Wash 'n' Go: the field archaeologist's attitude to finds?

Sue Anderson, © November 1996.

Introduction

This paper was originally presented at an Institute of Field Archaeologists Finds Group meeting in November 1996. It is based on my own experiences and those of other finds officers who have frequently come up against a strong anti-finds element amongst our field-based colleagues. Although most people in this category are, by definition, unlikely to be at the meeting, I would like to put my case for the importance of using finds for more than just a means of employing the field team after the end of an excavation.

There are three main strands concerned with finds work which I would like to draw out in this paper.

The first part will consist of a review of the usefulness of finds in archaeology from my own perspective as Finds Officer in a county-based Unit. Although many people here today have a better knowledge of each of the individual classes of finds which I'll discuss, my intention is to consider the point of looking at various find types rather than the detailed research which can be carried out.

Secondly, I will talk about the various roles of finds staff working within a unit, again from my own viewpoint. I am one of two people specialising in finds work within the field section of my unit, working closely with and as a part of the field team, but I recognise that other finds staff may not have such cosy working relationships with their field archaeologists.

I also want to look briefly at the end result of our labours - the finds report itself and its potential for integration with the structural report.

Justification

An anthropologist studying a particular society would study all aspects of that society to form a broad picture of its behavioural and cultural identity. When looking at the society's material culture, the anthropologist would consider both large and immovable 'objects' such as structures, and small portable artefacts. One cannot be interpreted without the help of the other. S/he is looking at the society as a whole and everything is studied as an integral part of life in that social group. Each object has a meaning for at least one individual, possibly even different meanings for different people, and is a relevant part of that society.

It follows from this that archaeologists cannot merely study pits and postholes to determine the nature of society. They must use all available forms of evidence if they are to construct a valid and balanced view of the past.

If this is the case, then it is obvious that merely washing and storing finds whilst the site director gets on with the 'real' archaeology of post-excavation work and interpreting structural evidence is not good enough.

I should stress that in many instances this is nothing to do with the field archaeologist's attitude, but can be traced back to the current planning laws which do not adequately cover post-excavation work generally. Pre-excavation costings often do not take into account the need for processing, conservation and analysis of finds, and are not realistic about the amount of staff time that this will inevitably occupy. Sometimes this is due to a lack of interest on the part of the officer concerned, but more often it is due to fear that we might lose the contract.

For those who still adhere to a philosophy along the lines of "If you can't date it, it ain't useful!", I will give a brief review of some of the diverse ways in which the major categories of finds can be used to help interpret a site. Please note that this is not intended to be comprehensive.

Animal bone is often the most common find from a site, but is one of the categories of artefacts which is least likely to be analysed. Edible shellfish and mollusca also fall into this category.

Animal remains are useful for:

- environmental evidence - this applies particularly to prehistoric sites on which they usually are the most abundant find.
- food and economy - interpretation of the species of animals present can show surprising differences between phases at some sites. Butchery techniques can be studied, as can evidence for bone working, and other industries connected with our exploitation of the animal kingdom, such as tanning.
- status - something which many non-specialists do not appreciate is that animal bone can be extremely useful as an indicator of status, possibly more so than any other find group. Bones of 'exotic' animals are the only high status objects which are deliberately discarded as rubbish. Most other status items are subject to recycling (e.g. metalwork), or do not survive in the ground (textiles, furniture), or are removed from the site. The only major exceptions to this are casual losses and grave goods.

Pottery has an obvious advantage as far as most field archaeologists are concerned – it can be dated, sometimes relatively closely. This means that it tends to get better treatment than other classes of finds. It is probably considerably more important to us as archaeologists than it was to the people who used and eventually discarded it.

Some of the interpretations which pottery can help with include:

- typological studies - this is useful in building up a picture of changing trends, which eventually helps us with dating. It does not really tell us very much about the people who used it, although it may suggest something about changing fashions.
- trade - this aspect of pottery has been widely studied and discussed, although in terms of standard site reports it seems to be of little concern. With some exceptions, imported pottery was valuable not for itself but for its contents. However, the fact that it was kept and reused rather than simply thrown away like most packaging today tells us something about past society.

- function - study of pottery forms is useful in interpreting food transportation, preparation and consumption. The narrow range of ceramic vessels in the high medieval period is an example of this, and it is also a caveat for the dangers of considering only one form of artefact. What were people drinking out of and eating off if they had no ceramic mugs or plates?
- technology - kiln wasters can be studied to provide information about methods of firing, stacking techniques within kilns, and methods of manufacture.
- appropriate technology - handmade pottery produces a fairly standard response from most people - "Yuk!" But consider its uses and how appropriate it is for cooking in an open fire.

