NO PREP

Context Is Everything

Why Location Matters More Than the Object

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

Name: Period: Date:

Context Is Everything: Why Location Matters More Than the Object

A Gold Coin Worth Nothing

Imagine someone hands you a gold coin. It is old, heavy, and covered in unfamiliar symbols. It is obviously valuable — you could probably sell it for a good price to a collector or a museum. But from a scientific perspective, that gold coin is almost worthless. Why? Because you have no idea where it came from. You do not know which country it was found in, what soil layer it was pulled from, what other objects were buried near it, or whether it was inside a building, a grave, or a garbage pit. Without that information, the coin is just a shiny object. It cannot tell you anything meaningful about the people who used it, the economy they participated in, or the time period in which it circulated. This is the central principle of archaeology: context

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Provenience vs. Provenance

Archaeologists use two similar-sounding terms that are actually quite different. Provenience refers to the exact, three-dimensional location where an artifact was found during an excavation: its grid coordinates, its depth below the surface, and its position relative to other objects and soil layers. Provenience is recorded in the field using precise measurements and is the foundation of all archaeological interpretation. When an archaeologist says, 'This pottery sherd was found in situ at a depth of 1.3 meters in unit N5E2, within a layer of ash above a packed clay floor,'

they are describing provenience. Provenance, by contrast, refers to the ownership history of an object: who has possessed it and how it has changed hands over time. A museum might track the provenance of a Greek vase from its purchase at an auction in 1920, back to a private collection in London in 1880, and before that to an Italian dealer in 1850. Provenance matters because it helps determine whether an object was legally obtained or illegally looted. But provenance tells you nothing about where the vase was originally buried, what was found next to it, or what archaeological context it came from. The distinction matters because objects with provenance but no provenience are scientifically crippled. A museum can own a stunning artifact with a well-documented ownership history going back 200 years, but if no one recorded where it was actually excavated, the object has lost its archaeological voice. It can be admired, but it cannot speak.

What Looting Really Destroys

When people hear about archaeological looting, they usually think about stolen objects, such as a golden mask ripped from a tomb or a carved statue smuggled out of a country. And yes, the theft of objects is a serious problem. But from an archaeological perspective, the far greater damage is the destruction of context. Looters do not record where they dig. They do not map soil layers, photograph features, or catalog what they find next to what. They rip through stratigraphy with shovels and picks, destroying the relationships between artifacts that would have told archaeologists how and when a site was used. Consider a hypothetical example. An undisturbed burial contains a skeleton, a ceramic vessel, two bronze bracelets, and a handful of seeds. To an archaeologist, this assemblage tells a rich story: the seeds reveal the season of burial, the bracelets indicate the person's social status, the ceramic style dates the burial to a specific century, and the skeleton's bones reveal the individual's age, sex, diet, and health. All of these interpretations depend on the objects being found together, in their original positions. A looter who steals the bracelets destroys this entire web of meaning. The bracelets end up in a private collection, admired for their beauty but stripped of everything that made them historically significant. The scale of looting worldwide is staggering. Satellite imagery has revealed thousands of looting pits scarring archaeological sites across the Middle East, Central America, and South Asia. In some countries, entire communities rely on looting as a source of income, driven by poverty and demand

from wealthy collectors in Europe and North America. International laws like the 1970 UNESCO Convention try to combat the illicit trade in antiquities, but enforcement is difficult and the market remains lucrative. Every looted artifact on the international market represents not just a stolen object, but a destroyed context: a chapter of human history that can never be read.

In Situ: The Magic Words

When archaeologists describe an artifact found in its original, undisturbed position, they use the Latin term in situ, meaning 'in place.' Finding something in situ is the gold standard of archaeological discovery. It means the object has not been moved by natural forces, human activity, or animal burrowing since it was originally deposited. An artifact found in situ retains its full context — its stratigraphic position, its spatial relationship to other objects, and its association with surrounding features like walls, floors, or fire pits. The opposite of in situ is disturbed or displaced. An artifact that has been moved from its original position — whether by a plow, a flood, a burrowing rodent, or a previous excavation — has lost some or all of its contextual information. Archaeologists can sometimes determine that an artifact has been displaced and account for it in their analysis, but the information lost through disturbance can never be fully recovered. This is why professional archaeologists work so slowly and carefully. Every centimeter of soil they remove is a potential source of contextual information. The exact depth at which a pottery fragment sits, the angle at which a bone lies, the distance between a tool and a fire pit — all of these details matter. Archaeology is not a treasure hunt. It is a meticulous process of recording relationships between things. The relationships are the data. The objects are just the physical evidence that those relationships existed. Consider a simple example. If an archaeologist finds a Roman coin in England, that coin tells a basic story: the Romans were here. But if that same coin is found inside a specific building, in a specific soil layer, alongside specific pottery and animal bones, the story becomes far richer. The building type tells us about the social status of the inhabitants. The soil layer tells us the approximate date. The pottery reveals trade connections. The animal bones reveal dietary habits. And the coin itself, in context, might indicate whether this was a market, a temple, or a private home. Remove the coin from that web of relationships, and you have a coin. Leave it in place and record everything around it, and you have a chapter of

