

# Reading the Archaeological Record

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## Archaeology



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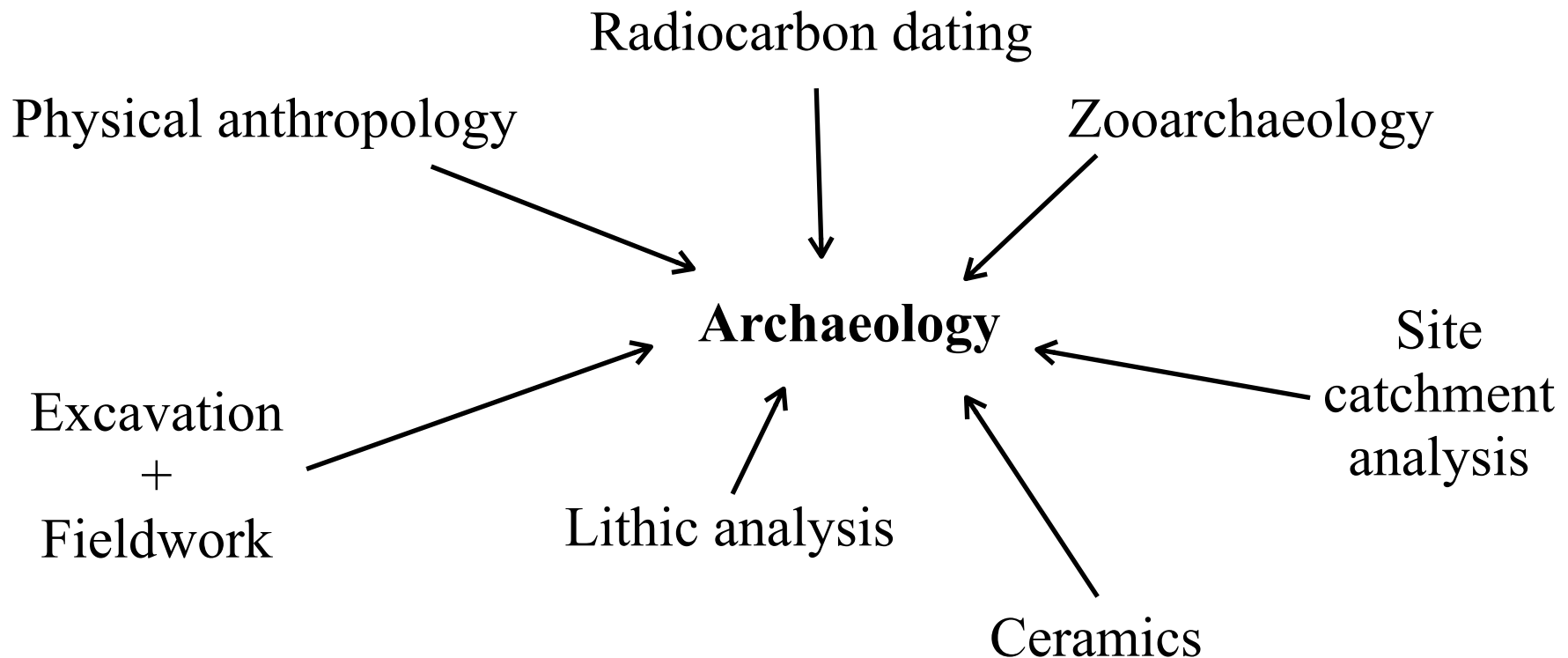


# Reading the Archaeological Record

## The Two Archaeologies

Archaeology is:

- a) a methodology involving fieldwork and excavation of sites, that is unique to archaeology;
- b) but also a broad discipline that is interested in people.



# Reading the Archaeological Record

## Primary Sources

1) The archaeological record *itself* is the primary source.

2) The excavation report should be treated as a *secondary source*, although it includes primary source data (e.g. measurements, descriptions). But it also includes the excavator(s) interpretations and “readings”.

**Interpretation starts ‘at the trowel’s edge’ (Hodder 1999: 83)**

## Case in point:

Neolithic houses at  
Durrington Walls  
(Parker Pearson 2012)

Several other cases found in  
Southwest Britain previously, but  
had been dismissed as pits.

