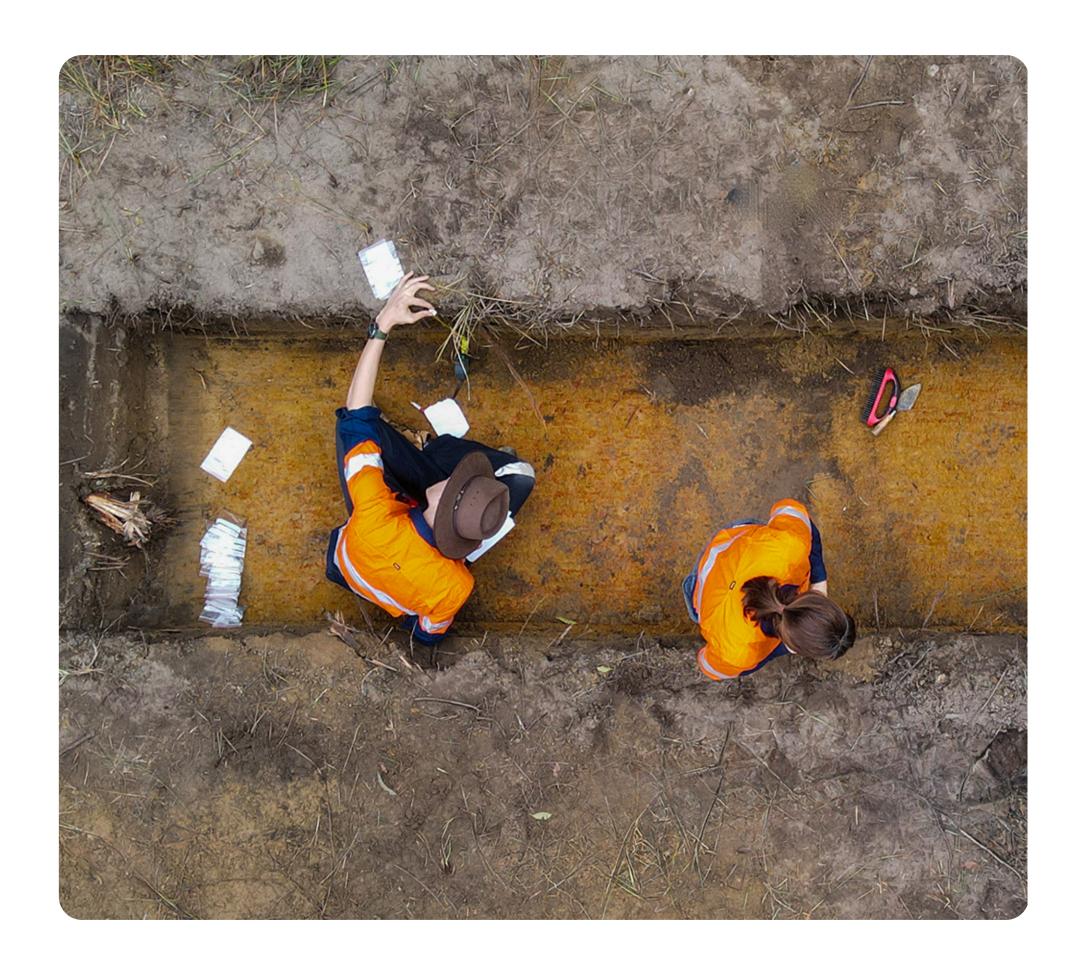# Introduction to archaeological methods

Year 7 History

What is archaeology?

Archaeology is the study of past human activity through the examination of artefacts, structures, and other physical remains. Archaeologists dig and explore to learn about how people lived, what they did, and how they interacted with their environment.

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Common archaeology methods

Field methods:
Surveying

Archaeologists walk over a landscape to look for artefacts and features on the surface. This method helps to identify potential sites for excavation without digging.

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Field methods:
Excavation

The careful digging into the ground using hand tools to uncover buried artefacts and features. Excavations can be large or small, depending on the site's significance.

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Field methods:
Stratigraphy

Stratigraphy is considered a field method of archaeology. It involves the excavation and interpretation of soil layers (strata) and artefacts found within them to understand the chronological sequence of human activity

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Analytical methods:
Site mapping

The creation of detailed maps of archaeological sites, including locations of artefacts, features, and structures. This helps to understand the layout of the site and how different cultural elements are related.

