

# Early Modern European Archaeology

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While the archaeology of the early modern period differed substantially from modern archaeology, many in the West practiced archaeology—the study of material culture—in the technical sense. The term "archaeology" was first used in English in the seventeenth century, but most archaeologists would have preferred to call themselves natural philosophers (the early modern term for a scientist) or, more often, antiquarians (those who study ancient material and textual objects). Early modern antiquarians rarely devoted their full time to the study of archaeology, and therefore they were not professionals in the modern sense. Still, they formed societies dedicated to studying ancient material culture, and they published countless books and essays on their discoveries.

Several important events contributed to the development of archaeology in early modern Europe. Perhaps most importantly, the movement that became known as the Renaissance encouraged scholars to meticulously study the remains of classical Rome and, to a lesser extent, Greece. Throughout much of the early modern period, the focus on classical culture was primarily textual analysis. However, a number of scholars, artists, and architects turned their attention to classical statues, temples, and public buildings, particularly those in Rome. Helping to drive their interests were numerous kings, princes, and church officials who spent enormous sums to collect antiquities for their collections. In fact, those with the best collections could point to it as a sign of status. Kings and nobles also became patrons of scholars who, in turn, studied their collections. By the end of the seventeenth century, scholars, kings, and nobles worked together to establish academies and societies dedicated to studying subjects such as natural philosophy, archaeology, and inscriptions. The infrastructure upon which the modern profession of archaeology was built had been established.

Early modern collecting was not limited to Roman and Greek artifacts. Europeans also collected prehistoric objects that they found buried in fields and tumuli throughout Europe and North America. While not always certain how to classify these objects—arrowheads were often thought to be elf-shot or thunderbolts—they displayed them in curiosity cabinets. Importantly, the prehistoric objects that they found were understood within the context of biblical scripture, classical philosophy, and local tradition. Thus, prehistoric remains were always dated according to the biblical 6,000-year timeline. This inhibited the development of stratigraphy, an archaeological tool that links an artifact's age to the geological layer from which it is excavated. Not until the mid-nineteenth century was stratigraphy used widely in archaeological practice.

### > FLINT CERAUNITES

By the eighteenth century, the idea that arrowheads were thunderbolts or elf-shot fell out of favor with many scholars. However, some earlier writers had already suggested this. In this selection, Michele Mercati (1541–1593), an Italian natural philosopher, describes their origins. This passage suggests that antiquarians could study transformations in ancient human societies by analyzing developments in their material culture.

"The 'ceraunite' is common in Italy; it is often called an 'arrow' and is modeled from thin, hard flint into a triangular point. Many believe that they are cast down by lightning; yet those who study history judge that before the use of iron they were struck from very hard flint for the folly of war. Indeed, for the most ancient peoples, pieces of flint served as knives. We read in the holy scriptures of how Sephorah, the wife of Moses,

circumcised her son according to Israelite custom, with a well-sharpened stone. ... In the period we are considering there was no worked iron in lands of the West; boats, houses, and all other works were fashioned with sharpened stones."

—**Jason M. Kelly**

### **Source**

- **Alain, Schnapp, *The Discovery of the Past* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1997), 347.**

From 1492, the European plundering of the Americas brought back artifacts from these continents that were displayed side by side with classical and prehistoric objects. In the wake of Europe's Scientific Revolution of the seventeenth century, natural philosophers increasingly attempted to analyze and classify these objects. Through studying their material cultures, natural philosophers increasingly equated the indigenous peoples of the Americas to the earliest Europeans and peoples of the Near East. Both were seen as primitive, less-civilized versions of early modern Europeans. From this perspective, a theory of cultural evolution developed in the Enlightenment, which privileged European civilization over all others. Thus, archaeology became a tool to justify European imperialism and its so-called civilizing mission into the nineteenth century.

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