For years the dearth of Neolithic  
settlements had been a staple of  
SWern British late prehistory.

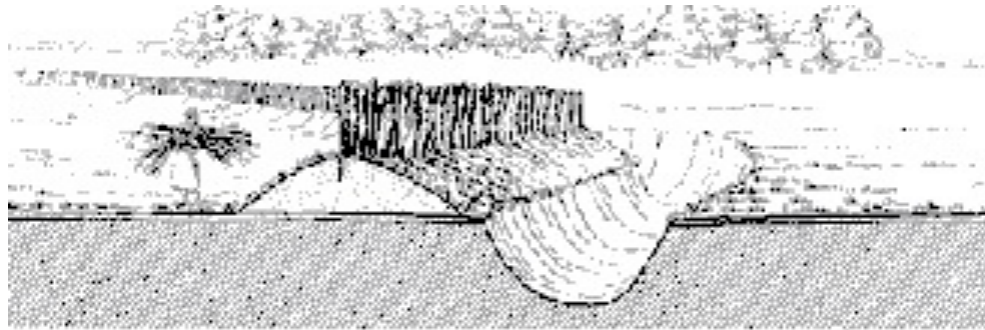
Everything will have to be  
reanalyzed and rethought now.



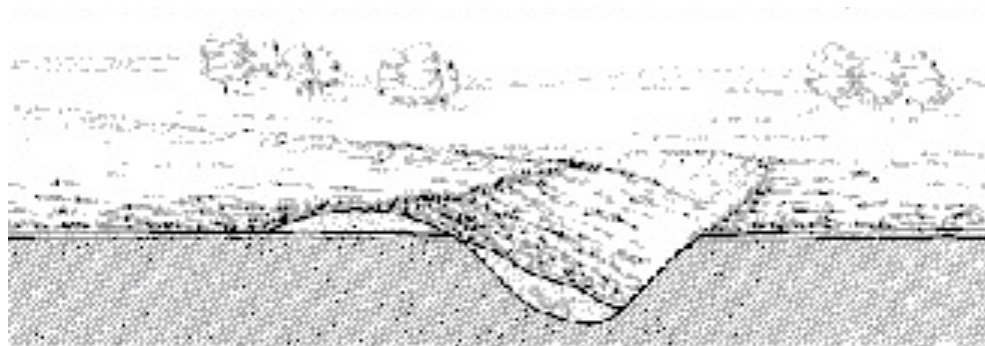
