

Digging Deep: Primary Sources in Archaeology

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Clyde Kluckhohn, a respected anthropologist, calls anthropology “the science of human similarities and differences.” You guessed it—that equals a *lot* of information. So anthropologists divided that information into many subfields, and one of them is archaeology. Archaeology is the study of materials left behind by people who lived before us.

What things would you imagine that people who lived twelve thousand years ago left behind? Much of what they left has disappeared, except for the hardest substances, like stone and bone tools, seeds, post holes that were once part of structures, house pits, hearths, and burial sites. Such *artifacts* and *features* are primary sources for archaeologists. Artifacts are objects that can be removed from sites for study elsewhere, and features are the parts of a site that cannot be removed without destroying their integrity. Archaeologists use these primary sources as clues to unlock the mysteries of past humans, their behaviors, and cultures.

Artifacts represent the most important primary sources for archaeologists. Archaeologists look at what materials an artifact is made of, how it was made, and how it was used in order to reconstruct a picture of life in the past. They “read” these artifacts in the same way historians read primary sources like written records. Archaeologists must have special training and practice to learn how to read artifacts.

Archaeology and History

History and archaeology have a lot in common. They share an interest in human behavior. Many archaeologists and historians agree how important it is to remember historical events. We all can learn from studying the past, so we don’t continue to make the same mistakes. Many historians and archaeologists also would agree that if you don’t remember your history, you are ignorant of who you are, where you came from, and where you are headed. In this respect, these two groups of people can complement one another.

This complementary nature is evident in the study of *historical archaeology*. Historical archaeologists study much of the colonial history of early America. Historical sites (known locations of past human activities) in North Carolina—such as Somerset Place, Historic Stagville, Brunswick Town/Fort Anderson, and Old Salem—serve as good examples of teamwork between archaeologists and historians leading to greater knowledge of the past.

One thing that separates the archaeologist from the historian is that many of the archaeologist’s primary sources are buried in the ground. To extract those primary sources from their locations or sites, archaeologists use a method of scientific and systematic digging called *excavation*. Excavations are tightly controlled, so that artifacts can be recorded in their exact locations. Why

is this important? When we know the exact location of artifacts in relation to the total site, and in relation to other artifacts there, archaeologists can make more complete and accurate conclusions.

Through a natural process of soil deposits, deeper layers of soils are older than layers of soil closer to the surface. Archaeologists call this natural process the law of superpositioning. When the natural layers of soil are disturbed, archaeologists have a more difficult time understanding the sequence of events or stories that the artifacts are trying to tell us.

Creating an Early Time Line

In North Carolina, archaeologists have used artifacts ranging from projectile points and scrapers to bone fish hooks and pipes to establish a prehistoric (before written language) and historic time line of human occupation. This time line spans thousands of years: the Paleo-Indian Period (12,000 through 8000 BC); the Archaic Period (8000 through 600 BC); the Woodland Period (600 BC through AD 1650); and the Historic Period (1650 through the present). Archaeologists have analyzed specific artifacts from specific soil depths to establish these time periods. Each period has unique artifacts in it that do not appear in another period. For example, archaeologists can see a change in the technology from Paleo-Indian to Archaic peoples in the design of their projectile, or spear, points. Such stylistic changes mark specific periods of innovation in human history.

One of the most significant changes in tool technology was the switch from the *atlatl* (a wooden stick that acts as a lever increasing the force and accuracy of a spear) to a *bow and arrow*. According to the archaeological reading of artifacts, this change took place between 1000 BC and AD 1000, during the Woodland Period.

One of the differences between the Paleo-Indian and Archaic periods is population growth. The large number of Archaic Period archaeological sites reflects this change. These sites generally represent base camps, or staging areas that long-ago people used to gather resources like acorns and hickory nuts. Evidence of some of the first horticultural (small-scale farming) activities and long-distance trade appears during the Archaic Period.

Based on archaeological primary sources, behavior that distinguishes the Archaic Period from the Woodland includes the burying of dead with rituals, the use of stone pipes, and greater complexity of populations and society. But the most distinguishable artifact that separates the Archaic Period from the Woodland Period is pottery. The Doerschuk site near Baden gave archaeologists the earliest clay pottery found in the Piedmont. There are only fragments, or sherds, of the pottery left, but archaeologists can tell a lot from them.

The latter part of the Woodland Period is referred to by archaeologists as the Mississippian Period. At that time, people practiced extensive corn agriculture and lived in compact villages with stockades (or walls), houses, public structures, and ceremonial platform mounds. Town Creek Mound, near Mount Gilead in Montgomery County, is the most characteristic Tar Heel site of the Late Woodland, or the Mississippian, Period. The Mississippian Period—the historical connection to colonial culture—saw some of the most intelligent and sophisticated forms of American Indian life anywhere in North America. In the North Carolina Mountains at this time

lived the Cherokee; on the coast were the Algonkians; in the interior lived the Tuscarora; and in the Piedmont were the Siouans. All of these people thrived and lived among themselves until the mid-1600s, when European settlers begin arriving in significant numbers. Archaeological primary sources help tell these stories.

Modern Archaeology

Modern archaeology is complex. Archaeologists use the scientific method to understand cultures and lifeways. A general principle of archaeology notes that what we know about the lifeways of past peoples builds on itself. This cumulative nature of primary sources in archaeology adds to its complexity, making archaeology subject to constant rethinking of previously held ideas.

Primary sources like artifacts are the most important data for archaeologists, because sometimes these items are the only evidence left that can tell us anything about people who lived here before us. Artifacts must be kept in order, from before the time they are excavated until they are brought to a laboratory for analysis. They must be properly handled, accurately excavated, recorded in detail, and properly preserved for future archaeologists, who will be able to apply new technology to further understand their importance.

Archaeologists must have years of education and training and possess exceptional technical skills. Their knowledge helps them dig deep into primary sources to interpret the past.

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