

History and Archeology

History is the story of people's lives from the past. It is a story told through oral or written language and through artifacts. It is also one that others put together. Historians and archeologists help piece together the past from evidence. Often, they have specific training, such as expertise in certain periods of history.

The Work of Historians

Historians ask questions about the past to re-create a picture of individuals, societies, and events. They do this by using evidence such as writings, oral accounts from individuals familiar with the people or the events, and the study of artifacts from the period.

Artifacts are items that have been made by people, such as jewellery, stone tools, pottery jugs, statues, paintings, buildings, and specialized structures or memorials, such as the inuksuit of the North or monumental poles created by the Northwest Coast First Peoples.

The Work of Archeologists

An archeologist excavates or digs in the ground to find evidence of past civilizations. Artifacts are usually found underground because of the effects of natural disasters, war, rebuilding over previous remains, or changing geography. Archeologists use a grid system to guide them in an **excavation**. Each section of the site is marked off as a square, then labelled so that the distribution of artifacts can be seen across the entire site.

How Can Artifacts Be Found?

Remains of the ancient past can be found in many ways. Natural disasters, such as landslides, or human activities can reveal artifacts.



▲ A team of archeologists searches for and documents evidence of artifacts in an excavation site on Triquet Island off the coast of British Columbia. Here, evidence of human habitation 13 800 years ago has been uncovered.

Archeologists can also be guided by

- oral histories—the archeological discovery on Triquet Island (see page 59) supported Heiltsuk First Nation oral history, which notes a strip of land that did not freeze during the Ice Age. Charcoal analysis from the site shows its age is consistent with the last ice age, which ended about 11 700 years ago.
- stories—tales of the lost city of Atlantis helped archeologist Spyridon Marinatos find the Minoan town of Akrotiri on the Greek island of Santorini in 1967.
- accidental discovery of artifacts—the construction of a canal in 1592 revealed marble slabs, resulting in the discovery of the ancient city of Herculaneum in Italy.
- mounds of earth, called “tells,” which often cover ancient cities.

- places where the land caves in or where crops grow differently to surrounding crops.

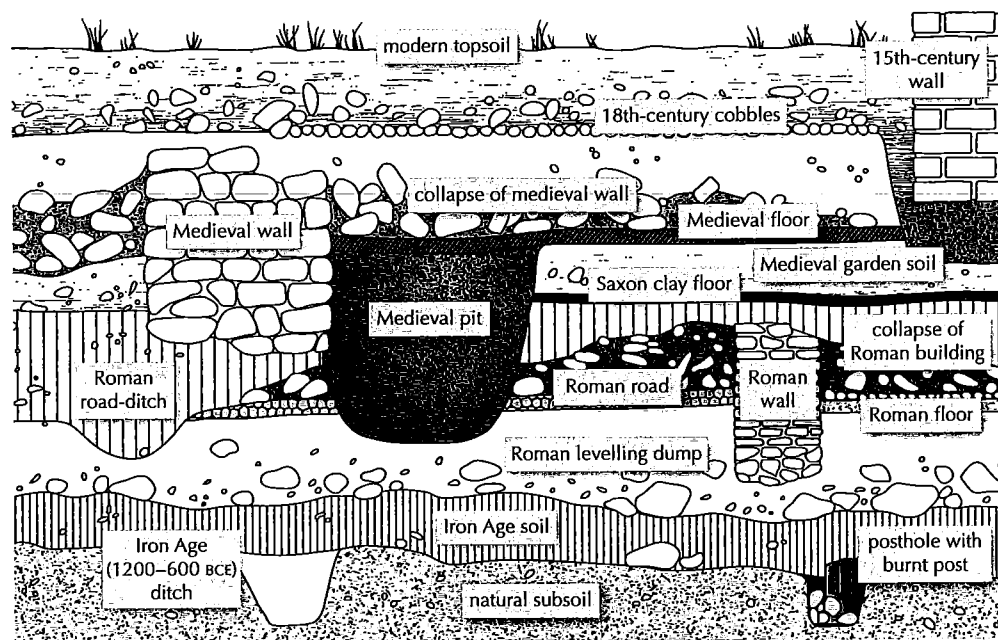
Technology

Archeologists use technology to help them find places to dig. Infrared satellite imaging, radar, underwater sonar, metal detectors, and aerial photography can provide clues about where ancient peoples lived.

Layers in the Earth

When archeologists dig into the earth, the ground is made up of many layers. These layers are called "strata" (see diagram below). The deepest layers are the oldest, and the layers closest to the surface are the youngest.

Stratigraphy allows archeologists to put the remains of the past into **chronological order** and gather information about the past.



