

BOX 6.1 COPROLITES

Coprolites (the term used in archaeology for preserved human feces) are an important kind of remains from which much can be learned. Following are some facts about coprolites in archaeology.

- Human coprolites are an excellent source of information for studying diets and paleoenvironments.
- The oldest reported human coprolite dates to about 1 million years ago in Africa, but there is some question about whether it is really human.
- There are reports of a 250,000-year-old human coprolite in Asia.
- One of the oldest reliably dated archaeological sites in North America, Paisley Caves in Oregon, which dates to more than 14,000 years ago, has several human coprolites of that age.
- One of the largest accumulations of prehistoric coprolites comes from the Hinds Cave in Texas, with more than 2,000 human feces. They span an 8,000 year period, and are shaped like cow patties. Analysis indicates a diet rich in fiber, although they had a diverse diet. In the hours before defecation, one individual had apparently eaten antelope, rabbit, rat, squirrel, and eight varieties of plants.
- A Viking coprolite discovered in the United Kingdom is probably the largest recorded. It measures 23 cm, provides evidence of a diet of meat and bread, and indicates the person had intestinal worms.
- Routine coprolite analysis often involves reconstituting the dried feces in solution. Sometimes the smell comes back.