human history. This principle applies not only to individual artifacts but to entire sites. The layout of a settlement — where houses were built in relation to workshops, storage areas, and ceremonial spaces — reveals information about social organization, economic activity, and community planning that no single object could convey on its own. When a site is looted or poorly excavated, these spatial relationships are destroyed along with the contextual data of individual objects.

Key Information: Context in Archaeology

Context Element	What It Reveals
Depth (stratigraphic position)	Approximate age and time period of the artifact
Horizontal position (grid coordinates)	Spatial relationships with other objects and features
Association with nearby objects	Function, status, ritual significance, trade connections
Soil type and color	Environmental conditions, natural or human-caused events (fire, flood)
Orientation of the object	Whether it was placed deliberately or discarded randomly
Provenience (exact 3D location)	The scientific record of where and how the object was found
Provenance (ownership history)	Legal status and chain of custody, but not original context

Case Study: Dr. Okafor and the Golden Mask

Dr. Amara Okafor had spent fifteen years as a curator at the National Museum of Cultural Heritage. She had seen thousands of artifacts pass through her doors, but nothing like the object sitting on the velvet cloth in front of her. It was a golden funerary mask, exquisitely crafted, with almond-shaped eyes and a serene expression. The art dealer presenting it, a well-dressed man named Hoffman, claimed it came from a 'private European collection' and offered it for $2.3 million. 'It's West African, probably Akan, probably 17th century,' Hoffman said smoothly. 'The collector's family has had it since the colonial period.' Dr. Okafor examined the mask carefully. The craftsmanship was extraordinary. But when she asked for documentation — excavation records, export permits, published references — Hoffman had nothing. 'These older pieces rarely have that kind of paperwork,' he said with a shrug. Dr. Okafor felt torn. The mask was breathtaking, and acquiring it would be a coup for the museum. But she kept hearing her graduate school professor's voice: 'A beautiful object with no context is a beautiful lie. You can admire it, but it cannot teach you anything.' She knew that buying undocumented artifacts fueled the very looting that was destroying sites across her home continent.

1. Using concepts from the reading, explain what Dr. Okafor means when she thinks of the mask as 'a beautiful lie.' What is the difference between the mask's provenance and its provenience?

2. Should Dr. Okafor purchase the mask for the museum? Explain your reasoning using at least one concept from the reading about why context matters.

Multiple Choice

1. What is the difference between provenience and provenance?

a) Provenience is the exact location where an artifact was found, while provenance is its ownership history

b) Provenience is used for objects found underwater, while provenance is only used for objects found on land

c) Provenience and provenance mean the same thing but are used in different countries

d) Provenience refers to an artifact's monetary value, while provenance refers to its age

2. According to the reading, what is the greatest damage caused by archaeological looting?

a) The physical danger to the looters themselves

b) The destruction of context and the relationships between artifacts

c) The financial cost that every institution faces in replacing artifacts

d) The loss of beautiful objects from museums

3. What does the Latin term 'in situ' mean in archaeology?

a) Under water

b) In a laboratory for analysis by trained specialists

c) In a museum collection

d) In its original, undisturbed position

Matching

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

Term	Definition
1. ___ Context	A) The illegal removal of artifacts from a site without scientific documentation
2. ___ Provenience	B) A Latin term meaning an artifact is in its original, undisturbed position
3. ___ In Situ	C) The exact three-dimensional location where an artifact was found during excavation
4. ___ Looting	D) A single distinct layer of soil deposited during a particular time period
5. ___ Stratum	E) The physical setting of an artifact, including its depth, location, and relationship to surrounding objects

Fill-in-the-Blank

1. The exact three-dimensional location where an artifact was found during excavation is called its _____.

2. An artifact found in its original, undisturbed position is described using the Latin term _____.

3. The illegal removal of artifacts from archaeological sites without scientific documentation is called _____.

Short Answer

Answer each question in 2-4 complete sentences.

1. Explain why a gold coin with no archaeological context is considered 'almost worthless' from a scientific perspective, even though it may be financially valuable.

2. Describe the hypothetical burial example from the reading and explain how looting one item from it destroys the entire web of meaning.

3. Why do archaeologists work so slowly and carefully during excavation? What are they trying to preserve beyond just the physical objects?