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Analytical methods:
Radiocarbon dating

Radiocarbon dating helps scientists figure out how old organic material is by measuring the carbon left in the object. Since all living things have carbon, and it slowly disappears after they die, this method tells us the age of an organic object by seeing how much carbon is left.

This method was developed in the 1940s and can date organic material as old as 50,000 years. Types of organic objects include trees, plants, animals and people.

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Analytical methods:
OSL and TL dating

OSL (Optically Stimulated Luminescence) and TL (Thermoluminescence) can help date artefacts, including stone tools.

These techniques measure when something was last exposed to sunlight or heat. Over time, minerals in the soil or objects trap energy. By releasing this energy, scientists can estimate how long it's been since they were last in sunlight or heated.

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Analytical methods:
Artefact analysis

This method helps archaeologists figure out what ancient objects were used for. They look at things like the shape, material, and wear marks on tools to understand how people made and used them.
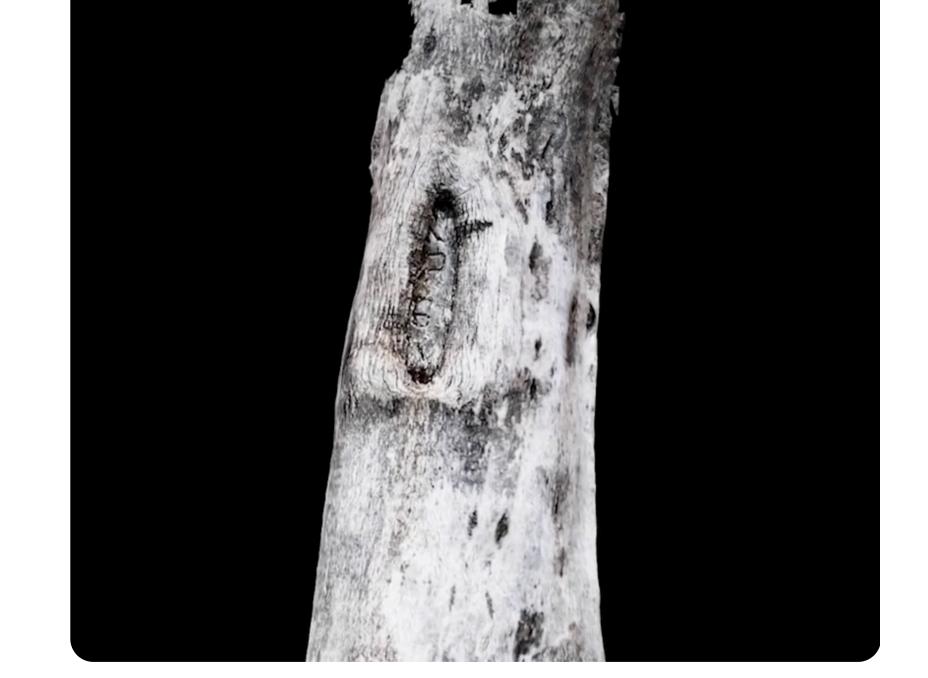
Sometimes, they even test for tiny traces of food or other substances left on the objects to learn more about their past use; this method is called residue analysis.

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Technological methods:
3D modelling

