



Department  
for Education

# Archaeology

**AS and A level subject content**

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# The content for archaeology AS and A level

## Introduction

1. AS and A level subject content sets out the knowledge, understanding and skills common to all AS and A level specifications in archaeology.

## Aims and objectives

2. AS and A level specifications in archaeology must encourage students to develop their interest in archaeology as they:

- understand past human societies and develop archaeological skills through experience of a broad and balanced course of study
- understand archaeological terms, concepts and skills
- practically apply archaeological skills and methods to both primary and secondary archaeological material and data
- demonstrate their breadth and depth of archaeological knowledge and understanding, and an awareness of chronology
- understand what archaeological evidence can tell you about the nature of past societies, human achievements, beliefs, moral values and attitudes and their impact on individuals, groups and whole societies as reflected in material remains
- understand the intrinsic value and significance of archaeology and its importance in contemporary society and heritage
- appreciate the importance of local social, cultural, religious and ethnic diversity issues to the practice of archaeology

## Subject content

### Breadth and depth of content

3. AS and A level specifications in archaeology must provide sufficient depth and breadth to allow students to develop the knowledge, skills and understanding specified below, and must include a rationale for the specification of topics including period and breadth studies which indicate how the following criteria for content are addressed.

4. AS and A level specifications in archaeology must provide a broad and coherent course of study for all students.

5. There are no prior knowledge requirements for AS and A level specifications in archaeology.

## Knowledge, understanding and skills

6. AS and A level specifications must require students to develop and demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the nature and types of archaeological evidence, and what examining such evidence can tell us about past human societies, including (but not restricted to):

- burial evidence including human remains
- buildings and other structures
- artefacts
- sites and settlements
- botanical and faunal remains
- landscapes

7. AS and A level specifications must require students to develop and demonstrate knowledge, understanding and practical application of archaeological techniques, including contemporary techniques, used by archaeologists to investigate the archaeological record, including (but not restricted to):

- how sites are formed including: site formation processes, and survival and limitations of evidence
- how archaeologists discover and record sites and landscapes including: aerial photography; field work, including on-site survey; sampling strategies; desk-top sources, documentary evidence and databases; methods of recovering archaeological materials from the surface; surveying; geoprospection; geochemistry; post-excavation conservation; and collaboration with the local and the wider community
- archaeological excavation and recovering evidence including: rationale, processes and strategies of excavation; on-site recovery; stratigraphy; and recording techniques (section drawings, photographs, plans)

8. AS and A level specifications must require students to develop and demonstrate knowledge, understanding and practical application of how archaeological data is analysed and interpreted including (but not restricted to):

- analysis of recorded data from survey or excavation
- dating archaeological sites, including: relative dating methods (typology); and absolute dating methods (including radiocarbon dating and thermoluminescence)
- environmental analysis (including macro and micro fauna and flora, soils and sediments)
- analysis of human remains (including age, sex, stature, occupation, diet, ancestry, and cause of death)
- visual analysis of metals, ceramics, and lithics
- ethnography and experimental archaeology

9. AS and A level specifications must require students to develop and demonstrate knowledge and understanding of how past human societies changed or stayed the same and the causes of changes. These must include (but are not restricted to) the following: climate, human innovation, conflict, migration, trade and agriculture.

10. In addition, A level specifications must require students to understand the practice of responsible archaeology, through the study of archaeological issues and debates in Britain and the wider world. This includes (but is not restricted to) the following aspects:

- human evolution and our changing relationship with the environment, including: key changes in the development of hominins over the last three million years, the lineage of anatomically modern humans, the development of modern human patterns of behaviour, factors affecting human development (including competition, natural selection, diet), the impact of the changing climate on human evolution, the changing place of humans in nature and human interaction with their environment over the long term
- cultural resource management, including: the role of UNESCO, the purpose and impact of protective legislation, debates about preservation versus excavation; the impact of the trade in antiquities, and attitudes towards metal detecting
- differences and tensions between professional and amateur archaeologists, the relationship between research and rescue archaeology, the funding of excavations and preservation of archaeological remains, the value of archaeology, and the social and economic role of museums
- the relationship between indigenous peoples and archaeologists, repatriation, the excavation of sacred or burial sites, the role of archaeology in the construction of national or ethnic identity, and how and why archaeology involves local communities

11. AS specifications must require students to study one archaeological context in depth and one breadth study. A level specifications must require students to study two contrasting archaeological contexts in depth and two breadth studies<sup>1</sup>.

12. An archaeological context is defined as a time span and place where the activity of a past human society can be studied using data, buildings, artefacts and remnants left behind.

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<sup>1</sup> At A level students may study the same (or some of the same) contexts and sites for their two breadth studies. At AS and A level students may not study the same context/s or sites for their breadth study/studies and depth study/studies. At A level students may not study the same context or sites for their two depth studies. As a minimum therefore specifications must require students at AS to study 4 contexts and 20 sites and students at A level to study 5 contexts and 25 sites.

