

Council for British Archaeology

CBA Factsheet 1: What is archaeology?

Archaeology is the study of the material remains and environmental effects of human behaviour: evidence which can range from buried cities to microscopic organisms and covers all periods from the origins of humans millions of years ago to the remains of 20th and 21st-century industry and warfare. Archaeology can be used in all areas of education and in all subjects, from an inspiration for work in art to an application of nuclear physics in radiocarbon dating.

These factsheets provide a gateway to archaeological resources, news, lesson ideas, field projects and other information, whether you are teaching, studying or just interested in archaeology. For a list of archaeology contacts, from university archaeology departments to local societies and contracting units, visit the Archaeology Online section of our website, www.britarch.ac.uk/archonline

What do archaeologists really do?

Archaeology provides us with the only source of information about many aspects of human development. Milestones such as the beginning of agriculture, the origin of towns, or the discovery of metals can only be understood through the examination of physical evidence. Archaeology also provides essential information for periods of the past for which written records survive.

Archaeology links with many subjects, including geography, history, social sciences, maths, physics, biology, chemistry, art, religion and technology.

We have tried to answer the most common questions that we receive in the following sections of this 'What is archaeology?' factsheet.

Where do archaeologists work?

Archaeologists work in many different types of employment; they don't just dig holes in the ground. They can be found in national agencies such as [English Heritage](http://www.english-heritage.org.uk), [Historic Scotland](http://www.historic-scotland.gov.uk), [Cadw](http://www.cadw.gov.uk) (in Wales) and the [Northern Ireland Environment Agency](http://www.northernirelandenvironmentagency.com).

They can be found in teaching and research institutions such as universities, in County and City Councils, with national organisations such as [National Parks](http://www.nationalparks.gov.uk), the [Environment Agency](http://www.environment-agency.gov.uk) and the [Highways Agency](http://www.highways.gov.uk), and

as curators or specialists within museums. Many commercial planning and development consultancies have an archaeological team which carries out a variety of archaeological assessments including commissioning archaeological excavation of sites throughout the UK by local authority archaeological units, or commercial organisations. To be employed in archaeology is to have the option of a wide selection of employment.

There is also an increasingly popular voluntary community sector which enables anyone to become involved in the archaeology of the area in which they live, regardless of age or background. Visit the **Community Archaeology Forum** (www.britarch.ac.uk/caf) on the CBA website to find out more.

What jobs do archaeologists do?

Archaeologists can work in a multitude of organisations, undertaking a broad selection of tasks beyond just archaeological excavation. Some examples are listed below:

- Archival work
- Archaeological fieldwork (excavation, geophysical or landscape survey, building recording etc)
- In a laboratory, undertaking the scientific study of botanical, human, animal, small mammal or insect remain
- Teaching in a university
- Involved with local authority planning decisions for building and road development
- Conservation work in a museum, working with archaeological artefacts and finds
- As an illustrator using computer programs and manual drawing skills to produce images of sites and finds
- Managing computer databases for the historic environment
- A small but increasing area of employment is in maritime and marine archaeology

In short then, archaeology is a sector of varied employment that requires many different types of skills.

Are there many job opportunities?

A survey by the [Institute for Archaeologists](http://www.britarch.ac.uk), published in the summer of 2008, concluded that there were over 7000 paid jobs in archaeology in the UK. The 2008/9 recession has had an impact on archaeological employment, particularly in developer-funded contracting units, but there

still remains a good range of job opportunities out there. If you had been applying for a job in archaeology 25 years ago, for example, you would have found it a lot harder to find a job and may have been discouraged before you even got that far. Archaeology is now far more inclusive and open to all. Many people who become involved in community projects pick up so much experience and skills that they decide to make a career of it. Archaeology is a profession that people tend to enter because they have a real passion for it; it's not a career option that people tend to drift in to. At the bottom end of the career ladder salaries are often quite low and many positions can be on set-period contracts. Higher up the career ladder, salaries are frequently lower than in correspondingly similar positions in other fields of employment. The up-side of this is that you have a job that is the envy of many others, a great talking point and an interesting position in which to spend your working career.

There are number of primary locations where archaeology jobs are advertised on the Internet. These can be found on the jobs section of our website (www.britarch.ac.uk/jobs) where you will find links to a broad range of job advertisers.

So it isn't really a subject you would recommend?

On the contrary, archaeology offers an interesting and varied career which provides intellectual satisfaction.

A university degree in archaeology bridges practical and theoretical skills, calls for practice in the collection and analysis of data, and is a good foundation for other careers because it combines literacy and numeracy, arts and sciences. Studying archaeology can therefore provide you with a broad range of skills and knowledge that employers value, both within archaeology and in the wider jobs market.

Archaeologists are often the most versatile and skilled of employees, with excellent transferable employment skills. For those who truly love their subject, however, archaeology is often a job they will do for life. The specific path they take through their career may develop and change over the years because there are plenty of avenues to be explored.

For further information, please contact:

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