

# Debunking Myths in

# ARCHAEOLOGY

## Archaeologists dig up dinosaurs.

False! Archaeologists do not dig up dinosaurs! Archaeology is the study of human past using material remains left behind by historic *and* prehistoric civilizations. Fully modern humans (*Homo sapiens sapiens*) have existed for about 100,000 years, and they have occupied the Americas for over 12,000 years. Dinosaurs went extinct about 65 million years ago (at the end of the Cretaceous Period) after living on Earth for about 165 million years. The scientists who study them are called Paleontologists, and although our fields are similar, the subject matter is very different and do not overlap. Calling an Archaeologist a Paleontologist (and vice versa) is like calling a duck a fish. They both like water, but they live in totally different levels of it!

## Archaeologists primarily dig up graves.

No, not anymore. In the past, archaeology was much more focused on the large-scale excavation of sites. The study of human remains from an archaeological site can provide important details about the diet and health of a population. However, excavating human remains is controversial, tedious, time-consuming, and costly. The cleaning, analysis, curation, and repatriation of human remains after excavation is also very expensive. One skeleton uncovered on a site can stop the rest of the dig in its tracks! For these reasons, as well as respect for cultural sensitivities regarding deceased ancestors, archaeologists think carefully before unearthing a burial. In addition, federal and state laws protect the graves of Native Americans.



## All archaeologists work in Egypt.

False! Not all archaeologists work in Egypt. Most American archaeologists will never work in Egypt. Egyptian archaeology is a specialized field of study called Egyptology, and not every archaeologist is an Egyptologist. Most archaeologists were drawn to Egypt at one time or another, and we're all familiar with Howard Carter's famous discovery of Tutankhamen's tomb. But archaeologists tend to specialize in a particular area, a geographical region, an aspect of human behavior, or a time period. Unless that specialty is Egyptology, we can't assume that every archaeologist aims to work in Egypt.

## Indiana Jones was the best archaeologist.

Not even close! Indiana Jones is one of the most popular fictional archaeologists out there, and the film franchise unquestionably inspired a lot of real world interest in the field of archaeology. However, Hollywood isn't known for its accuracy and Indiana Jones is no exception of this.

The reality of archaeological field work is not a lone hero dashing into hidden chambers with a bullwhip and a pistol, coming away with a priceless relic. It's large groups of academics, CRM professionals, and students painstakingly sifting through grids in order to retrieve artifacts as mundane as pottery fragments. By today's standards, Indiana Jones walks a fine line between an archaeologist and a *professional looter*. The movies emphasize the tomb-raiding aspect of archaeology in the 1930s, leaving the impression that artifacts are there for the taking by whoever stumbles on them first. But that's not to say we can't appreciate a good film, and the adventures of Indiana Jones have stood the test of time!



## For an archaeologist, it's all about treasure hunting.

No, not in the present day. In the past, the focus of archaeology was largely on the collection of material objects, particularly those that were seen as rare or unusually valuable. Today, archaeology is practiced differently. Although we still appreciate the beauty and mystery of objects recovered from ancient sites, we are much more interested in understanding the people who made the objects and decoding the important processes and events that occurred in the past.

## It's okay to pick up artifacts because if you don't, someone else will. Besides, the site won't last long anyway.

Absolutely not! Removing artifacts without using proper scientific methods actually *destroys* evidence. This is what looters and treasure hunters do. Most people do not realize that a piece of pottery, a stone projectile point, or an ancient coin are all part of a greater cultural context – an association of several items that all date to about the same time period. Any concentration of artifacts in which many of the items are more than 50 years old is considered an archaeological site under federal and local government regulations. Removal of artifacts from archaeological sites – whether prehistoric items or historical glass and metal objects – literally removes pieces of history. In addition, it's important to keep in mind that federal and state laws prohibit the removal of artifacts from public lands without a permit. In the state of Washington (RCW 27.53.060), it is unlawful for any individual to knowingly remove, alter, dig into, or excavate any archaeological resource or remove artifacts on private or public lands.

Over time, archaeological sites reach a state of equilibrium with their surrounding environment. They do not have to be excavated and actually survive best if left untouched.



## There's only one kind of archaeologist.

False! Like any field, archaeology has its own branches and specializations. Along with the more "traditional" archaeologist, you may encounter a...

- **Geoarchaeologist:** These archaeologists specialize in the usage of geological techniques in traditional archaeology. They have a mastery understanding of geography, geology, and other Earth sciences and natural physical processes that can affect the soil and sediments within an archaeological site.
- **Zooarchaeologist:** These archaeologists collect and identify faunal (animal) remains in order to answer questions about the people who occupied these sites. They specialize in the study of human-animal interaction through faunal analysis.
- **Bioarchaeologist/Osteologist:** These archaeologists specialize in the study of skeletal remains at an archaeological site. The physical and chemical examination of bones have the capacity to reveal a wide range of information about past peoples and societies including one's diet, health and lifestyle.
- **Experimental Archaeologist:** These archaeologists recreate the behaviors of ancient people through mastering skills such as flint-knapping, weaving, and butchering, in order to better understand how artifacts end up the way they do!

And there are many more!

## Archaeology is always exciting and fun.

Not always! Like any job or pursuit, archaeology has many tasks that are difficult, dirty, and sometimes less than exciting, but nonetheless must be completed. And a lot of the time, the wave of excitement upon discovering a new artifact can be few and far between. But some archaeologists find the dirt itself pretty exciting, and so finding out how that dirt got there, and how things were built can be just as exciting as finding a cool artifact!

## Archaeologists spend all of their time digging.

Truthfully, no. Archaeology is more than just a dig. Archaeologists actually spend a relatively small amount of their time excavating, compared to the time spent in the laboratory, analyzing and interpreting their finds, and preparing written reports about the project. Moreover, some professional archaeologists are involved in the management and protection of cultural resources rather than research. The work of an archaeologist is important, but not all of that work is done out in the field.



## Archaeology cannot be done without public support.

This is true! **Archaeology cannot be done without your support!** Archaeologists strive to share information with the public about archaeology and seek public support in protecting and identifying archaeological resources. Archaeology is uniquely dependent on the public for the identification and protection of its resource base. And in some way, all archaeological research is supported by the public's money. In the past, some archaeological projects were privately funded by museums or benefactors. This is no longer the case. We cannot do what we do without public support!

Archaeological &  
Historical Services  
**AHS**  
Eastern Washington University

  
Anna Coon and Jennifer Wilson  
Eastern Washington University | AHS

  
SPOKANE  
ARCHAEOLOGY  
DAY