

# Some Frequently Asked Questions About Archaeology

Compiled by R. MacKay and members of the Ottawa Chapter of the Ontario Archaeological Society

## Introduction

People don't often get the opportunity to see archaeologists at work, so when they get the chance to talk to an archaeologist, they are often full of questions. Here, we provide a sampling of real questions archaeologists have been asked, in no particular order, along with answers based on what our members and professional archaeologists have suggested. We hope you will find them helpful. We thank Nick Adams, Chris J-Andersen, Tom Ballantine and Sue Bazely for editing, and suggestions on the final draft.

## What kind of dinosaur bones have you found?

Actually, archaeologists do not look for dinosaurs. That is the job of the paleontologist. Paleontology involves the study of ancient life forms, including but not only the study of dinosaurs. Archaeology involves the study of human culture through the examination of the things they made and left behind as well as research into how they changed their surroundings. Examples of archaeological finds might include objects made of stone, stone projectile points, coins, ceramics, toys, glass, and metal objects. Earthworks or stone foundations would also be considered to be archaeological in nature.

Although there are some similarities in the techniques used in paleontology and archaeology, these two sciences are worlds apart. Sometimes archaeological work includes working with the bones of animals and people, but those bones are rarely fossils. Of course, as a scientist, if an archaeologist did find some dinosaur bones, he or she would be quite excited and would report the find to a paleontologist for study.

## Have you found any treasure yet?

While some people only associate archaeology with sunken treasure from ships, or the discovery of rare gems in an ancient tomb, the reality of archaeology is much more commonplace. While it is true that sometimes people have buried "treasure", including gold, and that sometimes archaeologists have studied such deposits, most of the time archaeologists find objects and the other evidence that represents the life of the common person. Archaeology is not about treasure hunting, but about understanding the lives of people in the past. It is knowledge that archaeologists find to be most valuable.

## Is there still a lot of work in this field of employment these days?

Yes, there is, but there are fewer archaeologists on the street than are represented by most other jobs. Archaeological investigations are conducted every year because of heritage laws which were written to protect, among other things, archaeological sites. Most major building projects, be they development of a sub-division, or construction of a highway, require an archaeological assessment. Only a professional consulting archaeologist can carry out that kind of Cultural Resource Management assessment. The consulting archaeologists can't do all the work by themselves, so they often hire people with archaeological experience to help them.

It should be noted that while it is true to say there is much work being done in archaeology in Ontario, a distinction must be made between research archaeology which is undertaken primarily as an academic inquiry (usually at the university or museum level), and the much more prevalent Cultural Resource

Management archaeology which is generally conducted by consultant archaeologists on behalf of developers to meet government requirements. The latter industry is quite competitive.

### **What is the best part about being an archaeologist?**

A favorite part about being an archaeologist, for many archaeologists who answered this question, has to do with the people they meet, the travel involved, and the fact that one day is almost never like the next. Some archaeologists have said that they enjoy anticipation of discovering something that was previously unknown.

### **How do archaeologists become interested in this career?**

Some people stumble onto archaeology as a career after they have tried a few other things. Some learn about archaeology through reading books, or have friends who had become archaeologists. Some people start off learning about archaeology as a casual interest, and then get very serious about it. Other people just know that archaeology is the career for them from an early age.

### **What skills do you need to become successful in this career?**

Archaeologists need to be able to adapt to change fairly rapidly, think on their feet, write well, and get along with lots of different people, such as colleagues, employees, and landowners (who must give permission to go on their land).

### **How long does it take to study an archaeological site?**

Archaeological projects vary a great deal. In some cases, excavations at a single site can last years or decades, while in others, a few hours investigation is all that's required.

### **How much money can you make in this occupation?**

Income depends on whether you are in business for yourself or working for an institution such as a museum or government agency. One must realize that for most archaeologists, employment involves short-term contracts with no employment benefits. According to one archaeologist consulted, "If you get an advanced degree (MA or PhD), you can earn enough to have a house with a mortgage and raise a family, but archaeology has never been the place to get rich." Another archaeologist has suggested that "archaeology is best undertaken by those of independent means." On average, an experienced archaeologist can anticipate earning about as much as the average teacher.

### **Is there a lot of reading and writing involved with this job?**

Excellent reading and writing skills are an essential part of being an archaeologist. Reading is an important part of research, and since all archaeological work at any level in Ontario requires that detailed reports be submitted to the Ministry of Tourism and Culture, and archaeologists are also expected to publish the results of their work, writing is too.

### **What is the worst part about your job?**

A number of archaeologists have pointed out that archaeology season in Ontario coincides to a great extent with fly season. There is usually a short period of time between the thawing of the ground and the onset of black flies, at least in some parts of Ontario. While at first they just annoy the archaeologist by flying around and getting between one's glasses and eyes, they soon graduate to the biting habit. Any exposed flesh is fair game. While the black flies are out in full force, the mosquitoes come along, and

sometimes the sand flies, which are so small that they are sometimes called “no-see-ums”. Later, one might be exposed to deer flies and horse flies. Toward the end of the archaeology season there are sometimes a few black flies and sand flies hanging on (at least there were last year), and then there is a short period without flies, at least until the snow flies. Archaeologists must also be able to cope with poison ivy, prickly ash, and whatever other adverse conditions “mother nature” might throw at them.

