



Archaeology: 101

How do archaeologists know who made the artifacts at a site?

Let's say an archaeologist finds a stone knife in one excavation unit and a grinding stone in another. How does she know if the artifacts were made by the same people? They left no written records, so archaeologists use other clues to determine if artifacts represent one culture or two.

One of the most important concepts in archaeology is **context**. Understanding the relationship between artifacts, time, frequency and methodology can yield important information about the site as a whole. For example, if the stone knife and grinding tool were found at the same depth, are made of similar raw material and are found together frequently, one can assume they were made by the same group of people.

When archaeologists find certain artifacts from the same time period together frequently, it is called an **assemblage**. Generally, an assemblage is associated with a culture. We may not know what language they spoke or where they came from, but the tools indicate that people were doing things the same way over a period of time. Assemblages are often given names based on the tools found, the location they were found or when they lived in an area.



Above: Tool assemblage from San Clemente Island. These tools indicate a reliance on maritime resources.

Below: San Dieguito Tradition tool assemblage, 10,000-7,500 years ago. Large stone points and scrapers indicate a hunter-gatherer culture.

