
Lesson 5.1

ARCHAEOLOGY AS A CAREER

Subjects: science, careers.

Skills: knowledge, comprehension, application, evaluation.

Strategies: reading, research skills, brainstorming, interviewing, writing.

Duration: 45 to 60 minutes.

Class Size: any.



Ceramic pot from Haywood County,
North Carolina, AD 1000-1400.

Objective

In their study of archaeology as a career, students will read essays and complete an activity to gain an understanding of and appreciation for the career of a professional archaeologist.

Materials

A copy of “Profiles of Archaeologists” for each student.

Vocabulary

Hominid: the family consisting of humans and their ancestors.

Background

Archaeology is one of the four subfields of anthropology. Anthropology is the study of humanity, in the broadest sense. Linguistic anthropologists study languages: how they change, how they are related to one another, and the relationship between culture and language. Cultural anthropologists study the cultures of living peoples. Physical anthropologists study the physical characteristics of human populations and the evolution of the *hominid* family. Archaeologists study past human cultures through material remains—artifacts and sites.

Anthropologists study human cultures and how they change. They seek to make general statements about human behavior. Anthropology addresses questions like: In what ways does a culture change when people who were nomads become village-dwelling farmers? How does a technological invention, such as the automobile or the computer, change a society? Is the passage through adolescence to adulthood less traumatic in some cultures than it is in others?

Archaeology is the method anthropologists have of studying these kinds of questions as they pertain to cultures in the past.

Archaeology is the laboratory of time, where human cultures and how those cultures have changed can be studied over thousands of years. Popular movies have helped create a public image of archaeologists as swashbuckling adventurers. In reality, archaeologists are much more like the fictional character Sherlock Holmes, working with clues to piece together mysteries of the past.

Archaeology is related to history; both attempt to understand the past. The differences between history and archaeology center on the types of evidence used and, to some extent, the kinds of questions asked of that evidence. Historians rely mainly on written documents to study the past.

They examine, for example, old courthouse records, newspapers, books, diaries, and letters. Archaeologists study artifacts and sites—the things people used and the places where they used them. When the culture being studied has left behind written records or oral history, such as stories or songs, archaeologists use these sources, along with archaeological data, to help them understand the past.

Many people think archaeologists study only ancient cultures and historians study just more recent events. Yet historians do study written records of ancient Egyptians, which are more than 5,000 years old, and some archaeologists research the behavior of modern people by studying their garbage. For example, one archaeologist studies early 20th-century coal mining camps in California. To put it simply, archaeology is a method of studying the past, even the past of one hour ago, by researching material evidence—the things people created and used. History is a method of studying the past by researching written records.

In the United States, archaeologists earn degrees in Anthropology. But in some countries, archaeology is considered to be its own discipline. A few colleges in the U.S. offer degrees in archaeology. Most practicing archaeologists have a Bachelor of Arts degree and a Master of Arts degree. Many archaeologists also have a Doctor of Philosophy degree, a necessity for becoming a university professor.

Considerations for selecting a college or university include the kinds of programs each offers, the opportunities for field work and internships, and the background and research interests of the faculty. At the undergraduate level, a broad anthropological background and an archaeological field school are the most important experiences for students to gain. By participating in a field school, students learn the techniques used to excavate and record sites, how to analyze artifacts and other finds and how to interpret their findings. It is often advisable to seek employment in archaeology after completing an undergraduate degree and before beginning a graduate program. Graduate school is where students study the special branch of archaeology that most interests them. Because archaeology is such a diversified field, a refinement of research interests helps a person select the graduate school best meeting his or her needs.

Archaeologists can specialize in a wide range of topics. Some choose to work with museum collections. Others decide to specialize in one of the analytical techniques, such as pollen analysis, identifying animal bone and plant fragments or geological sediment analysis. Some archaeologists specialize in a geographical area, like Peru or the southeastern U.S. Others specialize even further, working with a particular cultural group or time period, such as African-American sites or the Woodland period, which falls chronologically in North Carolina between 1000 BC to AD 1000. Underwater archaeology is another specialty. Field work is a component of most archaeologists' work, as well as writing and working with computers and other scientific equipment.

