NO PREP

Careers in Archaeology

What Can You Actually Do?

Includes: Student reading, case study, differentiated questions, teacher key

Name: Period: Date:

Careers in Archaeology: What Can You Actually Do?

CRM: Where Most Archaeologists Actually Work

If you asked most people where archaeologists work, they would probably say universities or museums. And while some archaeologists do work in those settings, the majority — roughly 75 to 80 percent of all professional archaeologists in the United States — work in Cultural Resource Management, known as CRM. CRM is the process of identifying, evaluating, and protecting archaeological sites that might be affected by construction, development, or land-use changes. The legal foundation for CRM in the United States is Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, which requires federal agencies to consider the effects of their projects on historic and archaeological resources. In practical terms, this means that before a highway can be widened, a housing development can be built, or a pipeline can be laid on federal

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The Academic Path

Academic archaeology, teaching and conducting research at a university, is what most undergraduate students imagine when they picture a career in the field. The academic path involves earning a bachelor's degree, a master's degree, and usually a Ph.D., followed by years of seeking a tenure-track faculty position. It is intellectually rewarding but brutally competitive. The number of Ph.D.s produced each year in archaeology far exceeds the number of available faculty positions. Many graduates spend years as adjunct instructors or postdoctoral researchers, earning modest salaries with no job security, before either landing a tenure-track position or leaving academia entirely. Those who do secure faculty jobs spend their careers teaching, writing grant proposals, publishing research, advising students, and (if they are lucky and well-funded) directing field projects during summers and sabbaticals. Despite the challenges, academic archaeology offers something that CRM often cannot: the freedom to pursue long-term research questions. An academic archaeologist might spend 20 years investigating a single site, building a detailed picture of how a community changed over centuries. They have the time and institutional support to develop new methods, train the next generation of archaeologists, and contribute to theoretical debates about the nature of the past. For those who can tolerate the uncertainty and the workload, it remains one of the most intellectually fulfilling careers available.

Beyond the Dig: Museums, Forensics, and the Deep

Not all archaeologists spend their time digging. Museum archaeologists work as curators, collections managers, and exhibit designers, interpreting the past for public audiences. They manage vast collections of artifacts, design educational programs, and decide how archaeological stories should be told in gallery spaces. Museum work combines scholarship with communication: the ability to translate complex research into experiences that non-specialists can understand and enjoy. Forensic archaeology applies excavation and documentation techniques to criminal investigations and disaster response. Forensic archaeologists help recover clandestine graves, identify victims of mass disasters, and provide expert testimony in court. The work is emotionally demanding: forensic archaeologists deal with recent death, grieving families, and the justice system, but it represents one of the most direct ways archaeology can serve modern society. Underwater archaeology is

another specialized path. Underwater archaeologists excavate shipwrecks, submerged settlements, and drowned landscapes using diving equipment and remote-operated vehicles. The work requires advanced diving certification and specialized training in underwater excavation techniques, which differ significantly from land-based methods. Sites range from ancient Mediterranean trading vessels to World War II warships. The preservation conditions underwater can be extraordinary: waterlogged environments often preserve wood, leather, and organic materials that would have decayed on land. Government agencies like the National Park Service, the Bureau of Land Management, and the Army Corps of Engineers also employ archaeologists to manage and protect cultural resources on public land. These positions offer more stability than CRM contract work, with benefits like health insurance, retirement plans, and a regular schedule, luxuries that many archaeologists in the private sector or academia do not enjoy.

The Bottom Line: Education, Salary, and Lifestyle

Breaking into archaeology requires at minimum a bachelor's degree in archaeology, anthropology, or a related field. A bachelor's degree qualifies you for entry-level CRM positions, typically as a field technician. Moving up — to project director, lab supervisor, or principal investigator — usually requires a master's degree. Academic positions at universities require a Ph.D., and even then, the job market is fiercely competitive. Salary in archaeology is lower than in many other fields requiring similar levels of education. Entry-level CRM field technicians earn between $35,000 and $45,000 per year, with project directors and senior CRM managers earning $55,000 to $80,000. Academic salaries vary widely depending on the institution and rank, but assistant professors in archaeology typically start around $55,000 to $70,000, with full professors at research universities earning $90,000 or more. Museum positions, government jobs, and forensic roles fall somewhere in the middle. The lifestyle demands are real. CRM fieldwork means long stretches away from home, sometimes in remote locations with limited amenities. Academic careers require years of financial uncertainty during graduate school and the tenure track. Even established archaeologists spend significant time writing grant proposals with no guarantee of funding. People enter archaeology because they are passionate about the past, not because they expect to get rich. The question every aspiring archaeologist must answer honestly is whether that passion is enough to sustain a career in a field that

demands a lot and often pays modestly in return. It is worth noting that archaeology careers offer intangible rewards that salary figures cannot capture. Archaeologists regularly describe the moment of uncovering something that no living person has seen for centuries or millennia as among the most powerful experiences of their lives. The intellectual satisfaction of solving a puzzle that spans thousands of years, the physical engagement with landscapes and materials, and the knowledge that your work contributes to humanity's understanding of itself are all forms of compensation that do not appear on a pay stub. Many archaeologists also value the variety and unpredictability of their work. CRM archaeologists might work in a different state every month. Academic archaeologists spend summers in the field and the school year teaching and writing. Forensic archaeologists respond to cases that are never the same twice. For people who dread the monotony of a desk job, archaeology offers a career where no two days are ever identical.