# Reading the Archaeological Record

## The Archaeological Process

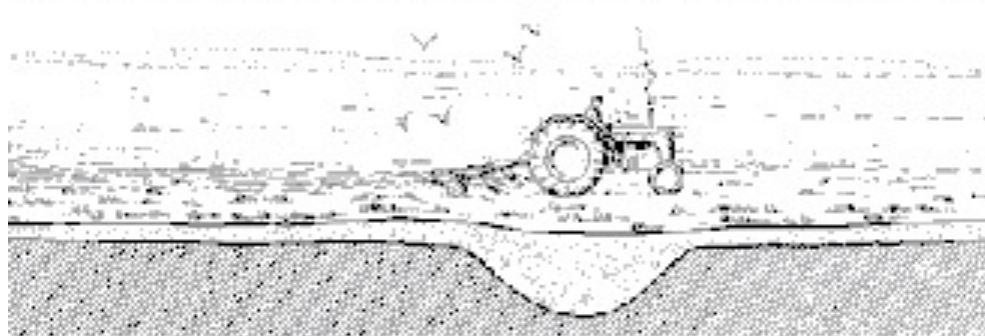
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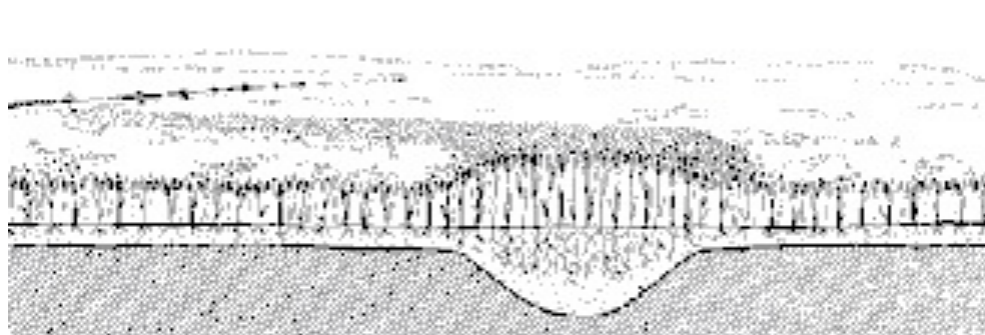
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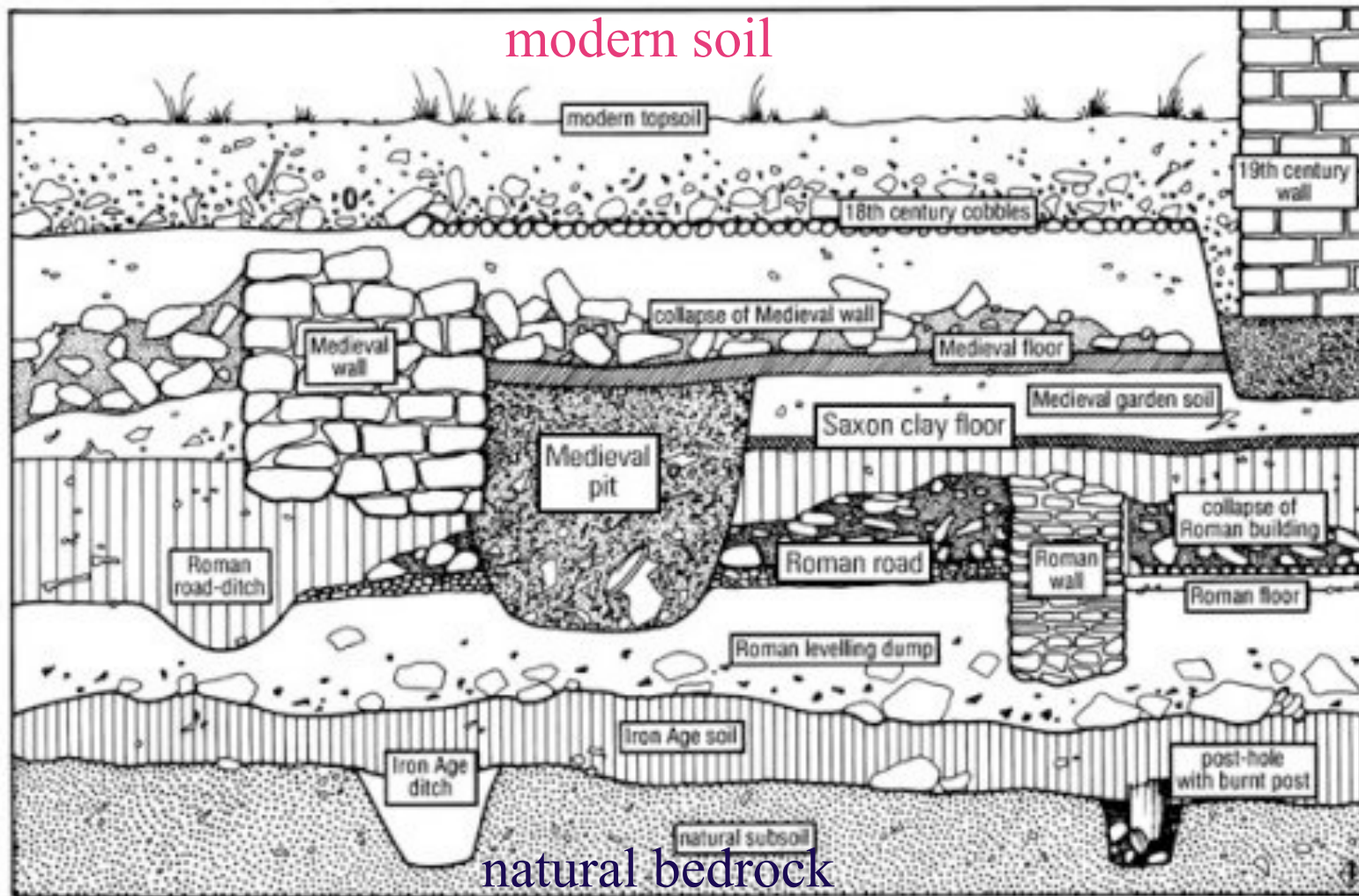