13. For each archaeological context studied in depth students must cover five sites. The context chosen must be a restricted geographic location and time period<sup>2</sup> and must be prescribed in specifications. Specifications must require students, in the in-depth study, to demonstrate knowledge and understanding of how a particular past human society lived in the context chosen based on what archaeological evidence can tell us. Specifications must require that in each depth study students must show knowledge and understanding of the following areas as a minimum, in relation to the context studied:

- the social organisation of the context chosen and why this may have developed in this particular society (e.g. conflict, exchange networks and proximity to farming societies)
- the belief system of the context chosen (e.g. beliefs in gods/goddesses, creation, spirits, ancestor worship and cults)
- art in the context chosen (e.g. painting, carvings, sculpture, statues, pottery and hieroglyphs)
- technology in the context chosen (e.g. copper-smelting, hand axes, bow and arrow, and cordage)

14. Each breadth study must extend across a minimum of three contexts each covering a minimum of five sites. Each breadth study must include contexts which cover multiple geographic locations and/or time periods. Specifications must stipulate the contexts which can be studied for each of the types of breadth studies covered below. Specifications must also provide guidance on the selection of sites for each breadth study to ensure that these sites cover all of the content for the relevant breadth study and can illustrate change and continuity through time. Specifications must require students, in the breadth study, to develop and demonstrate an understanding of change and continuity in and between the contexts studied, and make informed comparisons between these contexts. Specifications must require that students choose breadth studies from the following options, and demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the content required under each option in relation to the contexts studied:

- people and their activities in relation to religion and ritual including (but not restricted to):
  - ritual activities, including: how ritual activities are related to beliefs; different types of ritual (including personal rituals and organised group activities), structure/organisation of rituals, and specialist religious and ritual organisations
  - mortuary practices, including: treatment of bodies and related practices

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<sup>2</sup> Geographic location means the whole, or parts of, a country or group of countries. The time period will vary depending on the age of the area being studied, but must be a minimum of 100 years.

- related locations and structures, including: how rituals can be shown to have taken place at particular locations and/or in specific structures, association with the surrounding landscape, and how locations/structures act as a focus for belief
  - symbolic expression, including: art works, and the use of symbols and how these can be interpreted
  - artefacts including: the function and interpretation of artefacts in relation to religion and ritual
- people and their activities in relation to society in the past including (but not restricted to):
    - migration of populations in the past
    - organisation of human societies in groups, including: the organisation of social units, families and households; variations in basic social organisation (including seasonality); and the nature and workings of specialist organisations (including religious groups, military groups)
    - social differentiation, including: the nature of, and reasons, for differences between individuals or groups in the past (including status differences, age, gender, ethnicity); evidence for presence or absence of ranking or stratification and its causes; and evidence for specialists and how they operated within society
    - power and social control, including: evidence for individuals or groups having power over others, and how it was maintained in the past; warfare as a means of control; and forms of resistance to control
    - social change, including: identification and causes of social change in the past
  - people and their activities in relation to sites in the landscape including (but not restricted to):
    - the adaptation of people to their landscapes, including: the human impact on the environment and the constraints on human activity imposed by the environment
    - the functions of particular sites or areas within sites, including: how sites are identified and differentiated from other areas of human activity; and the siting, growth, reorganisation and abandonment of particular sites
    - reconstruction and understanding of structures and buildings, their significance and form, including: the classification of different functions of buildings and structures (including ritual, defensive, economic and social)
    - territory and boundaries, including: the way human groups identified with particular areas of the landscape, and the nature of boundaries in the past
  - people and their activities in relation to economics and material culture including (but not restricted to):

- the exploitation of plants and animals, including: identification of past subsistence and diet, the different ways animals and plants were exploited for food, and non-food uses of animals and plants
- extraction and production, including: artefacts and their manufacture and use, and evidence of specialist production in the past
- economic strategies, including: ways of coping with uncertain food supplies; the relationships between resources and site location, and permanence and function; and different modes of exchange of goods, and the nature and function of trade
- economic change, including: major changes in the economic basis of societies in the past; and changes in past technology and the impact of these changes

15. AS and A level specifications must require students to:

- interpret and analyse archaeological material and data
- communicate effectively and argue critically using archaeological terminology and conventions
- exemplify their interpretations of data by placing it in their relevant archaeological contexts
- employ knowledge and understanding both of the nature of archaeological evidence and of the strengths and limitations of methods used by archaeologists to gather and interpret that evidence, and be able to evaluate alternative explanations
- organise and communicate their archaeological knowledge and understanding, arguing a clear and logical case and reaching substantiated judgements

16. In addition, A level specifications must require students to:

- make links and draw comparisons between different aspects of periods, societies or breadth studies covered in their course of study
- critically evaluate a range of primary and secondary evidence and data, draw substantiated conclusions, and understand how provisional interpretations could be strengthened through future analysis

17. A level specifications must require that students undertake an individual archaeological investigation that is independently researched and that interacts with the archaeological record, drawing on the knowledge, understanding and skills outlined above. A level specifications must require students to:

- identify, and provide a rationale, for the archaeological topic they have chosen to investigate, using the knowledge and understanding outlined above and 'desk-top' research to identify an appropriate question



- apply an understanding of the nature and reliability of archaeological evidence required in paragraph 15 in order to comment on the accuracy of their own primary evidence and the extent to which they are representative
- apply an understanding of the relevant archaeological concepts which form and support the context of their study to exemplify their interpretations of data
- gather, select, organise, and translate data obtained from primary sources using at least one of the archaeological investigative techniques outlined in paragraph 7, as well as 'desk-top' research, to investigate one of the types of archaeological evidence in paragraph 6
- interpret and analyse archaeological data and material using at least two archaeological data analysis techniques outlined in paragraph 8 above in order to reach substantiated conclusions about the investigation undertaken
- apply their understanding of the different methodologies of archaeological investigation and analysis, demonstrating understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the different methodologies, justify their choices of methodology and recognise associated problems
- apply their understanding of the different methods for the presentation of evidence (including written, illustrative, graphical, photographic), and consider which are most appropriate to present the evidence they have gathered in their investigation
- evaluate the outcomes of their investigation, including the methodologies used and how provisional interpretations could be strengthened through future analysis
- organise and communicate their archaeological knowledge and understanding effectively, arguing critically using archaeological terminology and conventions, in order to reach substantiated judgements



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