Other archaeologists have pointed out that the worst part of archaeology is watching a site be destroyed because archaeological work was not required when it should have been, or was not done as extensively as they think it should have been. Not everybody in society holds our cultural heritage as a high priority when compared with “progress”, and some clients don’t really want an archaeologist to find anything on their development property because it costs money to do more archaeological work or because it might delay a project. Sometimes a landholder will seek the opinion of a second archaeologist, if they do not like the recommendations made by the first. It is also frustrating when an archaeological site seems to fall “between the cracks” between government agencies or different levels of government. Sometimes it appears that agencies claim to only be involved with certain aspects of regulating archaeology or development, when the protection of an important site and its cultural heritage value seemingly are not addressed.

Other archaeologists have mentioned that the ability to use common sense and their professional judgement in determining how they conduct archaeological investigations has been diminished, with increased regulation and prescription of standards and guidelines by the Ministry of Tourism and Culture.

### **How many hours a day do you work?**

The work day really varies. If you're in the field, some days last as long as the sunlight does; but that is under unusual circumstances. Usually labour laws restrict a work crew from working more than eight hours in any one given day. In many locations, archaeology in the field is a seasonal activity, for both the professional and the avocational archaeologist. Unless a person is employed in the off-season to write reports, most archaeological work only takes place during a fairly intensive field season, usually in the summer. For the non-professional, job availability is usually restricted to this field season.

### **In what type of weather do you work?**

Because the field season is generally intense and short, archaeologists conduct field work in all kinds of weather. Archaeologists in Ontario are not supposed to work when the ground is frozen or snow covered, because these conditions prevent them from performing their jobs properly. Archaeologists do pay attention to safety issues and do not work when conditions are too severe (lightning storms or during flooding, for example).

### **What advice would you give for someone interested in exploring this career?**

First, join your local archaeological society, where you will meet others with your same interest and learn about local opportunities. Some people choose to become archaeologists as a career and others do it as a hobby. In Ontario there is an organization of professionals and amateurs called the Ontario Archaeological Society ( [www.ontarioarchaeology.on.ca](http://www.ontarioarchaeology.on.ca) ). The OAS has a central office in Toronto and a number of chapters spread throughout the province, in Toronto, London, Peterborough, Ottawa, Huronia, Thunder Bay, Windsor, and Hamilton. Some of those chapters have their own web sites which outline when there are winter meetings (usually a talk about archaeology work done somewhere). There are often links to other archaeology web sites as well. Membership in the OAS includes a newsletter.

Some field opportunities are available, usually through McMaster University or Trent University. The Metropolitan Toronto Conservation Authority runs a three week Archaeology Field School at Boyd Conservation Area. Younger children, or even students in high school, might benefit from attending the Catarauqui Archaeological Research Foundation “Can You Dig It” camp, in Kingston, during the summer.

Often there is archaeological information available in museums. If you happen to be in the Kingston area, you could visit the Kingston Archaeological Centre, operated by the Cataraqui Archaeological Research Foundation. They also have an interesting web site (<http://www.carf.info/>), and they have a small museum which explains some aspects of archaeology, as it relates to the Kingston area. Of course many larger cities have even bigger museums, such as the Museum of Civilization in Ottawa, or the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, or the Museum of Ontario Archaeology in London, Ontario.

### **My child wants to become an archaeologist. How many years of schooling does this job take?**

The amount of schooling required depends on what kind of job your child hopes to get.

If a person plans to teach as a university professor he or she will need a Ph.D. Usually that is undertaken after completion of a Master's Degree. If a person plans to run archaeological investigations as a principal archaeologist for a cultural resource management company or as a consulting archaeologist with their own small business, he or she will need an M.A. That would generally mean getting an undergraduate degree, usually in archaeology, and completing a Master's degree in archaeology (six years after secondary school). There are other opportunities to do archaeology as well, working as support crew, for a professional archaeologist, which require less education.

Regulation of archaeology in Ontario is carried out by the Ministry of Tourism and Culture. Archaeology can only be done by a person who carries an archaeological license. A person running an archaeological business requires a professional license. Obtaining a professional license requires both education and experience.

There are a number of universities that offer degree programs in archaeology, in both Canada and the United States. Information on what courses are required for entry into undergraduate programs in archaeology at each university is available in the university course-selection calendars located in the Student Services Office in all Secondary Schools. Those should be consulted when selecting courses to take in the senior years. The information may also be on-line through the Internet. A student should aim to do well in secondary school, in all courses, so as to get his or her pick of undergraduate programs.

A requirement for a professional or consulting license in Ontario is a certain amount of experience in doing archaeology in the field, under supervision, and in helping to lead archaeological work, under supervision. Some of that could be obtained by volunteering on digs and keeping a record of his or her experience.