Building materials are often only sampled on site, or not collected at all. Few archaeologists realise that ceramic building materials especially can be almost as useful as pottery in giving a broad date to a site. This is particularly possible if well stratified material can be collected and studied to establish a sequence, as has been done in Lincoln and to a certain extent in my own Unit. The finds officer should always be consulted when determining a strategy for disposal or sampling of this material, but in general don't just keep the pretty ones, or the corners, or the bits with a hole!

- typology - use of pantiles or pegtiles on roofs, types of floor tiles and their designs, brick sizes, can all be useful in dating.
- trade - CBM may be more useful in this than pottery since building material is traded for itself. Recent work on Roman building materials suggests that they are often not as local as has been assumed. Economics of building stone in medieval period - stone petrology can be used to tie stones to quarries or areas.
- building techniques - use of mortar, daub, etc. Wooden construction techniques.

Human bone is archaeology at the level of the individual, as well as providing information about a local population sample. I'm not suggesting that there is a real problem with getting Units to have HSR analysed, but sometimes disarticulated remains or single skeletons are not considered worth studying.

- demography - age, sex, trends in stature, head shape, genetic affinities, etc.
- disease - individual suffering, epidemiology.
- sometimes even dating - for example, clay pipe smoking leaves tell-tale marks on the teeth.

Metal **small finds** are often individual objects with individual meanings. Sometimes the owner can even be identified, for example a personal seal matrix.

- dating - particularly coins
- status - grave goods - although these may reflect the status, beliefs, gender etc. of the burier rather than the buried.
- technology - metallographic and chemical analysis

Other classes of find which should not be forgotten, but which unfortunately I do not have time to consider today, include:

- Glass (window and vessel),
- Leather and textiles, and other organic materials
- Metallurgical waste
- Flint/stone implements

It is important to remember that we shouldn't only be looking at the exciting finds to the exclusion of all others. Archaeology is more about the mundane than the exotic.

The Role of the Finds Officer

There is much more to finds work than washing finds, dating the odd bit of pot which someone thrusts into your hand at the end of the day's digging, or writing the occasional report!

Some aspects of the work of finds staff include:

- overseeing the **collection** of finds on site and their transportation back to the Unit
    - This may involve considerable tact - how many field archaeologists really want a 'finds person' telling them how to run their site! However, finds collection is a major part of excavation strategy, possibly as much as 50% of the work, and should involve someone who is competent to make decisions regarding finds.
    - Although it is not always possible for the finds officer to be on site due to time or financial constraints, every project larger than an evaluation should have a designated finds person on site who is responsible for the collection and packaging of finds. This person should have some training from the Unit finds officer beforehand. The importance of having someone competent to deal with finds on a site run by a Unit based outside the region cannot be stressed enough.

- overseeing or carrying out finds **processing**
    - Correct washing is important and field archaeologists are wrong to think that untrained staff can simply pick up a brush and get on with it. There is a need for all field staff to be trained in correct washing procedures and the reasons why careful washing is important. However, underlying this is a fundamental need for a change in attitude amongst field staff towards finds, and this is something which really needs to be addressed at the basic training level at University.
    - Marking of all finds should be seen as a minimum requirement. Anyone who has tried to sort out old collections of material stored in decaying paper bags will understand the reasons for this. We may use plastic bags now, but who knows how long they will last. Also marking is necessary for specialist analysis, since there is always a risk of mixing finds when they are laid out anywhere in the reach of non-specialists!
    - Basic quantification is an absolute necessity, and this should include both counting and weighing of all classes of artefact. This is needed both for the archive and the assessment report, as outlined in MAP 2. The number of boxes is not really sufficient for a specialist to make an estimate, since box sizes vary enonnously between Units. Most museums would not accept archaeological archives without this basic work.

- draughting a **finds policy**
    - If there isn't already a finds policy in use, the finds officer should determine all finds strategies and procedures within the unit, in consultation with regular specialists, conservators, field staff, and museum archaeologists. Although minimum standards should be set out, it should also be recognised that the practicalities of site work, particularly in bad weather, mean that best practice will not always be adhered to, and that it is sometimes necessary to make compromises.
    - the policy should include: procedures to be used on site, stressing at all times the need for consultation when in doubt; procedures for post-excavation processing; and archive policies.

- sending material to and liaising with **specialists**
    - this should be done by the finds officer rather than the field archaeologist, simply because it makes sense to have a single person in charge of the whereabouts of finds from all Unit excavations and a single set of records kept in a designated place. It also makes it easier for specialists if they have one known contact in the Unit.