Employment opportunities in archaeology are primarily with colleges and universities, state and federal agencies, private consulting firms, museums, and historic sites. Archaeologists who work for colleges and universities spend a lot of time teaching and training students both in the classroom and in archaeological field schools. Cultural resource management is a branch of archaeology that grew out of legislation requiring state and federal agencies to consider the impact a proposed development project, such as a pipeline or road, could have on prehistoric and historic sites. Archaeologists who work for the government help enforce laws protecting archaeological sites and data from destruction. Archaeologists who work for private consulting firms, as well as some who work for universities, are frequently hired by businesses and government agencies requiring archaeological services for proposed development projects. Archaeologists pursuing research topics often receive funding by writing grant proposals.

Recently, there has been a surge of interest in involving the public in archaeology. Interpretation of sites, publications written for a general audience, tours, curriculum development, and children's activities are all part of this new specialty. By educating the public about the importance of the past, archaeologists hope to help save archaeological sites from destruction.

Archaeology is a study that requires a broad understanding of many things: soils, plant and animal life, geology, surveying, chemistry, computers, statistics, and the social sciences, to name a few. People with interests in many fields will find an opportunity to integrate them in archaeology. Sometimes skills learned in archaeology will lead a person to new employment opportunities and career directions in related fields. Field work in remote areas and foreign countries is another aspect of archaeology that many people enjoy.

Procedure

This lesson can be used in a variety of ways. It can be a part of a careers fair or an element in a unit on archaeology. Some suggestions:

- Students research possible specialties in which an archaeologist might work. Also have them list the skills they think a person should have in order to work in that specialty.
- In small groups, students create a list of questions they would like to ask an archaeologist about his or her profession. They then arrange to interview an archaeologist.
- Students read the profiles of two archaeologists and write a short essay about why they will or will not consider a career in archaeology.
- Invite archaeologists working in a variety of specialties to speak to your class or be panel members discussing questions and issues identified by the students.
- Ask students to think of other fields of study that relate to archaeology. Conversely, ask them how they think being an archaeologist could provide a person with background to work in other fields.
- Either individually or as a small group project, students interview an archaeologist on the future of archaeology as a career.

Sources

- Smith, Shelley J., Jeanne M. Moe, Kelly A. Letts, and Danielle M. Paterson. 1993. *Intrigue of the Past: A Teacher's Activity Guide for Fourth through Seventh Grades*. Washington, D.C.: Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Department of the Interior. [This lesson is adapted from "Archaeology as a Career" on pp. 89–94, courtesy of the Bureau of Land Management.]
- Society for Historical Archaeology. "Mapping Out a Career in Historical Archaeology." Pamphlet. Tucson: Society for Historical Archaeology.
- Stuart, George E., and Francis P. McManamon. 1996. *Archaeology and You*. Washington, D.C.: Society for American Archaeology.
- Ward, H. Trawick, and R. P. Stephen Davis, Jr. 1999. *Time Before History: The Archaeology of North Carolina*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. [The image in this lesson's main heading is taken from Figure 5.14.]

Profiles of Archaeologists

David Moore

David Moore works in Asheville for the Office of State Archaeology, Division of Archives and History, North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources. He identifies and preserves key archaeological sites and conducts excavations when significant sites are going to be destroyed. Dr. Moore also gives public programs on archaeology and prepares exhibits for local museums. Born in California, he grew up in Williamsville, New York. Dr. Moore attended the University of California at Berkeley and received his doctorate in Anthropology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.



David Moore working in his lab.

How did you become interested in archaeology?

I read a book called *Aku-Aku*, by Thor Heyerdal, when I was in the sixth or seventh grade. It was about Easter Island and the people who erected the mysterious stone statues there. The story about how the huge statues were quarried, transported across the island, and erected was really exciting to me, and it taught me about how complex ancient cultures could be. From that point on, I had a fascination with archaeology.

When did you decide to be an archaeologist?

After I graduated from college, I got a summer job working at the Hardaway site in North Carolina. This was my first experience with real archaeology. We excavated a camp that was nearly 10,000 years old, and I learned how to identify stone tools. I loved the work, and I loved learning about the past, so I decided to apply to graduate school and become an archaeologist.

What kinds of archaeology jobs have you had?

I have worked for the Office of State Archaeology for nearly 14 years. During that time I have also taught archaeology field schools and classes at several local colleges and universities.

