

# CAISTOR ROMAN PROJECT GUIDANCE FOR NEW MEMBERS

## HOW AND WHY DO OBJECTS MADE OR MODIFIED BY HUMANS END UP IN THE GROUND?

It is important to bear in mind that objects (the term artefact will generally be used in the rest of this document) that we treat as finds in Archaeology are not always “lost” in the true sense of the word. There are a number of different reasons why this may have occurred including:

- The artefact may have been genuinely lost e.g a brooch or buckle that has suffered a break in the pin.

**Break here causing detachment from belt plate**



**Roman Head Buckle**

- The artefact may no longer have been needed and was discarded as rubbish e.g a broken pot.
- The artefact/s has/have been deliberately placed in the ground to perhaps avoid loss during times of threat e.g coin hoards.
- The artefact has been deliberately placed to signify the foundation or closure of a building.
- The artefact has been deliberately placed in what traditionally has been referred to as a ritual deposit but now tends to be referred to as a structured

deposit. The 2018 excavations in Temple Field produced a potential structured deposit in the form of a mid-4th C Roman coin placed within a cluster of oyster shells in the trench over the eastern gateway.

**Roman coin within oyster shell cluster**



- The artefact may have been deliberately thrown away.

## **WHAT CAN WE DEDUCE FROM SIMPLE OBSERVATION?**

### **USING POTTERY AS AN EXAMPLE**

When looking at a find for the first time your eyes are your most valuable asset and a close examination of even the most mundane potsherd, for example, can reveal a great deal. In the case of pottery the sort of points to look out for include, in no particular order:

1. Is it a single sherd with no other associated sherd/s that form a clear join with it or are there parts of the same vessel in the same area?

**Example of adjoining potsherds**



2. Is/are the edge/s where it has been broken clean and sharp? If so this probably indicates that it has suffered little disturbance and wear subsequent to it going in to the ground. Absence of clean sharp breaks will suggest the opposite scenario.

**Sharp edges with clean breaks**



3. Is the surface of the sherd abraded i.e showing signs of wear? If so it is likely to have suffered from wear and tear subsequent to being deposited in the ground. Also bear in mind that the broken sherd may not have gone into the ground immediately. For example it may have lain on the surface for some time or in a surface midden and may subsequently have been amongst material used to fill in a pit. In a similar vein it may also have been amongst material spread on fields as part of the practice known as manuring. In the latter scenario the effects of subsequent ploughing may have resulted in further damage and erosion of the original fabric.

4. The size of the sherd. This obviously may simply be a reflection of the size of the original pot and how many parts it was broken in. As a general rule, when examining the pottery assemblage from a particular site, the average sherd size (total weight of assemblage divided by the number of sherds) together with the extent of abrasion will give some indication as to whether or not it has lain largely undisturbed through time.

5. Whether the pot has been hand made or wheel turned.

6. The extent to which the original pot has been fired. Typically the harder the pot the higher the firing temperature and vice versa. The colour will also give an indication as to whether the pot has been produced in a reducing or oxidising atmosphere.
7. The nature of the raw material used. Is it pure clay or are there inclusions e.g grit, shell or organic material such as grass?

**Example of pot sherd with inclusions**



8. The shape of the sherd. For example has it come from the body, rim or base of the original vessel.

**Samian base sherd**



9. The presence of any decoration. This can range from indentations applied by use of a finger nail, for example, or a simple tool such as

a piece of stick or bone to the complex scenes depicted on mould formed samian ware.

**Simple Decoration**



**Decorated rim**



10. The presence of identifiable lettering. This can take the form of marks scratched on the pot (graffito), in the simplest example, to stamps bearing the name of the potter as in the case of samian ware.

**Stamped samian**



**Aborted spindle whorl made from re-cycled grey ware sherd**



11. Has the potsherd been modified in any way after breakage of the original vessel? Examples include re-cycling of pot bases to form spindle whorls or gaming counters.

