



Archaeology: 101

How old is it? Relative Dating

Most people are very surprised at the amount of dirt covering archaeological sites. The artifacts and features that archaeologists study have often been abandoned for hundreds, if not thousands, of years. The weather, animals, vegetation and humans contribute to site burial.

Wind brings dust and debris to cover the remains of a site. Sometimes floods will bring silt and soil. In more dramatic cases, sites may be buried relatively quickly during catastrophic events, the way Pompeii and Herculaneum were covered over by ash and volcanic mud during the eruption of Mount Vesuvius.

Human have built over sites, filling in holes to create a level surface. In addition, it is difficult for anything above ground to survive, so most of what archaeologists find is buried.

Most archaeological sites have layers corresponding to each event that added soil or debris to the site. These layers are called **strata**. In general, the deeper the strata the older it is. As new layers are built up, the layer on top is usually the youngest.

Therefore, if an artifact is found between two layers, one can assume that the artifact is older than the layer above it and younger than the layer below it. This is called **relative dating**. It means that you are not dating the artifact itself, but determining an age based on the layers above and below it.

Archaeologist can use other artifacts found at a site in **relative dating**. For example, let's say an artifact is found in the same layer as a flip phone. We can infer that the layer dates from 1989 or later because flip phones first came out in 1989.

2018



1989



1934



300 AD



12,000 YBP



Strata: The layers of earth and debris at an archaeological site.

Stratigraphy: The study of strata.