



World archaeology

Archaeology: an Overview

Phil Perkins

Archaeology has a distinctive position as a subject because it is essentially interdisciplinary, drawing upon the Humanities, Arts, Social Sciences, Sciences or indeed any other subject that might be relevant in order to investigate the human past through its material remains. Just as now, people in the past created all kinds of material traces of their lives and, because of this, archaeology can study literally anything that people have done. This freedom enables archaeologists to study things from any time in the past and, possibly more importantly, to evaluate how things have changed from one time to the next. We can also compare and contrast human life from any part of the world where people have lived. Our challenge as archaeologists is to piece together those details in order to write the story of how, and hopefully why, human societies have developed in the way they have across the world.

Norman Hammond

Doing an archaeological reconstruction is a bit like doing a jigsaw puzzle when you haven't got any of the straight-edged bits around the edge, and when you have got ninety per cent of the pieces missing and you haven't got the picture on the box top to show you what it's like.

Phil Perkins

This is Norman Hammond, Professor of Archaeology at Boston University. His particular expertise is the ancient Mayan civilisation. He has excavated a village and palace at Cayo in Belize dating back to 1300 BC. The site clearly shows how much of daily life can be pieced together from human remains.

Norman Hammond

We have obviously got the physical framework of the palace itself. We then got the artefacts from the domestic life of the palace, discarded in dumps behind them, including both fine pottery that would have been used for feasting, and storage and cooking pottery, and from the size of the vessels we can reconstruct how many people would have been served. From the animal bones and plant remains in those rubbish heaps we know what they were eating. We then have portrayals of palace life on painted vases. The pictures on them show us Maya rulers receiving guests, partying, getting high on hallucinogens, and so on.

Phil Perkins

There are other sites, though, where the lifestyle of the people is revealed by the absence of finds.

Trevor Watkins

We excavated very carefully the last five centimetres above the plaster floor and it had absolutely nothing in it. We didn't even have hearths. We had scorch marks where charcoal had been burning in a hearth but no actual charcoal.

Phil Perkins

Trevor Watkins is Professor of Archaeology based at the University of Edinburgh. Here he is describing excavation work on one of the earliest villages, dating back to about ten thousand years BC, in modern Iraq called Qermez Dere.

Trevor Watkins

They organised their settlement; different activities took place in different parts of the settlement. They dumped all the debris of life in another part of the site. Another thing that they zoned was all the food processing. By far the great majority of all the ground-stone implements that we found – the heavy equipment which is necessary for grinding wheat into flour, for example, or pounding things in a mortar and pestle – were in one part of the site, associated with a different kind of structure, which was unlike their houses. Not very helpful to the archaeologist because of course it doesn't let you find out what precisely they were doing inside the houses. You can only put it together cumulatively from all the remains that you have got.

Phil Perkins

As well as examining the remains of houses and refuse, archaeology also investigates the physical remains of humans. The Maya provide us with a vivid example.

Norman Hammond

We found nearly two hundred burials all together, and the most unusual ones were two mass burials; and these were sacrificial offerings; and all of these with one possible exception were young to middle-aged men – exactly the sort of people who would serve as warriors in the community. Exactly the sort of people that the community could least afford to lose. And for that reason we have interpreted these as burials of captured warriors from another community.

Phil Perkins

But it's not just the human bodies. The objects that were buried alongside also provide clues about how societies were structured. An exceptional recent discovery is in Egypt at the site of Hierakonpolis, dating back to 3600 BC. Dr Renee Friedman of the British Museum is leading the excavations there.

Renee Friedman

What's amazing is an early cemetery which is really blowing us away, is that amongst these really humungous tombs that we are finding now is that they are also burying with them and around them an array of exotic animals. So we have found the burial of an elephant, an African elephant, that was buried like a human. He was wrapped in linen and he was given grave goods. He had a bracelet. He had eye make up. He had everything that a human would have, and a rich human would have. He also had a huge tomb, as you can imagine. We also have an aurochs and baboons. We have a little wildcat, again buried specially around these elite burials. So they are taking their world with them.

Phil Perkins

Piecing together a coherent account of the remains of the human past is key to our understanding of how societies, including our own, have developed. But why is archaeology the best approach to writing that story?

Chris Scarre

Archaeology is ideally placed because wherever people have lived they have produced material remains – places they have lived in, settlement sites, or objects used in daily lives or burials or whatever it might be – and that enables us to look at the diversity of these practices and the diversity of technologies and ways of life across the whole global canvas.

Phil Perkins

Professor Chris Scarre, based at the University of Durham, is the editor of *The Human Past*.

Chris Scarre

A lot of what we read about other countries and about the past is based on written documents and on historical sources. Archaeology encourages us to look at the past slightly differently. For one reason, it has a very very long time perspective. It starts with the very earliest humans and goes really up to the present day. So it means we can study societies which even in recent times did not have written records, and that enables us to look at the recent past, or more distant past even, of places like Africa or Australia on an even footing with Europe or the Near East or areas that we know had cities and writing and so on for several thousand years.

Phil Perkins

Archaeology then is not just about creating a better version of history that is based upon more than just written documents. It is about enabling a different kind of story to be written; a more diverse story, a story of human cultural development that is written from more than one viewpoint.