I have used pottery as a means to demonstrate just how important your powers of observation are in the context of Archaeology. Applying the same degree of rigour to all types of artefact should help you to critically appraise what might have happened to that object both before it went in to the ground and equally importantly after it went in to the ground.

## **TYPICAL ARTEFACTS LIKELY TO BE FOUND DURING CAISTOR EXCAVATIONS**

### **BULK FINDS**

As the name implies bulk finds are the most common things we find in the trenches. They are collected by **Context** in finds trays which carry two labels, one attached to the finds tray by a treasury tag and one placed loose in the bottom of the tray. Finds must **never** be placed in an unlabeled tray.

The following will usually be treated as bulk finds and treated as described above.

- Ceramic building material - principally brick and tile fragments.
- Pot sherds - but may be treated as small finds if out of the ordinary e.g see reference to re-worked pot below.
- Animal bone - generally fragmentary - look for chop and cut marks. Will be treated as a small find if it has been re-worked to produce a pin or needle for example.
- Metal Working Debris including slag.
- Iron (Fe) objects - often non-diagnostic but will be treated as small find if identifiable e.g knife blade. The most common Fe artefact in the bulk finds category will often be nails.
- Glass - bagged separately but placed on top in bulk finds tray. May be treated as a small find if an identifiable part of a vessel or bearing decoration.
- Horn
- Shell
- Clay tobacco pipe
- Fired clay
- Stone (worked - examples include quern stone and whetstones)
- Flint (only if it has been worked but if in doubt put it in the tray)
- Burnt flint
- Human skeletal remains (HSR). Unlikely to be encountered but can never be ruled out.

**SMALL FINDS** (See Colchester Small Finds Report extract for broad categories)

Again as the name implies these tend to be small artefacts that are uncommonly encountered during the course of an excavation. As with many instances in Archaeology this is not always the case. For example coins can turn up in large numbers but will be treated as Small Finds.

### **Examples**

- Most metal artefacts including Copper alloy (CuA) and Iron (Fe).
- Coins (typically copper alloy)
- Items of personal adornment including pins (typically copper alloy or bone) and brooches (typically copper alloy).
- Any finds which show modification or re-use, for example re-worked pot including spindle whorls.

**NB IN THE CASE OF SMALL FINDS IT IS IMPERATIVE THAT THEY ARE LEFT IN PLACE UNTIL THE TRENCH SUPERVISOR HAS ASSESSED THAT THEY CAN BE LIFTED. WHERE THE FIND SPOT IS NOT GOING TO BE RECORDED IMMEDIATELY IT MUST BE MARKED WITH A PLANT LABEL AND NAIL. THE RELEVANT CONTEXT NUMBER AND SMALL FINDS NUMBER MUST BE RECORDED ON THE PLANT LABEL. ONCE THE FIND SPOT HAS BEEN RECORDED AND NOTED ON THE ACTIVE TRENCH PLAN THE PLANT LABEL CAN BE REMOVED.**

Once a Small Find has been lifted it is treated quite differently to a bulk find. It will be given a unique **Small Find Number** from the **Small Finds Register** and placed in an appropriately sized finds bag together with a tyvek label and a protective foam insert pre-cut to size. The **ENF Number** (unique site identifier), Context Number and Small Finds Number together with the date and finder's initials will then added in **legible** capital letters to both the tyvek label and the finds bag. In cases where the artefact is particularly fragile the finds bag may be replaced by a crystal box.



## **EXCAVATION STRATEGY**

CRP's excavation strategy aims for 100% artefact retrieval. This depends not only on excavators being focussed whilst trowelling in the trench but also on the sieving of all spoil removed during the course of the excavation. To this end each trench has a dedicated sieve and any artefacts retrieved during the sieving process must be treated in the manner described above for both bulk and small finds.

## **ADDITIONAL OBJECTS SPECIFIC TO TEMPLE SITE**

- Tesserae. Small cubes used to construct tessellated floors. Made from chalk, re-cycled tile and limestone in various sizes.
  
- Painted wallplaster.