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# Redefining Hearths

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## Résumé

Archaeologists are often required to define artifacts or features recovered from archaeological contexts. Hearths, however, are features of all contemporary hunter-gatherer societies, and when found in such contexts they exhibit high variability of construction methods, size, morphology, intensity, and functions. The lack of a clear archaeological definition of a hearth appears to result from their universal contemporary occurrence, as well as from their apparent variability. Ethnographic data emphasize the notion that a hearth is not necessarily a built (e.g. stone-lined) feature, and underline their high degree of variability. In his "Dictionnaire de la Préhistoire" Leroi-Gourhan (1988) suggested that a hearth should exhibit discoloration (dark sediments) and charcoal will be preserved. Other definitions in the archaeological literature similarly depends on the state of preservation and suggest discoloration of sediments, presence of charcoal, and a round or oval-shape.

The available definitions however, appear to suit the definition of a "well-preserved hearth" better than that of a "hearth". Ethnoarchaeological studies demonstrated that the preservation of combustion features, particularly in open-air sites, depends on a variety of factors (e.g. fuel used, soil moisture, rates of sedimentation, chemical variations in sediments) and requires favorable depositional and post-depositional conditions in order to be preserved in the archaeological record. In summary, it is evident that hearths vary in terms of sedimentological setting, intensity, size, fuel used, structure, and function. These variables will eventually dictate the archaeological appearance of these features, i.e., whether hearths will exhibit a stone lining, whether ash and/or charcoal will be preserved, or whether discoloration of the sediments will occur. Consequently, as in the ethnographic record, the archaeological occurrences of hearths are extremely variable and uneven, and hearths are independently defined for each site. It seems that the only common feature of all hearths is the simple fact that people intentionally burn fuel in order to produce a fire.

As the archaeological appearance of hearths is variable in color, size, contour, depth, and the use of stones for construction, it is difficult to generate an archaeological definition that suits these features. However, since hearths serve as focal points for activities, they display areas of refuse accumulation, specifically small refuse. Accordingly, an archaeological definition of a hearth will specify that a hearth is a combustion area, variable in structure, size, and depth, which preserves the remains of burned materials. Such hearths are frequently preserved as *phantom hearths* that lack observable traits or features (e.g. structuring, discoloration of sediments, ash, charcoal), but can and should be discernible through observable patterns of artifacts' spatial distributions.

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\*Intervenant

**Mots-Clés:** hearth, archaeology