Archaeological taxonomy comprises a number of key concepts for the classification of archaeological material. These include ‘archaeological culture’ and ‘archaeological cultural unity’ which relate to such basic notions of theoretical ethnology as ‘economic and cultural type’ and ‘historical and ethnographic unity’.

The initial archaeological category is the notion of the ‘artifact’, i.e. “any material object produced or modified by man in the past performing a certain cultural function” (Bochkarev 1975: 35). The totality of artifacts comprises a complex, i.e., the empirical basis of archaeology.

The first level of interpretation of archaeological material will be the classification of artifacts according to types. Oscar Montelius introduced the theoretical basis of archaeological classification, commonly understood as the typological method. However, there is still no unity of understanding as to what precisely an archaeological ‘type’ means. Some view the type as an actual existing and historically conditioned phenomenon (Sher 1966; Gryaznov 1969; Kamenetsky 1970); others (Ford 1962; Fedorov-Davydov 1970) understand this category as purely gnoseological, a purely subjective instrument of research. It seems that, as a rule, the artifact type was understood by its creator as a real entity within a culture. This is proved by differences in settlement inventory and related cemeteries (the presence of ritualized and non-ritualized artifacts), and by the fact that archaeologically distinguished artifact types have independent names in the language of a culture.

Typological classification consists of the isolation of peculiarities of artifacts, but it also takes into account the interconnection of characteristic features. This permits one to reconstruct historically existing types within a culture and not a priori classes of artifacts.

The second level of interpretation of archaeological materials is connected with the typological classification of complexes, i.e., with distinguishing the types of sites according to Yu. N. Zakharuk (1981: 20-21). The site type is “a universal unit of classification both for defining within some small territory genetic connections and for discerning synchronous groups.” Systematization at this level is built on the correlation of the elements of burial rite with the basic categories of material culture, primarily ceramics. Then domestic settlement wares are compared with mortuary ceramics. Site types outlined according to a set combination of principles are then mapped. Their relative chronology is established on the basis of stratigraphical data, transparent typological series and mutually associated types within closed complexes. The absolute age of every site is defined on the basis of imports and such chronological indicators as bone
cheek-pieces and metal objects. Finally, according to the accepted definition of archaeological culture type, the chronological stages and local variants of the archaeological culture are evaluated and the degree of similarity between sites and with foreign cultures is determined.

The third level of archaeological analysis consists of distinguishing archaeological cultures or an archaeological cultural unity. This involves a transition from strictly archaeological research to historical interpretation. The archaeological culture is an open, dynamic, statistically stable system of different types of sites that occupy a continuous (though sometimes changing through time) territory with an objectively established unity of interconnected types, which develop uniformly over a long time period and vary in space in a limited manner, distinguishing this system markedly from other systems (i.e., archaeological cultures) (Kamenetsky 1970; Kovalevskaya 1988; Kuz’mina 1988d).

Sometimes divergence in the territorial aspect is such that some environmental zones exhibit independent lines of development. They do not coincide in everything; quite often sites of different types are situated like strip-farming.

In some cases where there is no satisfactory criteria for defining an archaeological culture according to the strict definition of recurring principles that occur uniformly in time and within a restricted area we may still discern a chain or lattice of interconnected site types that sharply differ from foreign ones. In these cases there is also reason to unite these sites into a cultural and historical unity. Sites of these archaeological ‘unities’ may have constrained time–space limits and are united according to one but differentiated according to other features. What is especially important is that they can be sharply distinguished from other sites. The notion of the archaeological cultural unity (or cultural region) was first introduced by A. A. Formozov (1951b; 1959b) and N. Ya. Merpert (1968; 1985) with respect to the Andronovo, Pit- and Timber-grave sites.

What is the historical reality of an archaeological culture or cultural unity? Some ethnologists and archaeologists are sceptical of identifying the archaeological culture with the ethnos (Foss 1952; Arutyunov and Khazanov 1978; Klein 1978; Clarke 1978; Renfrew 1977). Others see the archaeological culture as a reflection of an ethnos in terms of a social unit (Gorodtsov 1927; Bryusov 1956; Formozov 1959a; Zakharuk 1964; 1981; Artamonov 1969; Gryaznov 1969; Tretyakov 1969; Gening 1970; 1976; Kamenetsky 1970; Kuz’mina 1976a; 1988d; Bromley 1983; Merpert 1985; Alekseev 1986; 1989; Kovalevskaya 1988). Of decisive importance for resolving the problem of the relationship between archaeological culture and ethnos is the concept of cultural tradition. S. A. Arutyunov (1989) demonstrated that a cultural tradition is revealed first of all in language and meta-cultural communication (art, family ritual and burial rite). ‘Cultural tradition’ is a stable combination of an interrelated and uniform system of elements of material and spiritual culture as well as the very ways of transferring information from generation to generation. This system is capable of preserving and sustaining itself with a high degree of regularity through stages of cultural development, retaining its stability over a long period of time in order to reproduce an ethnos in a certain ecological niche.