4



# Reading the Archaeological Record

## The Archaeological Process



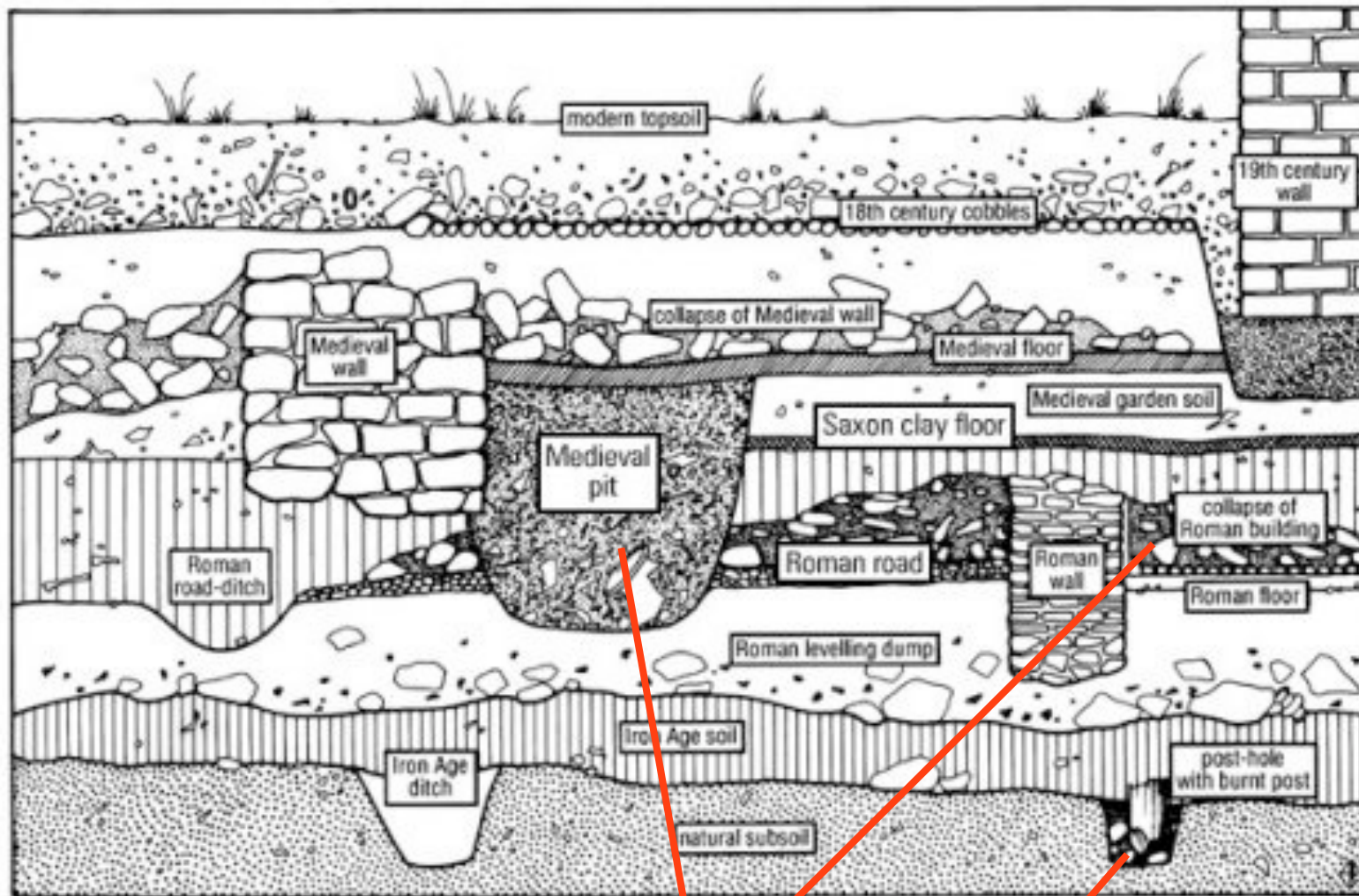
youngest



oldest

