



Archaeology

Question

How important is archaeology to the understanding of past human activities?

Archaeology is the study of human history and prehistory through the excavation of sites and the analysis of material culture and other physical remains.

This question considers how archaeologists study the physical remains that people who lived in the past left behind and what these evidences can tell us about the ways people made, used, and disposed of things in the past.

Answers should be no longer than 1200 words, and can be general in scope or focus on a particular case study. Be as creative as you like!

You may find the below guidance useful, though there is no need to cover all questions raised.

Guidance

Archaeologists look at people in the past and document the diversity of ancient cultures (e.g., social institutions, political dynamics, and economic interactions), and seek to explain the emergence of the first cities and empires. Archaeologists study material remains (from stone tools to monuments) and settlements (from villages to cities) to answer questions such as: What do people use plant for? How did daily life change with domestication of plants and animals? What was everyday life like for medieval peasants? In order to answer these questions, archaeologists employ diverse approaches, drawn from the arts and social sciences, as well as using scientific analyses to understand how people lived in the past and everything that they did. In answering this question, you might want to think critically about some of the following:

a. Why do the things of the world matter and what do they tell us?

Archaeology as a discipline studies the past and the present world by looking at the material culture that people left behind. To work out what happened in the past, archaeologists need data which can be recovered by excavating the soil (digging). Some digs might be small while some can be very big. So understanding how and why we find objects in the soil is vital.

You might want to talk about the processes of excavations and their importance in the understanding of the human past.

b. How do archaeologists use material culture to investigate social position, diet, trade and technology?

In archaeological excavations and survey, a lot of artefacts (objects made and used by humans) are recovered. Archaeologists work hard to identify all the objects they find, to find out as much as they can about an area, using all the evidence available. It's rather like having to know everything a farmer, a craftsman, a builder, a geographer would know so you can understand everything you find. In archaeology, you can use a lot of different skills to find out things that have been lost in the past. Archaeologists are scientists, historians and geographers. In answering this question, ask yourself, what evidence from an archaeological record you think can inform us about diet, belief systems, leadership, and technology. What kinds of objects were used and what for? Armed with this information, you can understand how people lived in the past and some of

the things that they did. Additionally, you might want to go through the various timelines like the Stone Age, Bronze Age, Iron Age, and Medieval period and then bring to light what kind of technology, subsistence practice, domestic structures were prevalent during these. Unlike the image in cartoons and movies which portrays archaeologists as treasure hunters, archaeological excavation requires extremely careful work and attention to detail. Like detectives at a crime scene, archaeologists evaluate and record an archaeological site with great precision in order to preserve the context of artefacts and features, and they work in teams with many other specialists.

c. What methods are employed in excavating and studying these archaeological evidences?

Having excavated, archaeologists start to analyse their findings by looking at the deposition of the objects and the different layers of the soil through the process called stratigraphy. You can explain the concept of stratigraphy by talking about how archaeological materials are deposited in the soil. Think about how these objects get buried:

- Dropped/accidents ('oh no I've lost my gold ring!' It then gets trodden into the ground, and eventually buried as earth build up.)
- Thrown away. Where does all our modern rubbish go? To the tip and then buried in a hole. Archaeologists call piles of rubbish middens. Other things just get dropped.
- Buried purposefully (hoard), or grave.
- Soil builds up from plant matter, people building on top of things, dumping rubbish or other objects.
- Remains build up and up. Older things will be on the bottom, newer things on the top.
- You can summarise your points with a picture like the one below.



Other methods which are also important are the various dating techniques especially radiocarbon dating. You can also talk about this by drawing different case studies/ examples from archaeological sites in Europe and elsewhere.

Basic Readings.

How Do Archaeologists Decide Where to Dig?

- ▶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hco0ykb6ycw>

What is archaeology: Understanding the archaeological record?

- ▶ <https://youtu.be/nvc1xIyntC0>