

Personal Snapshot: One Archaeologist's View of A Career in Archaeology

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1) Typical daily routine/work environment/work related hazards:

Archaeologists do three main kinds of work: excavation, research, and teaching. Excavation is done almost exclusively outside and, for the most part, only during good weather (i.e. the summer months). An excavation season (generally called a "dig") usually lasts from one week to three months, during which time work proceeds six days/week. Archaeologists conduct excavations all over the world, from the Arctic regions to tropical jungles to modern cities, and the timing of their seasons depends on local weather conditions as well as other factors, such as national holidays.

On a typical day during the dig, an archaeologist gets up pretty early—usually by 5 a.m. This is so she/he can begin outside work as soon as the sun comes up, and quit by noon. In most places, it is too hot to work outside in the afternoon. Actual digging is both hard and often tedious work. The archaeologist must break up and clear away lots of dirt, usually by using a pick-axe, large shovel or hoe, buckets, and a wheelbarrow. As soon as she/he finds something, however, the large tools are replaced by smaller ones, such as trowels, small picks, wisk brooms and dust pans, and even toothbrushes and dental picks. Archaeologists alternate hard and fast digging with careful, slow cleaning. This means that archaeologists must be in good physical condition, have stamina, and be able to move and bend easily. Of course archaeologists must also not mind getting dirty and hot, and they should enjoy being outside.

Around noon, archaeologists usually stop digging and eat lunch. Then they shower and rest for an hour or so. By mid-afternoon they start working again. Their afternoon activities usually include cleaning, studying, and writing about the artifacts they found in the morning. Sometimes they may return to the site in order to draw or map architecture (i.e. houses, walls) uncovered during that day's work. Afternoon work often lasts until dinner time, and sometimes continues after that throughout the evening. Finally, it's lights out, and a good night's sleep, so that everyone can get up early again the next day.

There are many potential work related hazards on a dig. These include the usual hazards that come with being outdoors—insects, sunburn, sunstroke, dehydration, and sudden weather problems. There are also some hazards specific to digs, such as possible injury from tools or large rocks, or falling into one of the deep holes created on the site.

2) Positions/job availability/salary and benefits

Most archaeologists do not work full-time at excavation. In fact, an archaeologist's usual position is as a professor in a university, and this is where she/he carries out the other two parts of the job: research and teaching. Archaeologists can work in one of several university departments, depending on their speciality. So, I belong to a classics department, because I specialize in the archaeology of ancient Greece and Rome, whose languages, literatures, and

cultures are the subject domain of classics. Archaeologists who work in North and South America, or prehistoric Europe, or the Far East, generally belong to anthropology departments, and some archaeologists who concentrate especially on Israel in biblical times work in religion departments.

The availability of university positions varies from year to year. In general, there are anywhere from one to five positions annually in the United States, and the competition for them is quite fierce. This situation has not changed much since I entered graduate school (1980) or received my Ph.D. (1988). However, every generation or so, things do change somewhat. So, in the 1960's to mid-1970's, there were many more positions, as well as less competition for them. Most people who finished graduate school were able to get university jobs. Since then, universities have been steadily down-sizing, which explains the current situation. I believe that in another 10 or 15 years, the pendulum will swing the other way again, and some universities will expand (not to levels of the 1960's, but bigger than they are now). So I think that it will become a bit easier for people to get jobs in this field, though this does not mean that everybody who wants to will be able to.

Starting salaries for assistant professors (this is the beginning rank) also vary. At large midwestern universities, they range from about \$43,000 to \$47,000/year. At some schools on the east and west coasts, where the costs of living are higher, starting salaries can be around \$50,000. Full professors (a rank usually attained after 10-20 years) can earn from \$65,000 to \$90,000/year. Benefits almost always include reduced rates on health insurance, payment into a retirement fund, and some additional money to travel to conferences once or twice/year. In addition, some schools now offer their faculty's children reduced or free tuition if the children attend that same school.

3) Training and education

It takes a long time to learn all the information necessary to become an archaeologist. There are two kinds of learning: from books, and from experience on an excavation. The book learning comes from college and graduate school; you need this latter part in order to teach in a university, for which you must have the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.). Earning this takes from six to nine years after college. You can't rush graduate school; many of the courses that you need to take depend on having first learned things in other courses. Graduate school has three main parts: taking lots of courses (usually for two – four years), taking lots of exams (which may require studying for up to one year), and finally, writing a dissertation, which is like a researching and writing a book and can take from two to four years as well.

Students get their excavation experience during the summer, when they travel to digs. Lots of digs are happy to have student volunteers, though they usually charge money for room and board (and sometimes tuition). This is the part of an archaeologist's education that can be hurried, in a way: you can start working on digs even when in high school, and continue when in college. If you end up going on to graduate school, you will already have lots of experience, and be able to advance much faster.

There are all sorts of extra skills that are useful to archaeologists, such as technical drawing, surveying, photography, and computer knowledge. All of these are necessary on an excavation, so if someone knows how to do one or more, that person is even more useful.

4) Satisfaction/stress level/personal time

My job is incredibly satisfying! I love all aspects of what I do, including the parts that I have no choice about (like long airplane rides). All three parts of an archaeologist's job are fun for me. The excavations are great, because I am outside and working with other people, and we are discovering new things together, which is very exciting and interesting. The research is great, because I am curious and like to learn all sorts of stuff, so I enjoy being in the library, trying to figure out things and write it all down in a way that makes sense to others. And I also love to teach, because students generally get very excited about this subject, and it's fun to be involved in that excitement, and help it along.

I suppose there is some stress involved in my job, in that I always have more things to do than time to do them in, so I am usually behind in something. But I am philosophical about this: most people in my position have the same problem, and we are all only human. I work

as hard as I can, and try to do as well as I can, and after that I don't worry. It's true that some things don't get done as well as others, or that at the end of a dig season more remains to be done. Some people get upset by these things. But archaeology is not a life-or-death kind of job: it's more like a hobby that some people are lucky enough to get paid to do. So it's not the stressful kind of job that medicine or law can be, since nobody's health or freedom depends on it.

Probably the biggest drawback to this kind of job is that it can take over your life. All those satisfactions that come with being an archaeologist are important, because first of all, it doesn't pay all that well (especially considering how much schooling one needs), and second of all, you can end up devoting much or all of your time to one or another aspect of it. I happen to have two children, so I don't spend all of my time excavating, researching, or teaching. But I have lots of archaeologist friends who are either unmarried or without children, and they do. This is alright, since, for most archaeologists, archaeology is not only their job but also their passion. They are happy to give most or all of their "personal time" to such a career.

5) When can I start?

I began going on excavations the year that I graduated from high school (1973), and I have spent almost every summer since then doing just that. Not all of them were overseas; I have also worked in southern Illinois and in the Chicago area. If you are interested in archaeology as a career, the single best thing that you can do is find out about some excavations in your area. Two sources of information are the state highway department and the local college or university. Most states have a state archaeologist who works in the highway department; that person can let you know if there are any digs that you can volunteer for. There is always some "contract archaeology" (that's archaeology being done on state or federal property and usually paid for by state or federal tax money) happening in every state, especially during the summer months; usually such work is administered through the anthropology department of a nearby university. Sometimes a professor will have a project purely for scientific purposes in the area as well. I have never heard of a project that didn't happily accept volunteer workers, and high-school age students are definitely old enough (I once directed a crew of 10-12 year olds for two weeks, and they were terrific!).

Good luck!