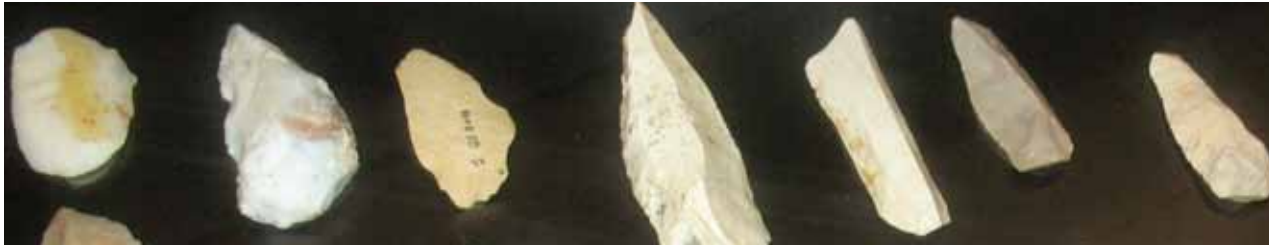


Archaeology at Queensland Museum

Fact Sheet



Stone Tools on display in Dandiiri Maiwar Exhibition, Queensland Museum, South Bank. Image: QM, Geraldine Mate.

Introduction

Archaeology is the study of the material remains left behind by people to reconstruct past life-ways and human behaviour. Archaeologists gather information by studying material remains lying on, above or below the ground. They undertake excavations and surveys and record any material found during these activities. Most of the remains found in archaeological sites are of hard and durable materials such as stone, bone and shell. Softer materials such as wood, string, seeds and fibres are mostly lost to the archaeological record, as are the social rules and the cultural context within which the objects were first made.

Archaeological Techniques

Archaeological remains can be discovered in a number of ways. Many are known of by local people. Others have been discovered through systematic surveying across a landscape. Some sites are not visible on the surface and are located using geophysical techniques such as Ground Penetrating Radar, and Electrical Resistivity. Most often, a great deal of research is done prior to searching for a site. This might include talking to Traditional Owners about the use of their land, or searching in the archives for the historical records of a place. Only then do archaeologists venture out to locate remnant sites.



Excavation at Commissariat Stores. Image: QM, Richard Robins.

To study these remains, archaeologists use a range of techniques including excavations and surveys. Excavation involves the systematic digging or removing of the deposits of a site. Deposits are removed in stratigraphic layers if present, or in arbitrary levels known as spits. This allows archaeologists to reconstruct the sequence of events at a site. It is generally assumed that more recent deposits will have been laid down on top of older ones. However, archaeologists also look for evidence of activities such as digging or intrusions into deposits which may affect the order of the deposits. These may be evident from changes in the texture and colour of the sediment in the layer or the artefacts located in the layer. As each layer is removed, each artefact or find is carefully recorded and labelled according to its excavation unit. It is important to record the context of each artefact as excavation by its nature is a destructive technique and destroys the context of the material remains within the site. Archaeologists then analyse

the artefacts to identify human activities and their sequence across the site.

Surveys involve systematically walking across the ground to locate sites and material remains. Archaeologists and others walk in spread out lines or corridors (called transects) across the study area to ensure good coverage of the study area. As finds or artefacts are located, they are usually marked with coloured flags or tape. Once a transect has been covered, the location and context of each artefact and site is recorded. If it is within the scope of the study, artefacts may be collected.

Whether undertaking excavations or surveys, archaeologists record the context of the sites being studied. Such information includes the site location, nearby water sources, the surrounding vegetation and landforms, slope, soil in the area, geological sources and geology of the area, and any disturbances to the site. This information helps to build a picture of the history and activities of people at the site. Archaeologists also accurately record the locality of the site and any transects or excavation squares or trenches, so that other archaeologists and interested parties can access and reconstruct the information.

Australian Archaeology

Australia has an archaeological record extending over many thousands of years, from the first arrival of people around 50,000 years ago. Archaeological remnants are found across Australia from the desert to the sea and include sites from earliest occupation to remnants of World War II activities. These remnants of our cultural heritage can be intensively studied both in situ and in laboratories.

Archaeology is important as:

- it gives people a link to the past and their identity
- it helps reconstruct information on the past
- places and objects of cultural heritage significance should be preserved for present and future generations
- there is a legal obligation to protect places of cultural heritage significance.

