

NATURE AND SCOPE OF PREHISTORIC ARCHAEOLOGY

INTRODUCTION

Anthropology is a broad discipline of humanity. It studies man and his activities starting from the dim remote period to the present position. It has three main branches. According to Colin Renfrew and Paul Bahn they are: 1) Physical anthropology ii) Cultural or Social Anthropology and iii) Archaeology. Archaeology is again divided into three main sections and many sub-sections. They are illustrated in the table 1.

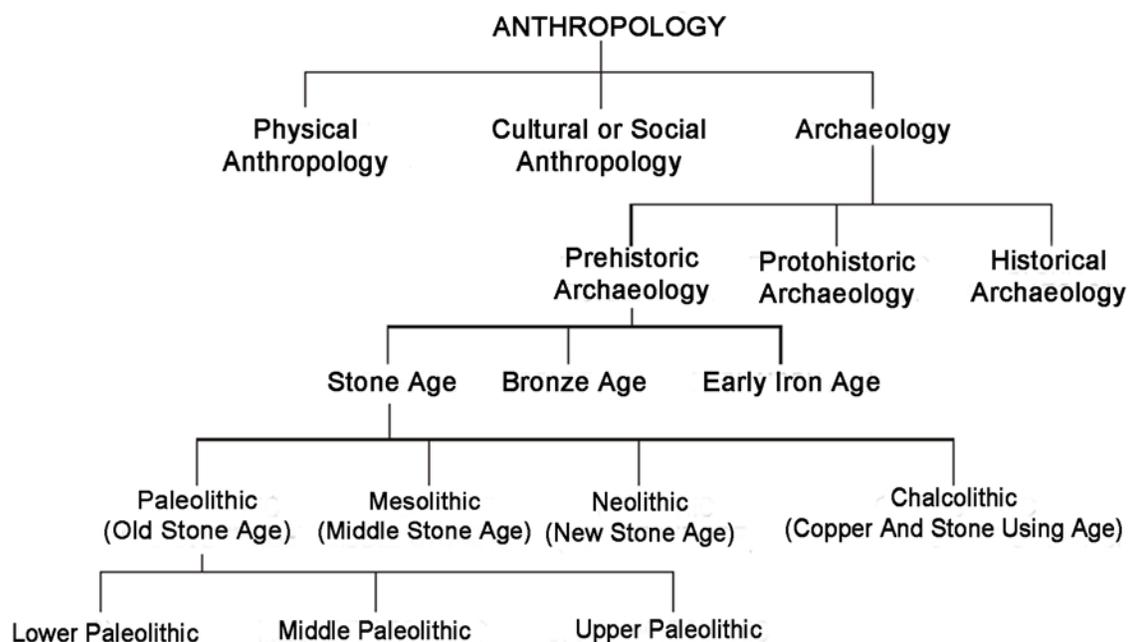


Table 1. The main branches of Anthropology showing the sections and sub-sections of Archaeology

Physical Anthropology studies man as a physical being. It is concern with human evolution, human variation, genetics, demography and environment whereas Cultural or Social Anthropology analyses human culture and society. Archaeology primarily concerns with the study of antiquities. It has three smaller divisions/sections *viz.*, Prehistoric Archaeology, Proto-historic Archaeology and Historical Archaeology.

Pre-historic Archaeology studies man and his work before the existence of written records. It tells us the history of a region, a country or nation, people or race before writing. It does not depend on the accounts of contemporary or later writers. Hence it may also be defined as an account of the illiterate or preliterate people or society. Historical Archaeology depends on written records or documents. This studies the literate people and their works. Proto-historic Archaeology bridges the gulf between the Prehistoric and Historical Archaeology.

Nature of Prehistoric Archaeology:

The nature of Prehistoric Archaeology is partly discovery of treasures of the past, partly the meticulous work of the scientific analysis, and partly the exercise of the creative imagination. For instance, it is toiling in the sun or an excavation in the deserts of Rajasthan or Mesopotamia; it is working with living Eskimos (to record the living traditions) in the snows of Alaska. It is diving down to the ancient ruins of Dwarka of the Western coast of India (Gujarat) or to Spanish Wrecks of the coast of Florida, and it is investigating the ancient civilization of India (Harappan civilization) or China (Yangshao culture) or America (Folsom culture). Moreover, it is also the painstaking task of interpretation so that we come to understand what these things mean for the past human society.

In this way Prehistoric Archaeology is both a physical activity out in the field, either for exploration work or excavation process or both, and intellectual pursuit in the study analysing the collected materials in the laboratory and writing a report on that finds. It is an exciting quest — that is the quest for knowledge about the early man existed in the distant past.

