

ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE FORMATION

Explore the process of site formation over time using a rock shelter example

OBJECTIVES

At the end of the lesson, students will be able to:

- Order graphics in chronological order
- Use information from the graphics to interpret what may have happened at an archaeological site

VOCABULARY

Rock shelter: An overhang or cave where humans took shelter.

Hearth: An archaeological feature that represents the remains of a human-built fire.

Living floor: A horizontal layer, or level, upon which there is evidence of human activity.

Storage pit: Holes dug into the ground, sometimes lined or covered, to store surplus food, keeping it protected from insects and rodents.

Stratigraphy: Layers of material, usually soils, deposited over time. Archaeologists excavate and document stratigraphy, piecing together the events that took place at a site.

MATERIALS

- Copies to distribute or a way to project the rock shelter graphics for the group
- Copies of the “Rock Shelter Site Formation” worksheet

GRADE: 5-12

Subjects: Social Studies, Archaeology, Geology

Standards:

- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.1](#)
- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.2](#)
- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.3](#)
- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.7](#)

Skills: chronological ordering, analysis, critical thinking, visual interpretation

Duration: 45 minutes

Class size: Any

BACKGROUND

Archaeological sites can form and change in multiple ways:

- Construction on site (building and repairing in the area)
- Site use (living on the site)
- Abandonment of the site (leaving the site for some period of time to the elements)
- Natural decay or purposeful destruction of the site

Archaeologists identify multiple formation processes for any site as humans lived in or used a place across time. Archaeological sites show those different uses as more than one soil level under the ground, forming the stratigraphy.

This exercise illustrates the process of site formation using an example of a rock shelter site. It demonstrates how the sequence of events at a site can be reconstructed by studying the archaeological record.

PROCEDURES

1. Discuss the following question: how do we know how people in the past lived when they leave behind no written record? Archaeologists devote their careers to doing just that. They use stratigraphy—layers in soil—to understand the places people lived, hunted, prepared tools, or otherwise interacted with the landscape.
2. Distribute copies of the rock shelter graphics or look at the series of images together. Give students the opportunity to identify different elements in the images.
3. Have the students individually arrange the images in chronological order using the “Rock Shelter Site Formation” worksheet. For each image, they will write the letter and a brief one sentence justification of why they placed it in that order.
4. After completing the worksheet, review the order and discuss what archaeologists can learn about the people using this rock shelter from the evidence left behind.

ASSESSMENT

The correct sequence is: B, E, D, A, C

Beginning with the oldest (earliest documented) stage of the sequence:

B) This is the oldest stage in the sequence of events. The drawing depicts a rock shelter. A hearth located to the right of the shelter is dug into the living floor surface.

E) This drawing shows the rock shelter after a second, later period of use. A new floor surface has been laid down, closing off the first hearth and a new hearth has been constructed (to the right of the first). A storage pit, or cache, filled with some kind of substance has been dug into the left side of the living floor.

D) A rock fall marks a period of abandonment of the rock shelter, sealing off the earlier living floors and storage pit.

A) After the rock fall, sediment is deposited over time covering the rock fall and older living surfaces.

C) People once again enter the shelter. Bones of bighorn sheep and flaked stone suggest this time, the shelter was used as a hunting camp.

WRAPPING UP

Discuss as a class:

- What material remains survived each phase to help archaeologists reconstruct events at the rock shelter?
- How might you account for the fact that very few artifacts survive as part of the archaeological record at the rock shelter site?
- What did you learn about the people who inhabited this rock shelter?



SOCIETY FOR AMERICAN ARCHAEOLOGY

ROCK SHELTER SITE FORMATION

NAME

The series of images show a rock shelter where humans took shelter through time. Archaeologists document every level of a site's stratigraphy (the layers of material, usually soils, deposited over time). Use the visual clues to arrange the images in chronological order, starting with the oldest and continuing to the most recent use of the site.

For each image, write a brief one sentence justification for why you placed it in that order.

ORDER:

LETTER	JUSTIFICATION

A



B



C



D



E

