Interpreting an Archaeological Site

Activity Directions:

1. Review the definitions of the following terms prior to completing this activity.
   - Site
   - Stratigraphy
   - Artifact
   - Feature
   - Soil profile
   - Research question
   - Interpretation
   - Natural forces

2. One of the most important objectives of archaeology is accurate site interpretation. Based on the information recovered from a site, the archaeologist may be able to reconstruct a number of events that took place on a site. In planning the excavation of a site, archaeologists generally develop a series of research questions to be answered during and after the excavation.

Student Task:

- Scan carefully the simulated soil profile below and respond to the research questions in the space provided.

Soil Profile
Interpreting An Archaeological Site

Research Questions:

1. How would we know that this illustration represents an archaeological site?

2. How many soil levels can you identify in the stratigraphy?

3. How many archaeological features are present in the stratigraphy?

4. What seems to be the function of the two features located on the site?

5. In what soil level would you find the most recent artifact material?

6. In which soil level would you find the oldest artifact material?

7. How many living surfaces can be identified in the stratigraphy?

8. Were the layers in the site formed by human activities or natural forces?

9. What types of objects are located in the two features?

10. If pottery fragments were recovered from the trash pits, how would they help the archaeologist to interpret the site?
11. How can archaeologists learn more about the lifestyle and beliefs of people from their pottery?

12. Where would you begin to excavate this site? Why?

13. How could you identify a soil feature during excavation?

14. What would happen if the archaeologist failed to identify soil features during excavation?

15. What inferences can you make about the history of this site based on the archaeological remains?

16. What additional evidence would be helpful in interpreting the human activities on this site?
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Teacher Answer Sheet:

1. How would we know that this illustration represents an archaeological site? (Artifacts and Features are present in the soil levels)
2. How many soil levels can you identify in the stratigraphy? (3)
3. How many archaeological features are present in the stratigraphy? (2)
4. What seems to be the function of the two features located on the site? (Trash pits)
5. In what soil level would you find the most recent artifact material? (Top level)
6. In which soil level would you find the oldest artifact material? (Bottom level)
7. How many living surfaces can be identified in the stratigraphy? (2)
8. Were the layers in the site formed by human activities or natural forces? (Erosion, a volcanic eruption, flood)
9. What types of objects are located in the two features? (Pottery and animal bone)
10. If pottery fragments were recovered from the trash pits, how would they help the archaeologist to interpret the site? (Pottery can be used to date soil layers helping to establish a chronology for a site.)
11. How can archaeologists learn more about the lifestyle and beliefs of people from their pottery? (Pottery designs, shapes, and manufacture may reflect cultural beliefs and behaviors)
12. Where would you begin to excavate this site? Why? (At the top layer keeping the individual soil layers and features distinct.)
13. How could you identify a soil feature during excavation? (By a change in the texture, color, or composition of the soil)
14. What would happen if the archaeologist failed to identify soil features during excavation? (Artifacts from different time periods and activities would become mixed.)
15. What inferences can you make about the history of this site based on the archaeological remains? (large buildings were constructed during the most recent period of occupation, there is evidence of destruction activities perhaps relating to war or other social upheaval, re-use of the site at different times suggests that its location was somehow favorable)
16. What additional evidence would be helpful in interpreting the human activities on this site? (More artifact material, documentary evidence, oral history)

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