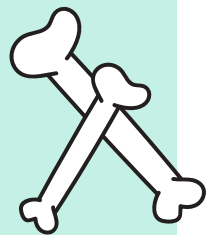
► Is that all that archaeologists study?

The answer is no! Although the findings and study of artifacts is one of the most important aspects of archaeology and museums, it is not the only thing that archaeologists study or look for.

What other things do archaeologists study besides artifacts?

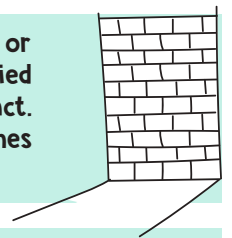
ECOFACTS

Ecofacts are natural objects that come from living things, and unlike artifacts, have not been modified or adapted by humans in any way. Some examples of ecofacts include plants, seeds, bones, and other animal remains. Sometimes, artifacts are made out of natural materials, like a rope made out of plants and tools made out of bones, but these are not considered ecofacts because at some point, someone changed them in order to make them useful. To identify if an object is an artifact or an ecofact, ask yourself if it has been cut, sharpened, broken, or altered in any way to be made into a useful object. Ecofacts can teach us what the environment looked like during the time being studied, what kind of plants were around and what kind of animals were being eaten or used.



FEATURES

Features are different from artifacts and ecofacts because features cannot be moved around or transported. Examples of features can be wall structures, post molds or pits. These are still modified or made by humans, but we cannot carry them out to the lab like an artifact or an ecofact. Archaeologists can still study features to learn a lot about the way of life in the past and many times these are the locations where they will find both artifacts and ecofacts.



SITES

Sites refer to the location where artifacts, ecofacts and features are found all together. Unlike objects, a site is not an individual item you can move around or one feature like a wall or pit. A site is the whole area that is being studied by an archaeologist and can often be a village, a burial ground, cliff dwellings or homes. Many times, complete sites are buried underground and are not visible to the eye, but by finding small artifacts, ecofacts or parts and remainders of features, archaeologists can determine if they have come across a site and begin an excavation.



Activity: Archaeology Lab

After an excavation takes place and archaeologists find and gather different artifacts or ecofacts from one site, they then take them to the lab. Here, they will study them further and record their findings.

Start by gathering different objects that you can use as artifacts. You can use the artifacts you dug up from lesson 1 to continue your research. Try to gather natural materials like seeds, tree barks, plants, and rocks to use as ecofacts.

Use the recording sheet below to record your findings.

Other materials you may need:

- Scale
- Ruler
- Pencil
- Magnifying glass
- Camera (use the camera to take photographs of each artifact to add to the recording sheet.)

