

Glossary of Archaeological Terms

Analysis

the process of studying and classifying artifacts, usually conducted in a laboratory after excavation has been completed.

Archaeology / archeology

the scientific study of past human cultures by analyzing the material remains (sites and artifacts) that people left behind.

Archaeological site

a place where human activity occurred, and material remains were deposited.

Artifact

any object made, modified, or used by people.

Assemblage

artifacts that are found together and that presumably were used at the same time or for similar or related tasks.

Attribute

a characteristic or property of an object, such as weight, size, or color.

B.P.

years before present; as a convention, 1950 is the year from which B.P. dates are calculated.

Ceramic

pottery, fired clay.

Chronology

an arrangement of events in the order in which they occurred.

Classification

a systematic arrangement in groups or categories according to criteria.

Context

the relationship of artifacts and other cultural remains to each other and the situation in which they are found.

Culture

a set of learned beliefs, values and behaviors--the way of life--shared by the members of a society.

Debitage

the by-products or waste materials left over from the manufacture of stone tools.

Diagnostic artifact

an item that is indicative of a particular time period and/or cultural group.

Excavation

the systematic digging and recording of an archaeological site.

Experimental archaeology

scientific studies designed to discover processes that produced and/or modified artifacts and sites.

Feature

a type of material remain that cannot be removed from a site such as roasting pits, fire hearths, house floors or post molds.

Grid

a network of uniformly spaced squares that divides a site into units; used to measure and record an object's position in space.

In situ

in the original place.

Level

an excavation layer, which may correspond to natural strata. Levels are numbered from the top to bottom of the excavation unit, with the uppermost level being Level 1.

Lithic

stone, or made of stone.

Material remains

artifacts, features and other items such as plant and animal remains that indicate human activity.

Midden

an area used for trash disposal.

Post mold / post hole

a type of feature; a circular stain left in the ground after a wooden post has decayed; usually indicates the former existence of a house or fence.

Pot sherd

a piece of broken pottery.

Prehistoric

the period of time before written records; the absolute date for the prehistoric period varies from place to place.

Projectile point

a general term for stone points that were hafted to darts, spears or arrows; often erroneously called "arrowheads".

Rock art

a general term for pecked, incised, or painted figures on rock.

Site

a place where human activity occurred and material remains were deposited.

Site steward

a volunteer who visits a site and helps protect it from vandalism and looting.

Strata

many layers of earth or levels in an archaeological site (singular stratum).

Stratigraphy

the layering of deposits in archaeological sites. Cultural remains and natural sediments become buried over time, forming strata.

Survey

the systematic examination of the ground surface in search of archaeological sites.

Test pit

a small excavation unit dug to learn what the depth and character of the stratum might be, and to determine more precisely which strata contain artifacts and other material remains.