◀ A diagram of archeological strata produced by the Canterbury Archeological Trust, a charity that carries out excavations in Kent, England

Investigate

Observe and Describe

1. Look at the picture on page x. Describe the types of tasks an archeologist does.

Work with the Evidence

2. Look at the diagram above. Which strata is the oldest? Explain why. Identify possible difficulties for archeologists in using strata. Interpret the diagram to determine how this site may have been used over time.

Communicate Your Findings

3. Create a concept map to brainstorm at least four ideas showing what history means to you.
4. Where would you look for artifacts in Canada? Why there? What is one advantage and one disadvantage of your site? Consider factors such as the likelihood of finding artifacts, the climate, and ground conditions. Create a postcard with a picture of your site and a message that addresses these questions.



▲ Some artifacts are more preserved than others because of geography and location—but that doesn't make them easier to date. This mask carved by the Dorset people (see timeline) was preserved by frozen soil. However, it cannot be dated precisely. Archeologists have dated this artifact to about 500–1000 CE. How do you think they did it?

CONSIDER THIS!

The ancient Babylonian calendar marked off the months of the year according to the position of the moon. Each month started with the crescent moon spotted in the western sky. There were 12 months, as well as a month that could be inserted any time in a cycle of 17–18 months. It functioned like the extra day in February during a leap year.

Dating

There are two ways to date historical artifacts. They can be dated generally based on their relationship to other objects whose dates are known (relative dating). For example, they

- have physical features similar to those of an object with a known date
- are found with objects with a known date or those that can be dated
- are found in or near the same layer of earth (stratum) as other objects that can be dated

Absolute dating is a more precise method of dating artifacts. Sometimes, it can be achieved by drawing on the ancient dating systems or coins of ancient peoples. Scientific methods of absolute dating include

- measuring the carbon level in an object, known to decrease at a fixed rate after death (a process known as radiocarbon dating)
- measuring how much time has gone by since the item was last exposed to sunlight or how much radiation it contains
- counting growth rings in trees, each year representing a year's growth (The rings create patterns and can also give information on climate.)

Investigate

Consider and Explain

1. What is the difference between relative and absolute dating? What questions could you ask about your artifacts to figure out which form of dating to use?

Work with the Evidence

2. Interpret the timeline on the previous page. How long do archeologists think Indigenous peoples have lived in North America? List the artifacts that have

assisted archaeologists in dating the development of Indigenous cultures in Canada. Suggest what new evidence could change the dates listed on the timeline.

Communicate Your Findings

3. Apply the process of placing dates in chronology to produce a timeline of your typical day. Use 1 centimetre to represent each hour. Include a short description of at least six events.

Investigating Sources

Historical Evidence

We know a lot more about early peoples today than people did in previous centuries. This is partly because archeologists and other specialists have worked together to provide a detailed analysis of sources.

It is also due to Indigenous peoples, who have been able to demonstrate that their oral histories and **traditional knowledge** are valuable sources of information about events that occurred thousands of years ago. In the past, these sources were ignored or undervalued.

When scientific data are combined with written records or oral histories to bring together the pieces of the puzzle, everyone benefits from greater understanding of the past.

Historians use historical evidence during their investigations into the past. They find the information they need in sources. A source is anything that survives from the past or tells us about the past. Once a historian uses a source to answer a particular question, it becomes evidence. There are two types of sources: primary and secondary.

Primary Sources

Primary sources have been created during or around the time that the historian is investigating. Primary sources are key to learning about the past. Types of primary sources include these:

- **writing**—such as letters, government records, transcriptions, and trade lists
- **artifacts**—items made by people and that have been preserved, such as stone tools, mummies, statues, and buildings

- **oral histories**—the histories of peoples, passed on orally to later generations, and traditional knowledge collected using notes or recordings

Secondary Sources

Secondary sources are items that have been created long after the time the historian is studying. They are often the products of the study of history and are based on other sources. People other than historians can produce secondary sources: for example, filmmakers, artists, and politicians. Secondary sources can be just as important as primary sources because historians can use them to interpret, analyze, and evaluate primary sources.

Making Decisions About Sources

Sources are not always easy to use and historians cannot believe all information in them.

Thucydides (c. 460–400 BCE) wrote a history of the Peloponnesian War, fought between Athens and Sparta in the 5th century BCE.

Thucydides describes his scientific approach to dealing with evidence in the source below:

I have made it a principle not to write down the first story that came my way...I have checked with as much thoroughness as possible...[as] different eye-witnesses gave different accounts of the same events, speaking out of partiality for one side or the other or else from imperfect memories...It will be enough for me, however, if these words of mine are judged useful by those who want to understand clearly the events that happened in the past.

Source: Excerpt from Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, translated by R. Warner, London, Penguin Books, 1972