As stated earlier, Anthropology is a broad discipline which studies mankind having three smaller branches viz., Physical Anthropology, Cultural or Social Anthropology and Archaeology. Prehistoric Archaeology is a section of Archaeology which studies past societies. In this sense, this section may also be defined as the past tense of Cultural or Social Anthropology. It is because of the fact that a Cultural or Social anthropologist studies primitive as well as contemporary communities whereas the Prehistoric archaeologist studies the societies of the ancient people primarily through their material remains. For instance — the habitational areas (like open air stations, caves, rock shelters, pits, huts, lake dwelling sites *etc.*), tools, weapons, implements, ornaments (decorative pieces), art objects (including paintings and engraving works) and other artifacts that constitute what is known as the material culture — that were left by those early men. And the most challenging task for Prehistoric archaeologist is to know how to interpret the past material culture in human terms. Many questions startle a Prehistoric archaeologist or Prehistorian. Who were they? What did they eat? How did they make stone, bone, antler and conch shell tools? How were these tools and pots used? How were societies organised? What was the environment looked like? What contact did they have? What did they think? How did things change?

To answer all these questions, Prehistoric archaeologists study the material culture left by the forerunners from different angles by using or applying the methods of natural and physical sciences such as geology, geography, paleontology, paleobotany, archaeozoology, climatology, pedology, Archaeological chemistry *etc.* In addition they develop a new idea to reconstruct the past lifestyle by using the knowledge of ethnography using the surviving Archaeological remains. Hence the Prehistoric archaeologists work like the ethnographers. These groups of scientists or Prehistoric archaeologists live among the non-industrialized communities with a specific purpose of understanding how such societies use material culture, how they construct their huts or settlements; why some huts are round and others square or rectangular and so on. This new idea of studying the non-industrialized societies (which range from the stone using hunter — gatherers in Australia and South Africa who have survived into the present century to the metal using hunter — gatherers, pastoralists and agriculturists who are to be found in many parts of the world) at various levels of technological and economic development using such studies for reconstructing Prehistoric cultures in relation to their living traditions or surviving antiquities is now known as Ethno-Archaeology.

Relationship between Pre-Historic Archaeology and History:

Prehistoric Archaeology deals with the past culture (based on their material remains). In the broadest sense, just as Prehistoric Archaeology is a section of Archaeology, so too is it a part of history - where we mean the whole history of humankind from its beginning over 3 million years ago. Indeed for more than 99 percent of past material culture is the only significant source of information if one sets aside Physical Anthropology which focuses on biological (human evolution and variation) rather than his works (socio-cultural aspects). According to Colin Renfrew and Paul Bahn (1991:10), the conventional history sources begin only with the introduction of written records around 3000 B.C. in western Asia, and considerably later in most other parts of the world (not until A.D. 1788 Australia, for example) Whereas the sources of Indian history go back to around 1500 B.C. (Sankalia, 1974:7). Then the question arise-How is the history of illiterate or preliterate people or country known? What are or can be its sources? A Prehistoric archaeologist should answer in brief - anything that tells us its past history, say language, place-names and study of the people's physical features, customs and manners, legends and traditions, their monuments, even a study of landforms, soils and vegetation, and the animals may help to illustrate this story (Sankalia, 1974 : 7). A commonly drawn distinction, therefore, is that Prehistoric Archaeology deals with the period before written records and history deals with, in the narrow sense- meaning, the study of the past using written documents (Colin and Paul, 1991:10). In another word Prehistoric Archaeology deals with the

history of the illiterate or preliterate communities. Thus it contributes a great deal of understanding of those periods and places where written records, inscriptions and other literary sources do not exist. It is the duty of the Prehistoric archaeologists to explore, excavate, analyse and interpret the evidence.

Even though Prehistoric Archaeology tells the history of preliterate people, it differs from history proper as the former does not depend on written documents or accounts. The artifacts or ecofacts whatever explored or excavated do not tell us anything without proper analysis and interpretation. It is the Prehistoric archaeologist who has to make sense of these finds. In this respect he works like a scientist. He collects evidences (data), conducts either experiments or formulates hypothesis (a proposition to account for the data), tests hypothesis against more data and in conclusion devises a model, a description that seems best to summarise the pattern observed in the data. He has to develop a picture of the past, just as the scientist has to develop a coherent view of the natural world.

