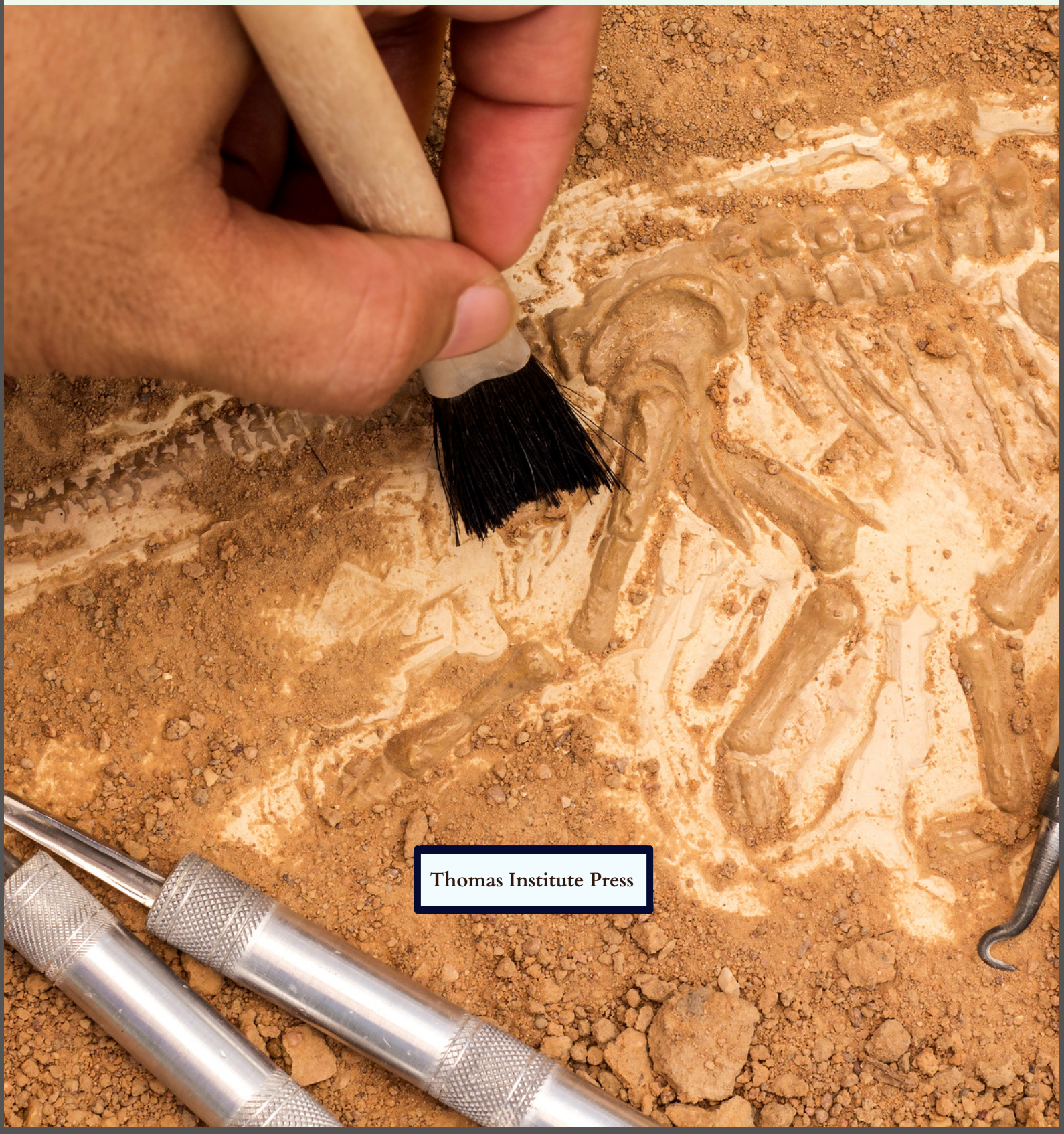
Digging into the Past: Resurrecting the Bible



Thomas Institute Press

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Curse Tablets at *Agora*

We were reading from the Bible in the Roman *agora* at Athens when we learned of the discovery of a series of tablets found in an old well nearby. Called “curse tablets,” the discovery unearthed dozens of well-preserved tablets that contained curses against Greek citizens from thousands of years ago. Although a seemingly odd discovery, curse tablets were quite common in ancient Greece, with people paying money to curse people they did not like.