This method creates digital, three-dimensional representations of artefacts, structures, or landscapes, allowing archaeologists to study and share detailed reconstructions without disturbing the originals
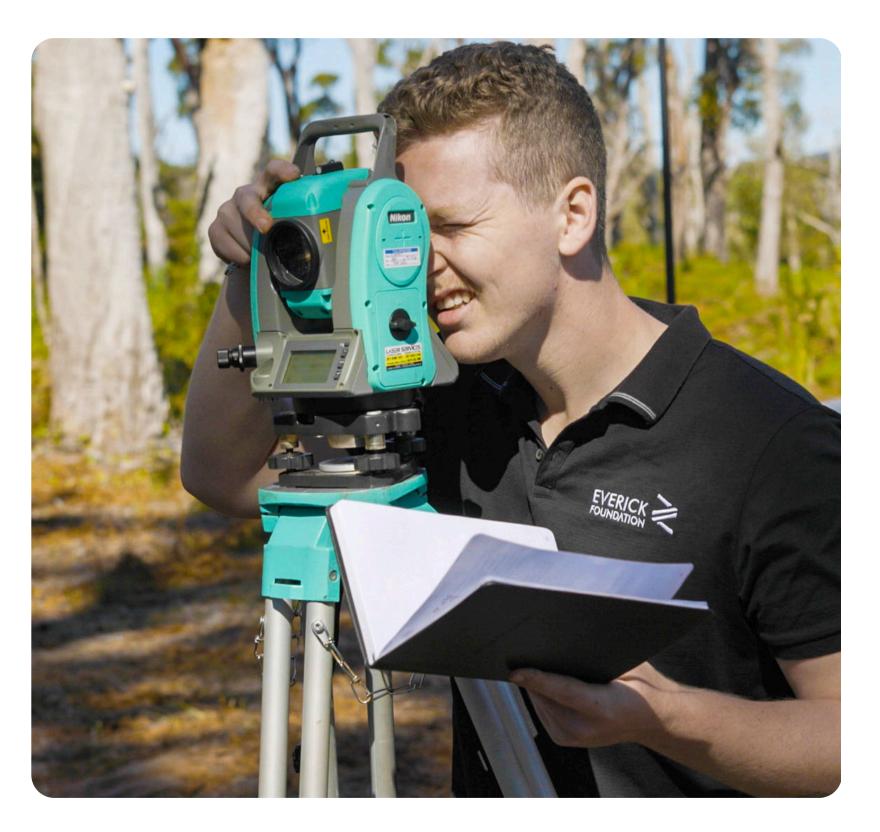

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Technological methods: Reconstruction

This method uses digital or physical models to recreate ancient buildings, tools, or environments, helping us better understand how they might have looked and functioned in the past.

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Technological methods:
Geographic Information Systems

This method known as GIS is a tool that maps and analyses spatial data, helping archaeologists study the relationships between different sites and how people used the landscape.
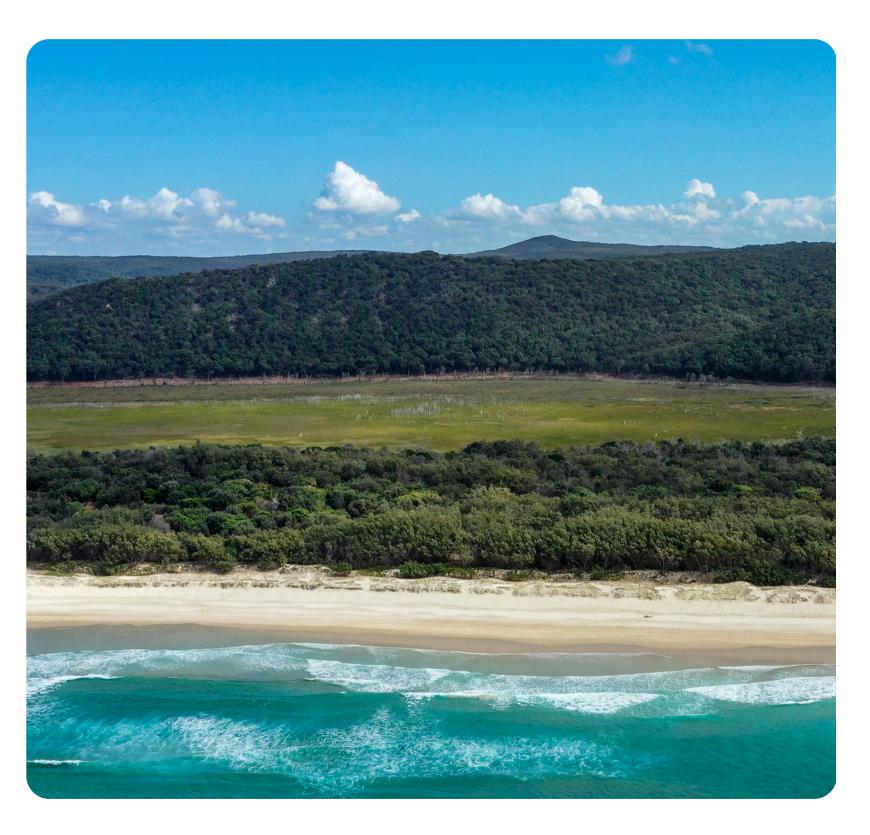
Common archaeology methods

Environmental methods

Environmental methods examine natural elements like soil, plants, animals, and climate to learn about past environments and how humans interacted with nature.

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Contextual methods

Contextual methods focus on the arrangement and relationships between artefacts, settlements, and landscapes to see how people organised their spaces, moved, and adapted to their environment.