

ARTIFACTS, ETC.

There is an amazing variety of things to be found on an archaeological site. Most people would know an artifact when they see one. *Artifacts* are objects made by humans. They are the physical materials that you can pick up, measure, take back to the lab, and analyze for information. They are the evidence of past human activities which can tell you about past technology, settlement systems, subsistence methods, environmental impacts, economic systems, and so much more. Some artifacts you may be familiar with:

- Ceramic pot sherds (Yes, that's not a typo. I mean sherd, a piece of broken pottery. Shard is reserved for pieces of glass, but folks in the UK may beg to differ).
- Projectile points (not everything is an arrowhead, in fact the spear and spearthrower, or atlatl, have a much longer history)
- Tools such as hammerstones, bone needles, and chisels
- Small things like the debris from making stone tools, known as *debitage*
- And big things like pyramids and temples (even though they can be made out of smaller artifacts, like brick or stone, themselves)

Once a material is modified by humans it is transformed, so to speak, into an artifact. Another category of archaeological finds are *ecofacts*. This term is used to describe the items classified as natural objects used by humans, but without modification. These things have been purposefully brought to the site by humans or are present as a consequence of human actions. For instance, animal bones left

from a meal, pollen associated with plants that were gathered, possibly cultivated, and eaten, even the chemicals in the soil that are evidence of the collection of waste materials can be ecofacts. Another term for certain ecofacts is *manuport*. This refers to objects that appear to have no use to people at the site, but could not have gotten to the site without human involvement. Think "Oh! That's a pretty rock, I'll take it home to show momma."



Figure 1 Burials at Jamestown, VA, unearthed in 2015

Some artifacts cannot be excavated and taken to the lab. These are usually classified as *features*. Features are "anything made by humans but is too big to bring back (intact)" (White, 2008). These include middens (or trash pits), hearths, post holes or post molds, foundations, and graves, among many others. Features can sometimes be taken out intact by cutting around them. Footprints or clusters of artifacts are features that may make it to the lab for further study. But most of the time, they are fully documented and excavated. A feature may be excavated several ways; it could be pedestaled or window cut, then bisected.

A pedestal describes a method of leaving the feature and its surrounding soil alone while you dig the floor around it. Eventually the feature will be within a column or step of soil. This can be helpful in determining what the feature is

and if there are more like it by exposing the soil around it. After the feature is pedestaled, it is usually bisected, simply half of the feature is excavated leaving a profile of the feature to observe and document. Sometimes one half is screened for artifacts while the other half may be used for soil samples and pollen tests. A window cut is like the opposite of a pedestal. The feature is dug out of the ground before the rest of the floor.

Some artifacts may be pedestaled as well. Especially if you do not intend to remove this right away, the dirt provides stability. Artifacts found *in situ*, Latin for in place, are within their natural setting as you found them. That means you uncovered them in the soil, but have not yet moved it. This preserves the provenience of the artifacts since we know exactly where it was found.



Figure 2 One of the oldest tools ever found, Kenya, 2015

What else do archaeologists find? So far we have assumed that there is a place to find artifacts. But one thing that archaeologists have to find before they find artifacts are *sites*. Sites are defined by individual state and federal agencies and private companies, but generally they are places where past humans have either habituated or engaged in definable activities and subsequently left behind artifacts, features,

and ecofacts. Sites can be of various sizes and shapes, as well as time periods. They can be big or small, shallow or deep. Sites can contain different *components*, or distinct time periods of occupation that can be linked to specific artifacts and/or settlement patterns, etc. Sometimes the components are separated by culturally sterile soil, making them easy to see. However, a site location may have habitual occupations which make it difficult to tease out a single one. When this happens it's called a *palimpsest*. Imagine thin sheets of tracing paper laying over one another and obscuring any particular image.

When it comes to all the different types of artifacts, sites, and time periods, you can be sure that there is so much to know it could fill books and support specialties. And it does. There are specialty archaeologists for just about everything:

- Artifacts: Lithic specialists, lithicists if you will, study the stone tools and *debitage*. Ceramicists study pottery in every form and function. Specialties for perishable artifacts like textiles, etc.
- Time periods: Paleoindian, Contact, Colonial, Frontier, etc. As well as more broadly, such as historical and prehistoric.
- Site Type: Underwater, rock shelter, quarry, industrial, farmstead, etc.
- Region or State: North American, Egyptian, Asian, Southeastern U.S., or Georgia.

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