These kinds of discoveries are more than just curiosities. They are like puzzle pieces from the past that allow us to have a clearer understanding of how people lived their lives. And when we compare these discoveries from things in the Bible, we can oftentimes see great parallels. For instance, there are dozens of verses in the Bible containing or referring to curses against individuals, towns, and even nations, perhaps most famously Jesus’s cursing of various cities and a fig tree in addition to his command to bless people who curse you.



The Importance of Archaeology

Let's start with a definition: **Archaeology is the study of ancient remains that aims to help us recreate how people lived in the past.** A relatively new discipline, the study of archaeology is less than 300 years old. Its great genesis was the discovery in the first half of the 1700s of ancient Pompeii and Herculaneum, two Roman towns that were destroyed by a volcano that erupted in 79 and lay hidden for centuries beneath ash, rubble, and earth. This discovery caused an avalanche of interest among adventurers, entrepreneurs, and opportunists who daydreamed about making the discovery of a lifetime.



Since its early days, archaeology has evolved quite extensively. It is now a highly technical and reputable discipline that is mostly confined to professionals who use the latest developments in science and technology. What archaeologists have accomplished in the last two centuries is absolutely incredible. They have literally brought entire villages, cities, and civilizations back from the dead. And any time you visit a biblical site—whether in Greece or elsewhere in the ancient world—it is a testimony to archaeology.

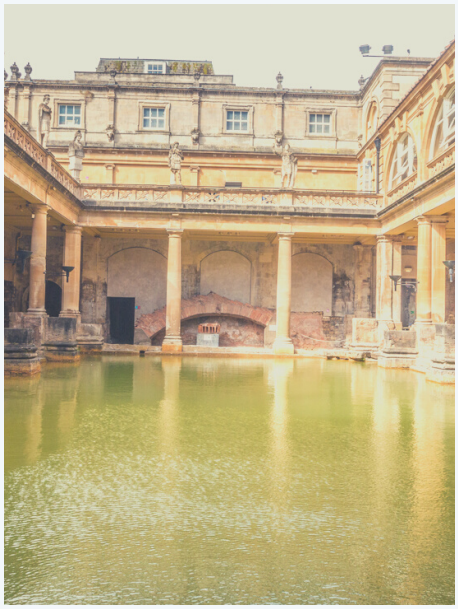
Terms Explaining Ancient Cities

For these reasons, it is important to learn some basic

concepts from archaeology that will really illuminate your visit to all the ancient sites you will visit. By learning about these terms, your trip will go from black and white to full color.







- **Agora**: This Greek term referred to the open area of a city designed in the shape of a square in the middle of the city. (It was called a *forum* in Roman cities.) The *agora*, or "marketplace," was where everything major happened. It is where people bought and sold goods, where governments decreed laws and heard cases, where gossip was spread, where teaching lessons took place, and where much of communal life was lived. In some Greek cities, the *agora* was divided into the commercial *agora* and the civic *agora*.

- **Amphitheater**: This oval-shaped theater was used for games, contests, and other entertainment. They were much more common in Roman cities than Greek ones, with the most famous example being the Colosseum in Rome.

- **Amphora**: This was a large storage jar that had two handles and a narrow neck. It was initially used for wine or olive oil, and they were used for everyday use in biblical times, especially in many biblical stories. Archaeologists use amphoras to date when events happened.

- **Acropolis**: This was the "high city" in ancient towns. So, it naturally commanded the highest part and was usually the oldest as well. In the ancient world, height indicated proximity to the gods, so an acropolis could be an ideal location for a temple. In Greece, the most famous acropolis is the acropolis in Athens, which still commands the most strategic location today.

- **Basilica**: This kind of building, called a "royal house," was colonnaded and used to conduct business or perform various functions of the government. It was a long and rectangular design with a central nave and side aisles that could accommodate a lot of people. After Christianity became a legal religion, the basilica became the standard architectural design for Christian cathedrals. So, when you visit almost any cathedral in Europe or the Middle East, you are standing inside a basilica.