Key Information: Careers in Archaeology

Career Path	Description	Education Required	Salary Range
CRM Field Technician	Conducts surveys and excavations before construction projects	Bachelor's degree	$35,000 - $45,000
CRM Project Director	Manages field projects and writes compliance reports	Master's degree	$55,000 - $80,000
University Professor	Teaches, publishes research, and directs field projects	Ph.D.	$55,000 - $120,000+
Museum Curator	Manages collections, designs exhibits, interprets the past for public	Master's or Ph.D.	$45,000 - $75,000

Career Path	Description	Education Required	Salary Range
Forensic Archaeologist	Recovers evidence from crime scenes and disaster sites	Master's degree	$50,000 - $70,000
Underwater Archaeologist	Excavates shipwrecks and submerged sites using diving equipment	Master's or Ph.D.	$45,000 - $75,000
Government Archaeologist	Manages cultural resources on public lands for federal agencies	Master's degree	$50,000 - $85,000

Case Study: Jordan's Crossroads

Jordan Torres was a high school senior with a 3.8 GPA and a serious decision to make. Ever since a family trip to Mesa Verde National Park in sixth grade, Jordan had been obsessed with archaeology. He had read every book he could find, watched every documentary, and spent a summer volunteering at a local dig organized by the state university. He knew he wanted to study archaeology in college. The problem was his parents. 'I did not raise you to be poor,' his mother said when he brought it up at dinner. His father, an electrician, was more blunt: 'You are smart enough to be an engineer or a lawyer. Why would you choose a career where you dig in the dirt for forty thousand dollars a year?' Jordan pulled up salary data on his laptop and showed them the numbers. CRM field techs started around $38,000. Project directors could make $70,000. Government positions offered benefits. 'It is not engineering money,' he admitted. 'But it is a real career with real jobs.' His father looked at the screen and shook his head. 'And what about when you are 40 with a family and a mortgage?' Jordan did not have an answer for that yet.

1. Based on the salary and career information in the reading, evaluate Jordan's father's concern. Is a career in archaeology financially viable for someone who wants to support a family?

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2. If Jordan asked you for advice, what career path in archaeology would you recommend, and why? Use specific information from the reading to support your suggestion.

Multiple Choice

1. What percentage of professional archaeologists in the United States work in Cultural Resource Management (CRM)?

    a) About 95 percent

    b) About 25 to 30 percent

    c) About 75 to 80 percent

    d) About 50 percent

2. What U.S. law requires that federal projects consider their effects on archaeological resources?

    a) NAGPRA

    b) The Antiquities Act of 1906

    c) The Archaeological Resources Protection Act enacted in 1979

    d) Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act

3. Which career path in archaeology is described as applying excavation techniques to criminal investigations?

a) Underwater archaeology

b) Academic archaeology

c) Forensic archaeology

d) Museum curation

Matching

Write the letter of the correct definition on the line next to each term.

Term	Definition
1. ___ CRM	A) Using excavation and documentation techniques to assist criminal investigations
2. ___ Fieldwork	B) Walking a landscape to locate surface artifacts and identify potential excavation sites
3. ___ Forensic Archaeology	C) The process of identifying and protecting archaeological sites affected by construction or development
4. ___ Museum Curation	D) Hands-on archaeological work conducted at an excavation site in the field
5. ___ Survey	E) Managing museum collections, designing exhibits, and interpreting the past for the public

Fill-in-the-Blank

1. The process of identifying, evaluating, and protecting archaeological sites threatened by construction or development is called _____.

2. Roughly 75 to 80 percent of professional archaeologists in the United States work in _____.

3. Archaeologists who work at excavation sites, conducting surveys and digging test pits, are performing _____.

Short Answer

Answer each question in 2-4 complete sentences.

1. Explain what CRM archaeologists do and why their work is essential. What would happen to archaeological sites without CRM?

2. Compare the academic career path in archaeology with the CRM career path. What are the main advantages and disadvantages of each?

3. Based on the reading, do you think the financial and lifestyle demands of an archaeology career are worth it? Explain your reasoning using specific details from the text.