

What is archaeology?

Archaeology is the study of past cultural behaviour, from the beginnings of the human species to events that happened yesterday, through the material remains, or artefacts, that people leave behind. By carefully applying scientific techniques in excavation and analysis of their findings, archaeologists attempt to reconstruct past ways of life and understand why different customs developed and evolved. Archaeology is a part of anthropology [1], because it studies individuals and their different cultures, even if limited to the past [2]. This is the most interesting aspect of archaeology: it is a way to understand humanity and ourselves. Archaeology is also a part of history, but it is more reliable sometimes because while history uses essentially written documents, archaeology uses material evidence. A description of facts can be very precious, but if we have only one description, or descriptions from only one point of view, we cannot be sure to know a true part of the past. Individuals in fact can lie or simply see things in a convenient way [3].

If we think of the Roman Empire, we must admit that it would appear as a golden age, according to certain sources. Many writings were clearly produced for a political internal use, for propaganda, many others were written in a later time trying to remember ancient facts, only few are attributable to the political internal opposition or to "the enemy [4]". This means that we know thanks to writings what the people in power in the Roman Empire wanted the population to know. Romans did not live in a lost paradise, as we could think reading the ancient authors. For example, the results of a recent study in Pompeii claim that children were used for heavy work: this was never clearly expressed in the ancient texts. This discovery was possible thanks to the scientific study of bones, otherwise reading the ancient authors it would be only a suspicion.

History is an interpretation of the past based on ancient/old writings. Archaeology is different from history especially for the methods used. It can help and complement history by offering studies on materials to be compared with documents to have a clearer idea of how the interpretation was done. But also archaeology, when beginning from evidence arrives to an inference, interprets data; for this reason archaeologists must be careful trying to explain the background culture in the present they have and which part of the evidence they focused: an objective interpretation is impossible [5]. History uses archaeology also for the periods

when written documents were not available, particularly prehistory, but more extensively for any period for which there are no documents available.

Archaeology is a humanistic discipline in its purposes, but it uses the methods of science and for this reason is also a science. An archaeologist must study the evidence available, if any, and formulate ideas, or a hypothesis. At this point the archaeologist needs to test the hypothesis by looking a second time at the evidence or trying to find evidence that can support it. The last, more important step, is to arrive at a valid inference that could explain both the evidence found and the more generic theme from which that particular study began. What is really important is the final inference, not the correctness of the hypothesis or the discovery of new materials. This last thing was the main purpose at the dawn of archaeology as a science, but now is only one of the "exciting and surprising" things that archaeology can provide.

The purposes of archaeology today are more sophisticated than a few years ago. Archaeologists are more interested in the behaviour of those who made and used certain artefacts. They continue to be interested in the material objects themselves and in what these can say about an ancient civilisation, but now they are also concerned with the comprehension of the society behind the material evidence. They want to know the ancient society in all its aspects: how human beings lived and survived in a certain time and area and the nature of their social organisation. This includes the religious beliefs, the technologies known, the family structure and the relationships with other societies, and many other things. Modern archaeology focuses its attention on human beings and wants to know more about the people who left such evidence. The evidence is explained when we understand the society which produced it. Archaeology wants to be a bridge with the past, not only an academic science that tries to explain the ancient remains we find today. These however provide us with a direct link to the past. Archaeology also has to analyse the transformations of societies, trying to understand which causes led to a transformation, or a development in the society.

The possibility knowing how ancient people lived, the comparison of the lives of people in different cultures, the art and culture themselves of a civilisation, and the capacity at the end to know humanity better are things for which a person can love this discipline and that give us a first idea about the importance of archaeology. The study of antiquity from the first human beings to the more complex societies of the "classical" period and those which followed it is essential for a better understand of how the "world",

the actual complex of societies, is changing. Modern human beings are basically the same as ancient ones; they only live in a more complex society, product of a continuous development throughout time. This means that the comprehension of a simple society and the reasons for its progress are of the greatest interest for those who want to know our society, and finally ourselves, better. Archaeology is fundamental [6] to build a memory of humanity and to understand human beings. Anthropology without archaeology can only tell us what is a person, how s/he lives, but not explain the actual behaviour, the society in which is living with its development; all these things can be known only thanks to archaeology. But also the simple possibility for the people of a town to know how lived their ancestors [7], is often sufficient to consider archaeology important and to satisfy the archaeologist [8].

Archaeology is not only both a humanistic discipline and a science, it is also a passion. Its main purpose is to understand humanity better, but achieving this many other "minor" purposes, even if initially unforeseen, can be reached. The importance of archaeology can be clearly understood when we answer to a simple question: is there something more significant to know rather than ourselves, our past, our society and finally our lives?

Notes:

[1] Intended as a broad study of humanity, including physical bodies and human cultures.

[2] A past that could arrive near our days in many cases.

[3] In any case each individual has its own ideas. It is practically impossible to be not involved in such a way with an argument so important to be written. We have to remember that especially in ancient times only a few were able to write, and they generally used writing for important things.

[4] With "enemy" I intend all the populations enclosed in the Roman Empire or outside it. For example about the war against Celts, we know what Caesar said, but not what Celts thought, even if they became a part of the Empire itself.

[5] Keith Jenkins' book *Re-thinking history* is very precious to understand the dangers of interpretation.

[6] With the help of history, as we have seen.

[7] They can also then show their history to tourists and earn much money. In the Mediterranean area this is becoming a common practice. Notice that if it began as a trade, this practice is giving many benefits other than money: people realise the importance of culture, can understand the contemporary world better knowing their past and the origin of many traditions or objects or uses; there is also an all new attention for the conservation of the archaeological evidence. These last things are surely happening in these last years at least in Italy.

[8] Each time an archaeologist can see evidence, I mean that a new part of the past is rediscovered while a part of the present is understood. The archaeologist is the first person who has the possibility to do this.

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