### **Is there any other way to become a paid archaeologist?**

It is not possible to get paid to do consulting work in archaeology in Ontario without having a consulting license from the Ministry of Tourism and Culture. There are other opportunities to do archaeology which require less education, such as working as support crew for a professional archaeologist. Archaeology crew members are often needed to assist the archaeologist with excavation, cleaning and labeling of artifacts, and many other tasks. However, as with all positions, the more education and experience you have the more likely you are to be the successful applicant.

### **Can a person be an archaeologist without getting paid?**

There are also two other levels of archaeology license: avocational and applied research. A person, who can find a professional archaeologist or applied research archaeologist to be their mentor, can work with that archaeologist and gain experience and then apply for what is called an avocational license (meaning

it is not a person's occupation). The first level of this license would likely allow a person to collect artifacts from the surface of the ground only, but eventually would allow for some small excavations called shovel tests. After five years of experience as an avocational archaeologist, and with the recommendation of a professional archaeologist or applied research archaeologist, or entry into a Master's degree program at a university, one can apply to get an Applied Research License. This permits a person to excavate for research purposes, but does not permit that person to get paid as a consulting or professional archaeologist. It should be noted that, generally, liability issues and ethics of fair competition prevent volunteers from participating on a Cultural Resource Management project.

### **What's the most interesting thing you've ever found?**

That is hard to say, because often the most interesting things are ideas rather than objects. The main reason that most people do archaeology is to learn about the way people lived in the past. They are people who like to learn about all sorts of things, so they find the archaeology to be fun. Part of archaeology is digging, but another part of archaeology is about learning what happened in history. History is not always just about Prime Ministers and movie stars. History is often about the lives of ordinary people like you and your neighbours or classmates. One archaeologist answered, "The next thing I haven't uncovered, yet."

### **Artifacts must be really far down, right?"**

Yes, some are, but most of Ontario's history is closer to the surface than you would expect, only 10-15 cm below the current level of our ground and sometimes less. The depth depends on the landscape and area of the excavation. Generally the older things are further below the surface. Archaeologists look for occupation or activity layers in the soil. The arrangement of these layers is called the stratigraphy of the site. Sometimes artifacts in farmers' fields get all mixed up because of ploughing. To find undisturbed layers and artifacts the archaeologist must excavate below the plough zone.

### **If I see archaeologists working on a site, are they a group of students working on a research project?**

Most of the time, the archaeologists who are visible and working in the field are professionals who work for an archaeological firm and are licensed and/or employed to do archaeology. Sometimes research projects, conducted by university students and others who have an archaeological license, are carried out in public places, but this is less common.

### **How do you know where to dig (in reference to a particular site)?**

Archaeologists usually test as much of the site as they can and based on the results of their testing they select a particular area that seems promising or might best help to understand what they want to know.

### **How deep to you dig?**

Generally, archaeologists dig until they are sure there is nothing more to be found, usually into what seems to be the sterile soil layer at the bottom (until the excavation is disturbance, feature, and/or artifact free)... and then they dig some more just to make sure there is nothing hidden even deeper.

### **What do you do with all the things you find?**

Just because you dig something up, it isn't a case of "finder's keepers". Archaeological sites may only be disturbed under license, and anything removed from the ground (on or under the surface) must ultimately be deposited in a suitable public institution such as a museum or a properly-equipped First Nation Interpretive Centre.

That having been said, after an artifact is brought back from the site, it is cleaned, identified, and then the archaeologist uses their experience and knowledge to interpret it; they make up a story that explains what it all is and means. It is stored away, so that if anybody else wants to have a look and make up another story they can.

### **Are there sites on the Internet where I can learn about archaeology in Ontario?**

There is an excellent summary of the archaeology of Ontario at the Ontario Archaeological Society web page. The specific index page is <http://www.ontarioarchaeology.on.ca/summary/contents.php>

### **I live in the Ottawa Valley. Are there Internet resources that can tell me something about the archaeology of the area?**

There is a very good web site produced by the Ottawa Chapter of the Ontario Archaeological Society. Included on that site are links to overviews of archaeological work that has been done in the Ottawa Valley.

It is recommended that you take a look at the "Land of the Spirits" website in the Virtual Museum of Canada, which was assembled by the Friends of Bonnechere Parks as a follow-up to field research carried out by various archaeologists and the Ottawa Chapter of the Ontario Archaeological Society. All of this archaeology took place on the Bonnechere River. The site includes a form of simulated dig, and explanations about a number of artifacts.

That URL is <http://www.virtualmuseum.ca/Exhibitions/Spirits/English/index.html>

### **What is a Public Archaeology Day?**

A public archaeology day is an event that gives members of the public an opportunity to learn about archaeology through activities and/or displays. For example, the Ottawa Chapter of the Ontario Archaeological Society assists with cultural heritage programs in Bonnechere Park by annually providing for park visitors a Saturday morning of exposure to displays about archaeology and past First Nation culture as understood through archaeology, as well as a few hands-on activities such as making pots from clay. Programs vary according to availability and expertise of chapter volunteers. Traditionally an evening program is offered on an archaeological topic of relevance to the area. Questions about archaeology are encouraged.

**Please let us know if these questions and answers have helped you understand more about archaeology by contacting the Ottawa Chapter of the OAS at [contact@ottawaaoas.ca](mailto:contact@ottawaaoas.ca)**