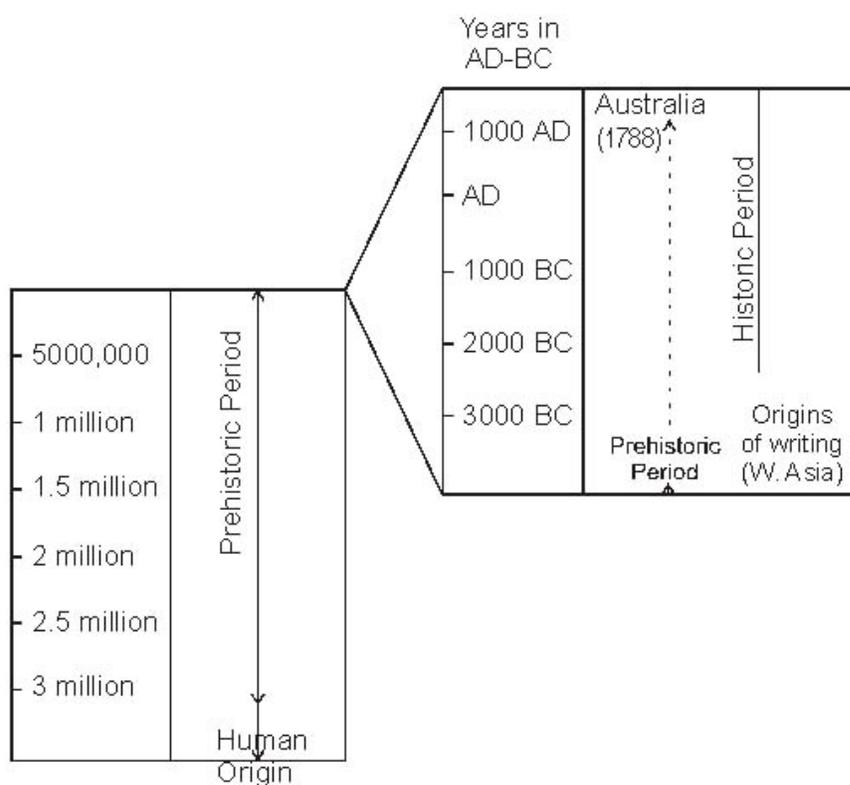


Table 2 : The vast time span of Prehistoric period compared with the relatively short period for which written records are available (conventional history). Before 3000 B.C. material remains are our only sources of evidence. (After Colin and Paul 1991:10)

Aim and objective of Prehistoric Archaeology:

The aim of this section of Archaeology is to learn about the human past. It aims at recovering as much as possible the history of illiterate societies. It is a social study concerned not with the individuals or with the relations of individuals to one another and to society in general but with the societies, and the inter-relationship between them and the natural world. It enables us to understand the economic aspect of man. It creates sense of awareness and is of great educational value and helps in lifting people out of the limitation of their own time and space. It creates interest in geology in the sense of understanding the knowledge of geological laws (forming the strata's). It also creates interest in geography in the sense of awareness of place as it involves the investigation of the existing as well as the former conditions of climate, topography, soil, vegetation, and animal life, all of which can be reconstructed with the help of physical environment in which the archaeological remains are preserved.

It calls for an understanding of the complex relation between human societies and physical environments. It is strongly associated with the elements of aesthetic appreciation as its primary dependence is on the artifacts and eco-facts and their interpretation in terms of cultural development.

The objective of Prehistoric archaeology is to reconstruct or piece together the past life ways of the ancient but preliterate communities with the help of their material remains (found in the form of artifacts

and eco-facts). It takes interest in having a clear picture of how people lived and how they exploited their environment. It also seeks to understand why they lived in that way, why they had that pattern of behaviour and how their life ways and material culture came to take the form they did. It takes interest in the cultural formation processes (C-Transforms) with a view to explain it in detail.

SCOPE

Prehistoric archaeology has a very wide scope. Nowadays Prehistoric Archaeology has become an institution, encompassing a number of different scholars forming sub-disciplines. Each scholar formulates new theories and follows different methods having diverse approaches. We have already drawn attention to the distinction between the Archaeology of the long Prehistoric period and that of the historic times. Often this chronological division is accentuated by further sub-divisions so that Prehistoric archaeologists specialize either in, for instance, the earliest period (the Paleolithic or the Old Stone Age or Early Stone Age, that existed from 2-3 million of years ago and continues upto 10,000 years B.C.) or the late but earlier periods (the Mesolithic or the Middle Stone Age or the Hoabinhian or the late Stone Age which coincides with the earlier part of Holocene when climate in glaciated areas ameliorated to finally acquire its present form), or recent periods (Neolithic or new stone age that existed between 7000 BC and 3000 BC), or more recent period (Chalcolithic which range from 3000 BC to 2000 BC), or the most recent periods (Bronze Age the 1st Indian civilization called the Harappan/Saraswati Civilization flourished between 3250 BC and 1450 BC).



