

Myths & Misconceptions

Because of former practices in the discipline, misrepresentation in the media, and long-time stereotypes about people of the past, members of the public, especially youths, often have inaccurate ideas about what archeologists do and the bygone populations that they study.

Myths	Reality
People used to hunt dinosaurs.	Dinosaurs died out 65 million years ago. Fully modern humans (<i>Homo sapiens sapiens</i>) have existed for about 100,000 years, and they have occupied the Americas for about 12,000 years. These first inhabitants hunted “megafauna” (big animals) such as mammoths and mastodons, and they also gathered plants.
Archeologists dig up dinosaurs.	Paleontologists study the fossil remains of extinct animals, including dinosaurs, and geologists study rocks. Archeologists study people of the past through their material remains.
Archeologists spend all of their time digging.	Archeology is more than a dig. Archeologists actually spend a relatively small amount of their time excavating, compared with the time spent in the laboratory, analyzing and interpreting their finds, and preparing written reports about the project. Moreover, some professional archeologists are involved in the management and protection of cultural resources rather than research.
Archeologists prefer to excavate graves.	The study of human remains from an archeological site can provide important details about the diet and health of a population. However, such excavations are delicate and time consuming, as is the conservation and disposition of the remains after their recovery. For these reasons, as well as respect for cultural sensitivities regarding deceased ancestors, archeologists think carefully before unearthing a burial. In addition, federal laws protect the graves of Native Americans.
It’s OK to pick up artifacts because if you don’t someone else will. Besides, the site won’t last long anyway.	Removing artifacts without using proper scientific methods destroys evidence. This is what pot hunters and treasure salvors do. Over time, archeological sites reach a state of equilibrium with their surrounding environment. They do not have to be excavated and actually survive best if left untouched. In addition, federal and state laws prohibit the removal of artifacts from public lands without a permit.

Myths	Reality
Indians who lived in America before Columbus were members of the same tribe of simple people.	Prior to European contact, the Americas were inhabited by hundreds of well-developed cultural groups, many with their own distinct languages. The houses, tools, foods, and other aspects of life differed among these populations because they lived in different environments and met basic needs in culturally unique ways.
Archeologists get to keep any gold that they find.	Professional archeologists do not keep, buy, sell, or trade any artifacts. They believe that objects recovered from a site should be kept together as a collection to be available for future study or display. By law, artifacts recovered from federal or state lands belong to the public and must be maintained on behalf of the public.

Adapted from the Society for American Archaeology Public Education Committee Guidelines