Archaeologists have a role in the protection and management of cultural heritage and undertake archaeological surveys and excavations prior to development taking place in an area. The purpose of these surveys or excavations is to establish whether any places or objects of significance are located in the area, and to recommend management and protection strategies to conserve them. A place or object may have different types of significance, including:

- research (including archaeological) significance
- historic significance
- aesthetic significance
- social significance
- Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander significance.

The level of significance can also vary. For example, the object or place may have world, national, or local significance.

When undertaking surveys or excavations for Indigenous sites, the archaeologist consults with the appropriate Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander communities or peoples. By gathering Indigenous knowledge and information on the remains and sites, and looking at this information in combination with the material remains, archaeologists piece together a rich and detailed picture of the past.

Queensland Museum's Archaeology collections

You can find examples of archaeological material on display in Queensland Museum but there is a much larger collection behind the scenes. The archaeological material collected and housed by Queensland Museum represents different themes and branches of archaeology from across the world.

Our **Australian Archaeology** collections include artefacts and archaeological material from various archaeological surveys and excavations. In Australia, archaeological sites include:

- Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander sites and places such as stone artefact scatters, middens, rock art sites occupation sites, quarries, ceremonial sites and grinding grooves
- Historic sites such as buildings, whaling stations and walls
- Maritime sites such as shipwrecks.



Stone tools held in museum collection. Image: QM, Geraldine Mate.

There are over 200,000 artefacts and items in our Australian Archaeology collections.

The artefacts and material collected or excavated from **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sites and places** include stone artefacts and tools, ochre, charcoal, animal remains, shell material and artefacts, plant remains, raw material and boomerangs. These artefacts and archaeological material may have been found and collected in an archaeological context, or collected, surveyed or excavated from Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander sites under permit under the relevant cultural heritage legislation. The majority of these materials and stone artefacts are from Queensland. The oldest dated archaeological material held by the Museum comes from Kenniff Cave on Mt Moffatt Station in the Carnarvon Ranges — around 16,000 Before Present (BP).

The artefacts and items from **historic sites** have been collected from various surveys and excavations of historic sites include a range of objects and material such as bottles, glass, buttons, ceramics, gun cartridges, structural remains of buildings, and tins. You may be familiar with some of the places that have been excavated around Brisbane — the Commissariat Store in William Street, South Bank Cultural Precinct, Victoria Park and Queens Park, and George Street (opposite the Casino).



Child's shoe from Victoria Park. Image: QM, Jennifer Blakely.

Our maritime archaeology collections are largely held by the Museum of Tropical Queensland in Townsville. This includes material collected from HMS Pandora which sank on a reef while approaching the Torres Strait.

Material from **overseas** held in our Archaeology collection includes artefacts and archaeological material from Prehistory and Classical archaeological sites.

Our **Prehistoric Archaeology** collection includes artefacts from Palaeolithic and Neolithic sites in Europe (especially United Kingdom, Ireland, Denmark, Switzerland and France) and Africa (particularly Somalia). It also includes artefacts from Native American Indian sites in the United States of America, Canada and Mexico.

Our **Classical Archaeology** collection includes material collected from sites in Rome and Sicily, Greece and the Middle East including Egypt, Pakistan, Israel and Palestine. This material consists largely of household items, lamps, bottles, pottery, pottery fragments, vases, items of personal adornment and items such as funeral goods.

How do I become an archaeologist?

People become Archaeologists in a number of ways, such as learning by experience, or transferring from another profession. However the best route to a career in archaeology is to gain qualifications by studying archaeology at university. This can be combined with practical experience gained through fieldwork. Universities, Museums, public bodies and some private organisations offer laboratory and field experience opportunities from time to time, allowing people to take part in survey, excavation and research projects. To become a professional archaeologist, it is usual to have at least an honours degree in archaeology. Some archaeologists go on to research, but many work out in the field, uncovering our past.



Recording artefacts in the field. Image: Nick Burrell.

Further Information

The Burra Charter – available on the web <<http://www.icomos.org/australia/>>

Can I really have a career in Archaeology? – available on the web at <<http://www.socialscience.uq.edu.au/docs/Archaeology-career.pdf>>

Australian Archaeological Association – Information available on the web at <<http://www.australianarchaeologicalassociation.com.au/>>

Balme, J. and Patterson, A. (Eds), 2006. *Archaeology in Practice: A Student Guide to Archaeological Analyses*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.

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