

# Myths and Misconceptions

by Society for American Archaeology, Public Education Committee



Because of former practices in the discipline, misrepresentation in the media, and long-time stereotypes about people of the past, members of the public—especially the young—often have inaccurate ideas about what archaeologists do and about the bygone populations that they study. Below is a list of myths and misconceptions, followed by a more accurate correction.

## Myth

## Reality

**Myth:** People used to hunt dinosaurs.

Dinosaurs died out 65 million years ago. Fully modern humans (*Homo sapiens sapiens*) have existed for about 100,000 years, and they have occupied the Americas for about 12,000 years. These first inhabitants hunted “megafauna” (big animals) such as mammoths and mastodons, and they also gathered plants.

**Myth:** Indians who lived in America before Columbus were members of the same tribe of simple people.

Prior to European contact, the Americas were inhabited by hundreds of well-developed cultural groups with distinct and mutually unintelligible languages. The houses, tools, foods, and other aspects of life differed among these populations because they lived in different environments and met basic needs in culturally unique ways.

**Myth:** Archaeologists dig up dinosaurs.

Paleontologists study the fossil remains of extinct animals, including dinosaurs, and geologists study rocks. Archaeologists study people of the past through their material remains.

**Myth:** Archaeologists prefer to excavate graves.

The study of human remains from an archaeological site can provide important details about the diet and health of a population. Such excavations, however, are delicate and time consuming, as is the conservation and disposition of the remains after their recovery. For these reasons, as well as respect for cultural sensitivities regarding deceased ancestors, archaeologists think carefully before unearthing a burial. In addition, federal and state laws protect the graves of Native Americans.



**Myth:** Archaeologists get to keep any gold that they find.

**Myth:** It's okay to pick up artifacts because if you don't, someone else will. Besides, the site won't last long anyway.

Professional archaeologists do not keep, buy, sell, or trade any artifacts. They believe that objects recovered from a site should be kept together as a collection to be available for future study or display. By law, artifacts recovered from federal or state lands belong to the public and must be maintained on behalf of the public.

Removing artifacts without using proper scientific methods destroys evidence. This is what pot hunters and treasure salvors do. Over time, archaeological sites reach a state of equilibrium with their surrounding environment. They do not have to be excavated and actually survive best if left untouched. In addition, federal and state laws prohibit the removal of artifacts from public lands



**Only in the movies:** Dinosaurs were extinct many millions of years before the evolution of humans. Evidence from thousands of archaeological and geological sites, plus the results of thousands of radiometric dating tests, prove this beyond any possibility of doubt.  
(Image from the 1940 film *One Million B.C.*)

