

CENTER FOR ARCHAEOLOGICAL MATERIALS

The purpose of the Center for Archaeological Materials (http://web.mit.edu/cmrae/cmrae_home.htm) is to encourage incorporation of the natural sciences and engineering in the normal pursuit of anthropological, archaeological, and art historical inquiry.

The center's particular emphasis is on examining and explaining the nature of prehistoric and non-industrial technologies, especially those technologies of unusual importance in the development of ancient and pre-industrial societies. The center considers not only technologies of subsistence, communication, and production, but technologies whose purposes are largely symbolic, such as information-bearing technologies of art.

The center is concerned with the remains of human activities in the past and the exploration of the imprint of these activities on the environment: what people did in the environment and what the environment was like. Determination of palaeoecologies—climates, floral and faunal populations, food chains, and so forth—provides a strong research focus. The center uses as its evidence all of material culture, and explores cultural and environmental materials through the most up-to-date methods common to chemistry, physics, biology, geology, and materials science and engineering, in conjunction with appropriate mathematical and statistical analyses.

The center's teaching and research programs incorporate materials science and engineering among the range of methods that archaeologists use to try to render culture history, cultural lifeways, and culture process from what little is preserved of society's material culture. Research activities are carried out in a network of materials laboratories that include metallurgy, ceramics, photomicrography, and computation. The center emphasizes rigorous laboratory study of artifacts and other kinds of cultural remains to determine the nature and structure of the materials of which they are composed and the extraction and processing regimes they have undergone.

Open to graduate students and senior undergraduates, the center offers graduate-level subjects in the Graduate Archaeological Science Laboratory. Subjects are heavily laboratory-oriented and often cover a single class of materials (e.g., ceramics or metals), or a method for interpreting archaeological data (e.g., computers in archaeology).

The center is administered by the Office of the Provost. Further information about the center may be obtained from the director, Professor Heather Lechtman, Department of Materials Science and Engineering, Room 8-138, 617-253-2172.