

Studying History

The Big Idea

Historians use many kinds of clues to understand how people lived in the past.

Main Ideas

- History is the study of the past.
- We can improve our understanding of people's actions and beliefs through the study of history.
- Historians use clues from various sources to learn about the past.

Key Terms

history
culture
archaeology
fossil
artifacts
primary source
secondary source

Academic Vocabulary

values ideas that people hold dear and try to live by

If YOU were there . . .

You are a student helping scholars uncover the remains of an ancient city. One exciting day you find a jar filled with bits of clay on which strange symbols have been carved. You recognize the marks as letters because for years you have studied the language of the city's people. This is your chance to put your skills to use!

What might you learn from the ancient writings?

The Study of the Past

The people of the ancient world didn't build skyscrapers, invent the automobile, or send spaceships to Mars. But they did remarkable things. Among their amazing feats were building huge temples, inventing writing, and discovering planets. Every step we take—in technology, science, education, literature, and all other fields—builds on what people did long ago. We are who we are because of what people did in the past.

What Is History? **History** is the study of the past. A battle that happened 5,000 years ago and an election that happened yesterday are both parts of history.

Historians are people who study history. Their main concern is human activity in the past. They want to know how people lived and why they did the things they did. They try to learn about the problems people faced and how they found solutions.

Historians are interested in how people lived their daily lives. How and where did they work, fight, trade, farm, and worship? What did they do in their free time? What games did they play? In other words, historians study the past to understand people's **culture** — the knowledge, beliefs, customs, and **values** of a group of people. Historians also



This statue of a bat god from Mexico provides clues to Aztec culture.

examine how past cultures interacted with their natural surroundings to create cultural landscapes. Examples of cultural landscapes include farms, battlefields, and religious sites.

All historians specialize in studying a certain part, or aspect, of the past. Some focus on a specific event, while others focus on a specific group of people. Some focus on a specific time period, era, or age. Dividing the past into smaller sections helps organize history.

Historians often use a method called historical inquiry to develop our understanding of the past. They first identify a question that needs to be answered. An example of this could be, *What natural resources did a specific group of people use to make shelters?* Then historians create educated guesses called hypotheses. After testing these hypotheses, they form possible conclusions based on evidence.

What Is Archaeology? An important field that contributes much information about the past is **archaeology** (a-hr-kee-AH-luh-jee). It is the study of the past based on what people left behind. Archaeologists, or people who practice archaeology, explore places where people once lived, worked, or fought. The things that people left in these places may include jewelry, dishes, or weapons. They range from stone tools to huge buildings.

Archaeologists examine the objects they find to learn what they can tell about the past. In many cases, the objects that people left behind are the only clues we have to how they lived. In ancient Greece, for example, earthquakes forced people to leave the settlement of Akrotiri. A volcanic