- background research
    - the finds officer should take some responsibility for setting up type-series for the region or regions covered by their unit. This is particularly true of pottery, and is necessary to provide field staff with those important dates. Lack of funding is a problem, but the importance of this work should be recognised and money should be made available from the general fund.

- the Finds Officer as **in-house specialist**
    - finds people who are specialists in their own right are a very useful resource. Not only are they available for quick queries by field staff at all times, but they are also able to write reports quickly and cheaply for the Unit, and they have a potential to bring money in. Unfortunately this is often overlooked, and the only outside contracts sought by some units are field-based. If anyone working in a unit shows an aptitude for specialist work, they should be trained accordingly and their skills utilised - they'll thank you for it, and the unit will be better off!

- writing up **finds reports**
    - the finds officer also has to be a generalist. S/he should be able to write an overview of the conclusions and interpretations made by other specialists, preferably in consultation with them.

Finds reports

Once it has been established, through assessment or other criteria, that particular finds are worth reporting on, then it is necessary to decide on a method of publication which will present specialist reports to their best and most useful effect. Click here for suggestions for integrating finds with structural reports.

It is generally agreed by most archaeologists that archaeological reports in their present form are boring, and there has been some debate in recent years concerning the integration of finds with the structural report. There are good arguments both for and against this practice, but Hedley Swain's suggestion, at a 1995 IFA Conference session, that it should only be done when it is 'best for the archaeology' seems to me to be the most sensible. It is also important to consider the audience for an integrated report - the 'popular' publication or the museum display may be the best and most achievable target for total. integration of archaeological evidence.

As a finds officer who also writes structural and specialist reports, I believe the most useful method of publication for my needs is the one suggested by Jennie Coy at the same session, namely integration by cross-referencing. This allows me to find parallels and dates for objects, and also to relate them to contextual information.

Perhaps we should even question certain assumptions and go for a more radical approach. Why should finds have to fit in with the structural report? If someone in the past buried something in a pit, do you think they saw the pit or the object as more important, or both, or neither?

However, there is another way. Integration can occur through teamwork - bringing together all relevant specialists for regular meetings during the post-excavation process. They can discuss their findings and interpretations with people who are looking at different material which forms part of the same assemblage, and also the people who dug the site and are interpreting the structural remains. This is the only way in which specialists with different backgrounds and viewpoints have any hope of breaking down the barriers and understanding each other's points of view. It would also be of great benefit in the interpretation of a site. Unfortunately this is an ideal which seems unlikely to happen with anything but the largest sites in the current financial climate.

The other extreme, integrating specialist reports into the main text without any consultation, is fraught with danger. Many specialist reports are not written in a way which could be integrated with the site report - for example they may not be written with particular features in mind but may simply provide an overview by phase with occasional reference to major contexts. If the specialist is not consulted from the beginning and not included in the post-excavation team, how can he or she be expected to know what is required?

Assuming specialists are brought into the discussion about the final report layout, what should we expect from them?

- specialists should be expected and allowed to use specialist terms which will be understood by their colleagues but they should also provide at least a summary of their findings and interpretations in plain English, making it clear which parts are interpretation and which are observation. This summary should allow generalists, either in finds or in fieldwork, to use the interpretation in their overall conclusions which draw together all the strands of evidence from the site.
- specialists should be provided with basic contextual and artefact information and a site summary at the very least, and they should be expected to refer to major

groups of finds where they occur. For this reason, it is essential that the specialist has some background in archaeology as well as their specialist knowledge.

- if finds are to be illustrated, the specialist should be consulted about which are worthy of inclusion. Only the specialist is qualified to make such decisions.
- Click here for more about specialist requirements and products.

Perhaps the best we can hope for at present is integration of specialist reports within the finds section of a site report, using functional categories not only for small finds but for bulk finds as well, concluding with an overall review bringing all the strands together.

Conclusions

I hope that on most sites finds would not be retrieved at all costs if it meant destroying the structural evidence, but on the other hand finds should not be destroyed or lost simply to get at the structural evidence. There must be a balance, and this balance should continue into the post-excavation analysis and beyond. Every find is worth studying and thinking about for the information it provides in helping to interpret a site, and everything must be recorded to a basic standard.

Finds are something that all archaeologists have to deal with, so there ought to be basic finds training of all staff to ensure that this balance is maintained and results in 'good' archaeology. Attitudes towards finds are often ingrained from University onwards, and they will be perpetuated as long as finds staff are seen as second class archaeologists who rarely rise beyond the post of Officer. In a career which is already underpaid and undervalued, shouldn't we all be sticking together and recognising the value of different aspects of our work? So don't let your excavators "Wash 'n' go", train them to be competent finds people as well as diggers, and we will be a little bit closer to integrating finds and fieldwork.