What do you enjoy about being an archaeologist?

I enjoy the actual process of uncovering evidence of the past through excavation. It is an exciting challenge to understand how people lived at a particular place at some time in the past and to try to understand all the forces that were a part of their environment. I also enjoy teaching about archaeology and helping others share my interest in learning about the past.

What do you dislike about being an archaeologist?

Often archaeological sites are destroyed by vandalism or construction. I try hard to help protect important sites, so it is extremely painful to see a site that has been destroyed, since we will never be able to learn about what was there.

Have you made any important discoveries?

None that would make the headlines, but I like to think that everything I do adds to what we

know about the past. I think it's an important discovery for everyone if I can help people learn about an Indian village located in their community 500 years ago.

What advice would you give a young person considering a career in archaeology?

Read about everything that interests you in history and try to meet professional archaeologists that work in your area. They often offer opportunities to volunteer in archaeology labs or on field projects. Explore these if you can to learn whether archaeology is something that you would enjoy.

What else would you like to tell people about archaeology?

Archaeology is a unique window on the past. If you want to learn about ancient peoples and cultures you can explore the past in books, at museums, on archaeological sites, and at historic sites. You may be surprised to know how much history is all around you if you begin to look for it.

Linda Carnes-McNaughton

Linda Carnes-McNaughton works in Raleigh as the archaeologist for the Historic Sites Section, Division of Archives and History, North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources. In this capacity, she conducts excavations at historic sites across the state and helps to develop public programs there. Dr. Carnes-McNaughton grew up in Atlanta, Georgia where she graduated from Walker High School. She received her undergraduate degree in Anthropology from Georgia State University in downtown Atlanta. She received a doctorate in Anthropology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.



Linda Carnes-McNaughton excavating.

How did you become interested in archaeology?

I have always been interested in people—past, present, and future. Some of my fascination for old things and other cultures probably came from living in Japan for two years as a small child.

When did you decide to become an archaeologist?

In high school and early college, I took courses in sociology, biology, geology, and geography. I was a sophomore in college, majoring in Biology, when I was accepted to go on a dig. After that experience, I changed my major to anthropology and knew with certainty I would become an archaeologist.

What kind of archaeology jobs have you had?

Over the years I have worked as an archaeologist for university-sponsored projects, private-consulting excavations, and federal and state-government agencies. Mostly my work has taken places in the southeastern states, such as Alabama, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia. Once I did a small survey in Northern Ireland on historic pottery sites. I loved it and would like to return to do more work in the United Kingdom.

What do you enjoy about being an archaeologist?

As an anthropologist and archaeologist, I am able to blend many diverse kinds of research and skills to expand our knowledge of past human cultures. I embrace that diversity and the multi-dimensional aspect of exploration and discovery. And working outdoors, in many different settings, keeps me in touch with nature and the environment.

What do you dislike about being an archaeologist?

The only frustrating part of my job as an archaeologist is trying to preserve and protect our cultural resources—the sites, artifacts, buildings, etc. Many people take for granted that these ancient (and not-so-ancient) remains will be here forever. Educating people about preservation is very challenging, but very important.

Have you made any important discoveries?

I get asked this question a lot! Usually I respond by saying, “It’s not what you find (artifact or feature-wise), it’s what you find out (information-wise) that’s important.” But the most exciting sites I’ve worked on were a 4,000-year-old soapstone quarry near Atlanta and the earliest European-style pottery kiln in North America, dated to the AD 1570s and located near Beaufort, South Carolina.

What advice would you give a young person considering a career in archaeology?

Learn to think clearly, listen hard, and write well. Take courses in social sciences (such as sociology, geography, and folklore) and physical sciences (such as biology, geology, mathematics, and chemistry). Learn skills such as photography, map drafting, and even art work. But most importantly, polish communication skills, such as writing and public speaking. Begin by volunteering on archaeological projects sponsored by your state or regional archaeological societies or organizations. Proper training in field techniques is crucial to continuing your archaeological career. Finally, learn the preservation laws in your state or community. This will help you to educate others.

What else would you like to tell people about archaeology?

Being an archaeologist means looking at the world around us in a different perspective. We live in the present as we study the past in order to learn what to do in the future—on this planet and possibly others. We learn to be humanists while at the same time we practice as scientists.