Archaeology Vocabulary List

**Accelerator Mass Spectrometry (AMS):** A process that can use a very small amount of organic (plant or animal) material to obtain a date for when that material was burned or gathered.

**Absolute Dating:** Methods that determine an age at a fixed point in number of years.

**Agriculture:** The process of intentionally planting or fostering the growth of specific seeds, caring for the plants, harvesting them to eat, and saving seeds to plant for the next year.

**Archaeobotanist:** A type of archaeologist that specializes in the study of plant remains.

**Archaeologist:** A social scientist trained to do archaeology.

**Archaeology:** The scientific study of material remains from human activity used to reconstruct the behavior of past cultures.

**Artifact:** An object produced or used by people (e.g. spear points, chert chips, pottery, china and glass, gun parts, bricks, food remains).

**Associations:** Two or more archaeological items (such as artifacts or features) that occur together.

**Catalog:** A systematic record of collected artifacts and materials from an archaeological site.

**Chert:** A type of smooth, fine-grained stone used for making stone tools (often mistakenly confused with flint).

**Context:** The position and location in which artifacts were deposited and located within an archaeological site; it also includes the other artifacts and material found around the artifact.

**Cultivation:** The process of humans encouraging plants by tending them and removing other competitive species.

**Culture:** Patterns of behavior that human groups invent, learn, and teach.

**Diagnostic:** Artifacts are described as diagnostic when they are typical of a particular culture; they are artifacts that represent the behavioral expression of a particular group of people at particular points in time.

**Domesticated:** A plant or animal that has been modified by long term, human interaction intended to benefit the humans that use it. This usually includes cultivation and selective breeding, sometimes leading to the plant or animal being dependant on humans for survival.

**Excavation:** The systematic digging that archaeologists do to collect information by uncovering and recording artifacts, features, and associations. The site where this occurs is commonly known as “A Dig”.

**Features:** Material remains that cannot be transported such as fire pits, storage pits, wall foundations, and post holes. These are very important to archaeologists.

**Flotation:** A process used by archaeologists to separate charred plant remains from soil using agitated water and small screens.

**Grid:** A set of evenly spaced north-south lines that cross a set of evenly spaced east-west lines, creating squares, each of which has a separate numeric designation. These allow archaeologists to carefully map out their excavations.

**Historic:** Existing after humans began written records; opposite of prehistoric.

**Horticulture:** The process of cultivating plants. Archaeologists often use the term horticulture to describe a subsistence strategy that incorporates aspects of both hunting and gathering and agriculture.

**Indigenous:** Being native or naturally found in an area.

**Macro and Micro-botanical:** Small (micro) or large (macro) pieces of plant remains. Macrobotanicals are most often best preserved when they are charred.

**Mound:** A human rather than naturally-made hill of earth.

**Prehistoric:** Existing before written records.

**Preservation:** The process of taking care of something to make sure it is not accidentally or intentionally damaged or destroyed, or the natural conditions that allow for something to survive to the present day relatively intact.

**Projectile Point:** A pointed object used as the tip of a spear or arrow.

**Radiocarbon Dating:** A method of absolute dating to determine the age of organic remains from the decay of radioactive carbon.

**Sherds/Shards:** Broken pieces of pottery.

**Archaeological Site:** A place where human activity resulted in features or deposits of artifacts, such as hunting camps, mills, farmsteads, villages, towns, battlefields, etc.

**Stratigraphy:** Cultural and geological layers of soil, artifacts, or architecture found in the ground.

**Subsistence strategy:** The yearly plan of a group of people to obtain enough of specific foods to eat. How people find their food.

**Taphonomy:** The study of the conditions and processes by which an archaeological site becomes preserved or changed.

**Zooarchaeologist/Archaeozoologist:** A type of archaeologist that specializes in the study of animal remains.