# Reading the Archaeological Record

## The Archaeological Process



youngest

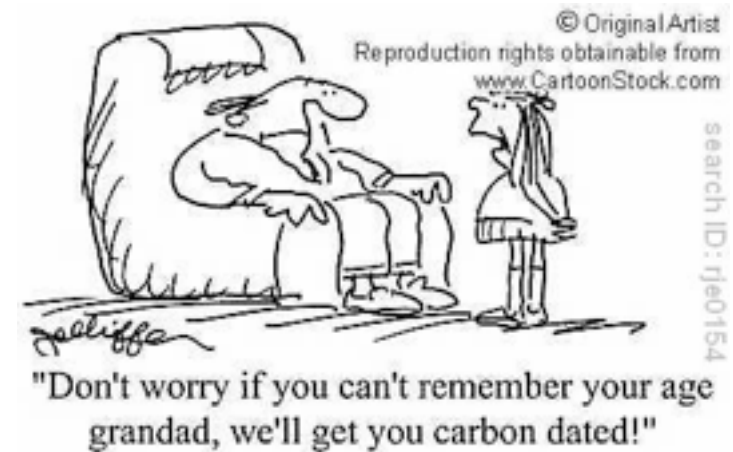
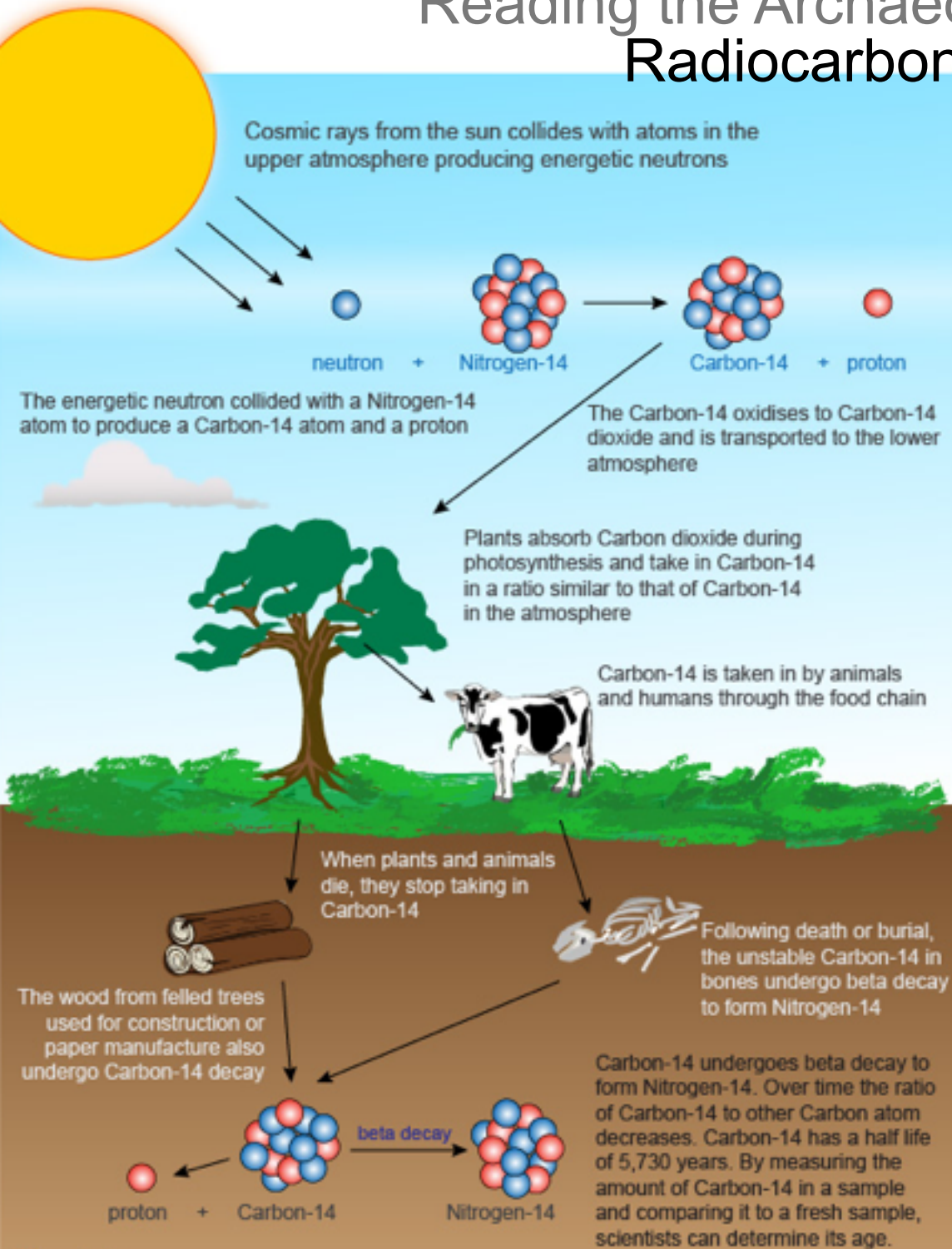