- **Baths**: Bathhouses were in every major Greek city, and they eventually became the center of social life. Over time, especially after the Romans conquered Greek



- **Baths** (continued): Cities, bathhouses became very extensive and surrounded by shops, gymnasia, schools, toilets, and fields. Depending on the city, bathhouses were not used by women and men at the same time. Bathhouses contained several rooms. In general, a person took off their clothes in the dressing room (*apodyterium*), then took a plunge in the cold room (*frigidarium*), then passed time in the warm room (*tepidarium*), and finished off in the hot room (*caldarium*).

- **Bema**: Located in the center of town, this was a speaker's platform where proclamations were read and where citizens appeared before government officials. Most famously, the apostle Paul appeared before Gallio at the *bema* in Corinth in the early 50s. So, when you visit Corinth's *bema*, you can literally stand in the very place Paul stood almost 2,000 years ago.

- **Column**: This was a freestanding pillar that was a hallmark of ancient Greek architecture. You will see them everywhere in ancient Greek cities. Composed of a base, shaft, and capital, there were three kinds or "orders": Corinthian, Doric, and Ionic. When you visit an ancient Greek city, try to figure out which order the columns belong to.

- **Gymnasium**: This was a Greek school for boys. It comes from the Greek word for "naked" because the boys exercised and played sports in the nude. The gymnasium was in the center of town.

- **Insula**: This is a Latin term meaning "island," and it refers to an "island" of tiny apartments in the ancient world. Most ancients lived in one-room apartments that had no running water, no natural sunlight, no electricity, and no bathrooms.

- **Mosaic**: This was a floor containing hundreds of different-colored and cube-shaped stones arranged to form a specific picture, phrase, or decorative pattern. They could appear in houses, buildings, streets, bathhouses, and religious structures.

- **Odeion**: This was in the shape of a theater but was usually smaller and reserved mostly for musical productions.

- **Polis**: This was what the ancient Greeks called their city-states, e.g., Athens or Sparta.

- **Radiocarbon 14**: This is a method that archaeologists have used to date specific objects found.





- **Roads**: In Greco-Roman cities, the main street was called the *cardo maximus*. This was in the north-south direction. Then there was the *decumanus*, which was in the east-west direction. When you visit an ancient city, always look for these roads.

- **Shards**: These are fragments of pottery that are littered throughout ancient sites. Archaeologists use shards to estimate dates for things.

- **Tel(l)**: This is a mound of earth composed of successive layers of civilizations. Archaeologists dig tells and classify each layer into a specific time period.

- **Temple**: A temple was usually located in the heart of a city or on its acropolis. Temples were dedicated to either a single god/goddess, more than one, or to an emperor. They were everywhere in ancient Greece, and although every city had one major god or goddess as its patron deity, there were countless temples that filled the streets. Figures in the Bible like Paul would have come across temples dedicated to pagan gods multiple times of day. Unlike churches, temples were not designed for group worship. Temples were also oftentimes connected to religious prostitution by means of pagan priests and priestesses. The most famous temple in Greece is the Parthenon, dedicated to the goddess Athena, "the Virgin," which is what *Parthenon* means in Greek.

- **Theater**: This served as the setting for plays, dramas, and other public performances. Greek theaters contained three parts: (1) *orchestra*, where the performers performed at the bottom center; (2) *theatron*, which is where the spectators sat; and (3) *skene*, or "scene building." Though not visible today, theaters usually had backdrops behind the orchestra. Theaters oftentimes could accommodate an entire city, and they were segregated according to class and social standing.

- **Triclinium**: This was a secluded dining room in wealthy villas or estates where the heads of the household ate their meals. It comes from a Greek word meaning "three couches" because it originally contained three couches used for reclining. Traditionally, the people reclined on their left sides and ate with their right hands while being served by slaves. The *triclinium* was likely the setting of the Lord's Supper during biblical times, and Paul addressed various issues that arose in them in his letters, for instance, in 1 Corinthians.