One of the major developments of the last five decades has been the realization that Prehistoric Archaeology has much to contribute not only to study the antiquities or relics of the past people or societies but also to study the modern people or contemporary societies with simple technology from the light of their practices set in Prehistoric period/ times. It can also help with specific Archaeological studies when the ways of life of the modern society are sufficiently similar to those of the past life. It has become a current focus of research. In one way or another we compare something from the past with an object in use today. For instance, megalithism is a dead cultural phenomenon which cannot be seen in other parts of the world. It is still practiced by different tribal communities in the same way or in some modified form in North-East India, particularly in Manipur, Meghalaya and Nagaland. Among these tribal communities megalithism is a living tradition. Hence many scholars who are specialized and in the field of ethno Archaeology take keen interest to reconstruct the past life ways of the ancient people of these region in the light of this living tradition.

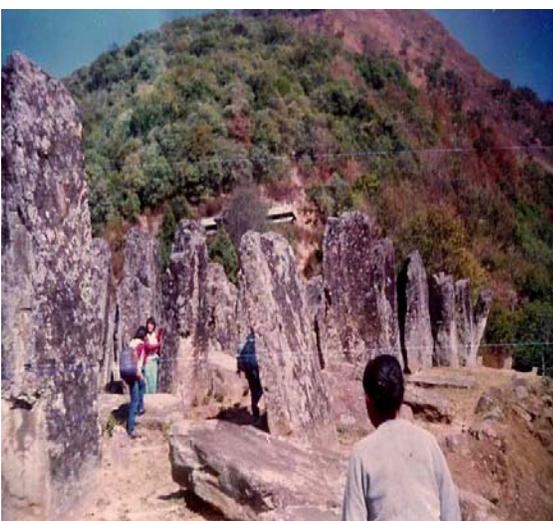


Photo 1 :- The process of preparing rice-beer for the feast-of-merit.

Photo 2 :- An avenue (a cluster of menhirs). Saranamei Site

Approaches in Prehistoric Archaeology

1. Ethno-Archaeology

Ethno-Archaeology has become a major specialization in modern Archaeology. We can only understand the Archaeological remains or records if we understand in much greater detail how it came about and how it was formed. Site formation processes are now a focus of intensive study. It is here ethno-archaeology comes in its own way: the study of living people and their material culture undertaken with the aim of improving our understanding of the Archaeological remains or records. For example, the study of butchery (works) practices among the living hunter-gatherers, undertaken by Lewis Binford among the Nunamiut Eskimo of Alaska, has given him many new ideas about the way Archaeological remains or relics may have been formed allowing him to re-evaluate the bone remains of animals eaten by very early humans elsewhere in the world. Nor are these studies confined to smaller groups or simpler societies or communities. Let us see another example from Tucson, Arizona where William L. Rathje set up the Tucson Garbage project. It involves the collection of Garbage from the trash cans of a section of the city and the great careful sorting in the laboratory of all that they contain. Thus the rather unsavoury task has given some valuable and unexpected insights into the pattern of consumption of the modern urban population — and the methods employed are purely Archaeological. The pattern of consumption by the Tucson people is shown in the table below:

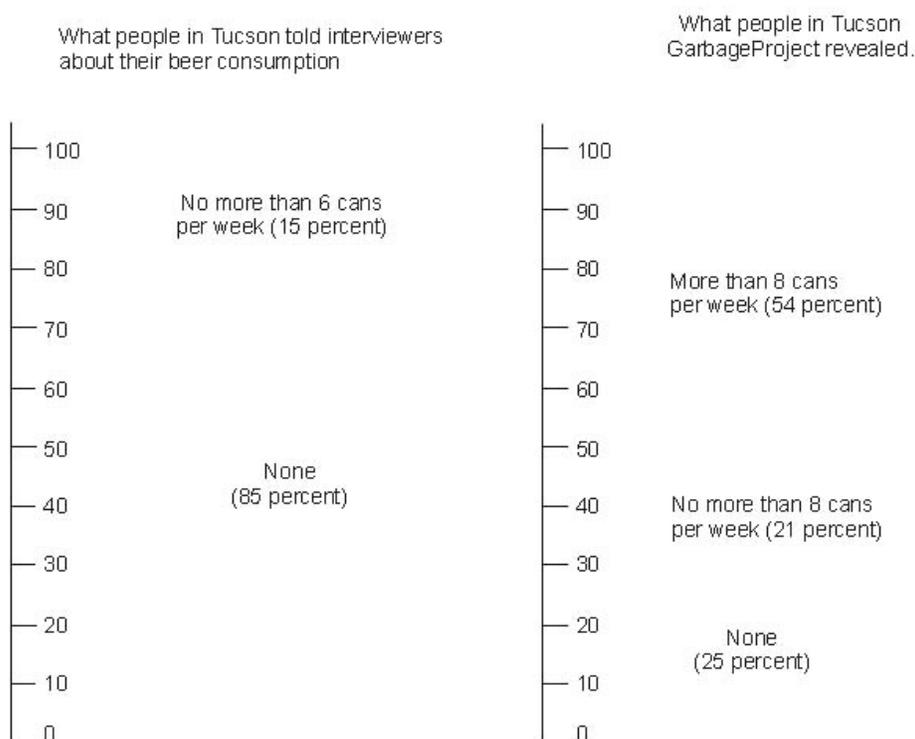


Table 3 : The Garbage Project, Tucson Arizona : An Ethno Archaeological survey among Tucson's modern inhabitants showed a marked discrepancy between people's accounts of their behaviour and what excavation of their trash cans actually revealed (After Colin and Paul 1991).

2. Environmental Archaeology

Another major specialization is Environmental Archaeology. It is an interdisciplinary approach where archaeologists and specialists from other sciences study the human use of plants and animals and how societies adapted to the ever changing environment. Environmental Archaeology is now a well-developed field in its own right. It views the human animal as part of the natural world interacting with other species in the ecological system or ecosystem. The environment governs human life. Latitudes and longitudes landforms and climate determine the vegetation which in turn determines animal life. And all these things taken together determine how and where humans have lived, or at least what they did until very recently.

With a few exceptions, little attention was paid by archaeologists to eco-factual evidence until recent decades. Sites were studied more or less as self-contained package of evidence rather than in their context within the landscape. It is now regarded as important to see sites in their setting and to consider the geomorphological and biological processes occurring in and around them. The environment is seen now as a variable not as something which is constant or homogeneous through space and time.

The reconstruction of the environment first requires an answer to very coarse-grad questions of chronology and climate. We need to know when the human activities under study took place in terms of the broad world climatic succession. This is, then, partly a matter of chronology. A reliable date allows us, for instance, to determine whether the context belongs to a glacial or an interglacial phase, and what the temperature is likely to have been in that part of the globe. Sea level and other questions will be related to this one. Finer grade questions will follow, and these are particularly relevant for all post glacial contexts after about 10,000 years ago. The archaeologists usually then turn to the evidence of the vegetation at the time whether from pollen or from other plant remains information is gained about the vegetation cover, which also contribute further data about the climate.

The logical next step is to turn to the faunal remains, in the first place, to the micro fauna including insects, snails and rodents, all of which are very sensitive indicators of climatic change. Like some of the plant remains they are also indicators of the micro-environment of specific conditions at the site. Some of these conditions, of course, resulted from human activity when people erected structures and otherwise influenced the immediate surroundings to ensure survival and comfort.

Owing to the poor preservation of many forms of evidence, and to the distorted samples we recover, we can never arrive at the 'true' facts of the past environments. One simply has to aim at the best approximation available. No single method will give an adequate picture. All are distorted in one way or another - and so as many methods as data and finds will need to be applied to build up a composite image.

Despite these difficulties — the task of environmental reconstruction is a fundamental one. For if we are to understand how human individuals functioned, and the community of which they formed a part, we have to know first what their world was like.

3. Marine Archaeology

Marine Archaeology or Underwater Archaeology is another field of specialization demanding great courage as well as skill. It is generally considered to have been given its first major impetus during the winter of 1853 to 1854, when a particularly low water level in the Swiss lakes laid bare enormous quantities of wooden posts, pottery and other artifacts. From the earliest investigation, using crude diving belts, it has developed into a valuable complement to work on land. It encompasses a wide variety of site, including wells, sink holes and spring (e.g. the great sacrificial well at Chichell Itza in Mexico); submerged lakeside settlements (e.g.; those of the Alpine region); and marine sites ranging from shipwrecks to sunken harbors (e.g. Caesarea in Israel) and downed cities (e.g. Port Royal in Jamaica and Dwarka in India).

In the last 50 years it has become a highly scientific exercise yielding time capsules from the past in the form of shipwrecks and other structures that shed new light on ancient life as well as on land. The inventions in recent time of miniature submarines, other submersible craft and above all of scuba diving gear have been of enormous value enabling divers to stay under water for much longer time and to reach sites at previously impossible depths. As a result, the pace and scale of discovery have greatly increased over the last few decades.