oldest

radiocarbon samples

# Reading the Archaeological Record

## Radiocarbon Dating



# Reading the Archaeological Record

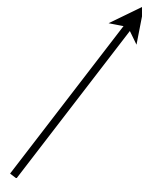
## Radiocarbon Dating

Needs to be calibrated using tree-rings.



$$6000 \pm 50 \text{ (uncal) BC} = 4890 \pm 60 \text{ cal BC}$$

“radiocarbon years”



“calendar/solar years”

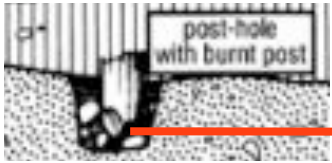


also usual to see it in “years ago”, “before the present”, or BP. The radiocarbon “present” is set to 1950 CE.

$$4890 \text{ cal BC} = 6840 \text{ BP}$$

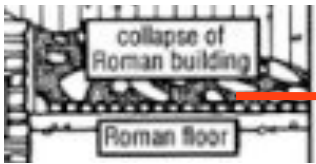
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## Context is Everything



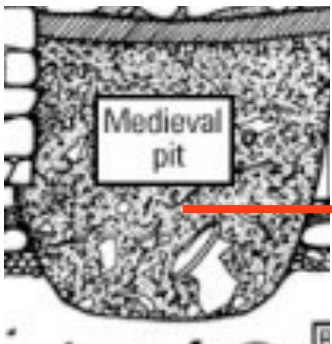
charcoal from burnt post

dates the wood, not  
the placement of the  
pole



charcoal from  
burnt wooden structure

dates the wood, not  
the construction of  
the structure



animal bones

dates the culling of the  
animal, not the  
placement of the bones  
in the pit

# Reading the Archaeological Record

## Archaeological *Theories*

A Theory (with capital T) in Archaeology is an academic current, much like the ones in Anthropology you've read about in the Research Methods module (e.g. functionalism, structuralism).



While reading through archaeological books or journals you will find one or more currents, and it's important to know the academic context of each author as with a Theory comes a set of assumptions and research interests/priorities.

# Reading the Archaeological Record

## Archaeological *Theories*

### “Classical” Archaeology (pre-1960)

Key role was to reconstruct the past;

Excavation was key methodology;

Very descriptive;

Created and used relative dating techniques, such as typological sequences;