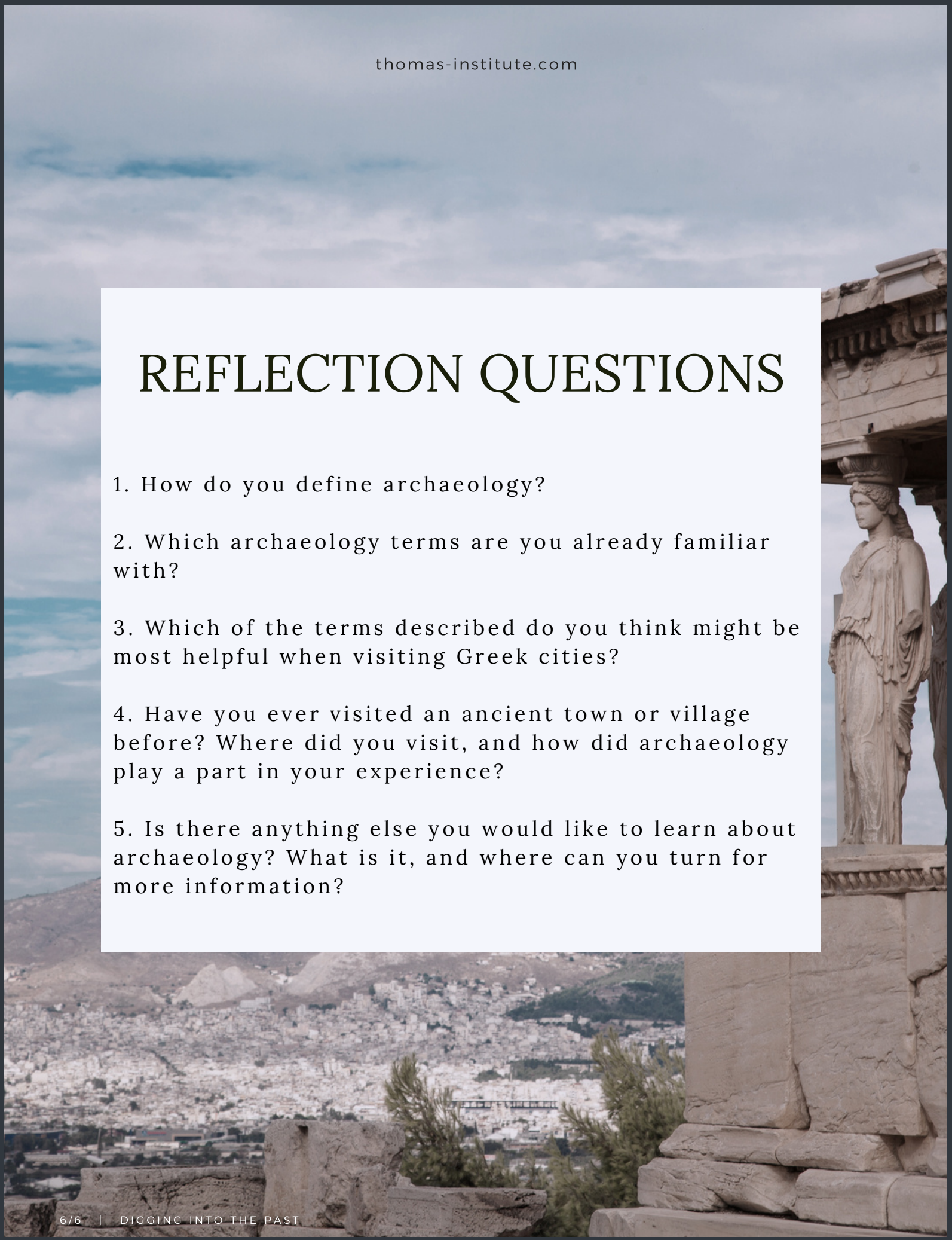




Conclusion

In conclusion, archaeology is an essential field of study when understanding the biblical past because it illuminates how the earliest Christians worshiped, ate, worked, slept, passed time, had sexual relations, raised children, and generally lived their lives.

Put simply, without archaeology, there would be no biblical sites to visit. And as you prepare to visit different sites in Greece, keep this booklet handy and refer to it as often as needed in order to better understand what you are experiencing



REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. How do you define archaeology?

2. Which archaeology terms are you already familiar with?

3. Which of the terms described do you think might be most helpful when visiting Greek cities?

4. Have you ever visited an ancient town or village before? Where did you visit, and how did archaeology play a part in your experience?

5. Is there anything else you would like to learn about archaeology? What is it, and where can you turn for more information?



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