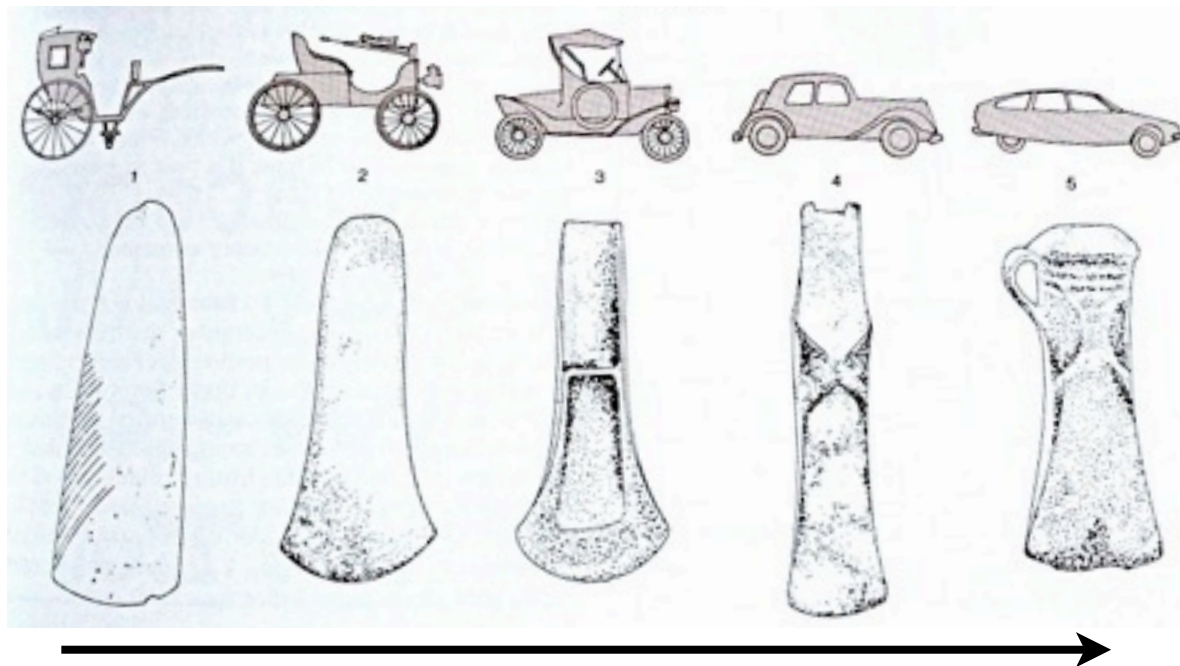


Famous representatives:

Sir Flinders Petrie (1853-1942)

V. Gordon Childe (1892-1957)

Sir Mortimer Wheeler (1890-1976)



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## Archaeological *Theories*

### Processual Archaeology (post 1960) or 'New' Archaeology

Key role was to *explain* past change via the concept of *culture process*;

Its birth coincided with the rise of Archaeological Science (radiocarbon dating);

An approach that mirrored the Natural Sciences: hypothesis testing, construction of models, question-directed research, generalization;



Famous representatives:

Lord Colin Renfrew (1937)

Lewis Binford (1931-2011)



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## Archaeological *Theories*

### Post-Processual Archaeology (post 1980s) or Interpretative *Archaeologies*

Encouraged from post-modernism;

Key principles: no single, correct way to undertake archaeological inference; objectivity is unattainable; many readings are possible (*multivocality*);

Different approaches:  
symbolic and structuralist; neo-Marxist;  
phenomenological; praxis; hermeneutic

Focus shifted from change and *process* to the beliefs and practices, to the ideologies and cosmologies of societies.



Famous representatives:

Ian Hodder (1948)

Michael Shanks (1959)

Chris Tilley (19??)



# Reading the Archaeological Record

## Landscape Archaeology

The landscape around an archaeological site is **not** simply a backdrop; passive, static, unchanging and uninteresting.

People move around the landscape, give and take meaning from it, tell stories about it. Landscapes are also open to control, change, beginning and end.

“The experience of landscape structures time and time structures the way we experience the landscape.”

Key works:

C Tilley, 1994. *A Phenomenology of Landscape*. Oxford: Berg.

B Bender (ed), 1993. *Landscape: Politics and Perspectives*. Oxford: Berg.

P J Ucko and R Layton (eds), 1999. *The Archaeology and Anthropology of Landscape*. Oxon: Routledge.

**“The closest parallel [to Archaeoastronomy] is probably landscape archaeology, which encapsulates a theoretical concern with how people constructed and used the environments around them, but also encompasses a range of field techniques and methods” (Ruggles 2011:7)**

# Reading the Archaeological Record

## Final words

**Context is everything in Archaeology.**