



How to Process Archaeological Finds

Finds processing is a crucial part of archaeological fieldwork but whilst it may seem self explanatory there are a number of important practices which should be followed for good 'pot washing'.

Ideally, finds processing should be carried out during the fieldwork or within days / a week of its completion. Finds left uncleaned in muddy bags for too long can 'sweat', potentially damaging them.

TIP: If you are unable to process your finds immediately, punch holes in the bags to allow the finds to breath. Whilst some finds will be more sensitive to being stored dirty, most will survive fine if left for a while (see page 2 for guidelines for treatment and storage of finds).

Labelling

Finds should be cleaned, recorded and put into labelled seed trays to dry. **PLEASE** be careful not to mix up the finds from different areas and contexts.

A waterproof label or labelled bag **MUST** be kept with the finds at every stage of washing and drying. This **MUST** contain the following information:

Fieldwalking	Test-pitting	Excavation
Site Code	Site Code	Site Code
Field No.	Test-Pit No.	Trench or Area No.
Transect & Stint or Grid No.	Layer No.	Context No.

Setting up, Washing & Drying

1. Lay newspaper down on the work surface, fill one or two washing up bowls with water (about half full) and place on the newspaper. If using two bowls - one is for washing, the other for rinsing.
2. Line a seed tray with newspaper, this is the drying tray.
3. Take a bag of finds and empty it into a second (unlined) seed tray. Write a label copying what is written on the bag and place it in the drying tray.
4. Select a find. Wash it carefully and thoroughly (see Washing Tips). Rinse in the rinsing bowl and place in the labelled drying tray.
5. Continue until all finds from the bag are washed. If there are too many finds for one tray you **MUST** write finds labels for every additional tray.
6. Remember, every context / find bag **MUST** have its own labelled tray. **DO NOT** mix up the finds.
7. Leave the finds for about 3-6 days to thoroughly dry. If they still have mud on them they may need rewashing. **DO NOT** re-bag wet or damp finds.
8. Once dry, sort and bag the finds from each context by find type. Select clean, appropriately sized bags to put them in. **REMEMBER:** Exactly copy the information from the finds label in the drying tray onto the new bag using permanent marker pen.

Health & Safety

- Some artefacts can have sharp edges, so be careful.
- Wear **GLOVES** if you have open cuts or sores on your hands, or if you have allergies to elements in the soil, or if your hands react to prolonged contact with water.
- REMEMBER:** Some people are allergic to latex and nitrile gloves.
- Be alert for **COMTAMINANTS** in the soil, such as petrol and oil. Keep a look out for asbestos which can look deceptively like pottery.

What equipment will you need?

- Washing up bowls
- Toothbrushes of assorted hardness
- Wooden cocktail stick / skewer
- Small cellulose sponge
- Newspaper
- Seed trays
- Finds bags of assorted sizes
- Waterproof (Tyvek) labels
- Permanent marker pen



Washing Tips

Most finds can be washed and left to dry in the drying trays on site. Non-fragile pieces of pottery, bone or stone should be gently washed with clean water and a toothbrush.

DO NOT leave finds to soak in the bowl. This can dissolve fragile pottery and metal and may lead to contexts being mixed up if a find is accidentally left in the bowl.

Avoid hard scrubbing of finds as this can cause damage. If it looks like the toothbrush will cause damage, use a sponge instead. Don't forget to wash the edges as well as the front and back of finds such as pottery sherds.

Finds with a lot of soil sticking to them should first be cleaned with a plastic or wooden implement (**NEVER** use a metal implement for cleaning).

Use a wooden cocktail stick / skewer to extract mud from hollows and odd shapes. This is particularly useful for cleaning bone. If possible, remove all mud in the middle of the bone.

If the water gets too dirty, replace it with clean water (as a rough guide, if you cannot see down 5cm the water needs changing!).

DO NOT dunk large finds like bricks and tiles into the washing water as they will soak it up and take longer to dry.

Fragile finds should **NEVER** be washed. Keep an eye out for paint on stonework or wall plaster and also for Anglo-Saxon and prehistoric pottery (this usually looks like old biscuit or dried mud!). These can be damaged by washing. Instead, carefully remove excess soil with a dry toothbrush and allow to dry. **DO NOT** wash metal or organic finds.

Use the guidelines on page 2 for what to wash and what not to wash.



Guidelines for post-excavation treatment and storage of finds

Material	Condition	Treatment	Storage
Antler	-	Wash	Dry perforated finds bag
Basket/wicker	-	Keep wet, do not wash or clean	Double bag, water to cover, keep in wet box.
Bone (animal)	-	Wash	Dry perforated finds bag
Bone (human)	-	Wash	Dry perforated finds bag
Copper	Green corrosion	Dry out, do not wash or clean	Dry perforated finds bag in dry box with silica gel, cushion with acid free tissue.
Ceramic (stable)	-	Wash	Dry perforated finds bag
Ceramic (fragile)	Soft, breaking up, painted decoration	Dry for 2-3 days to harden before washing gently	Dry perforated finds bag
Fibre	-	Keep wet, do not wash or clean	Double bag, water to cover, keep in wet box.
Flint artefacts	-	Wash with fingers/sponge	Dry perforated finds bag
Flint (burnt)	Stable	Wash	Dry perforated finds bag
Flint (burnt)	Breaking up	Dry Brush	Dry perforated finds bag
Glass (stable)	-	Wash	Dry perforated finds bag
Glass (medieval or otherwise unstable)	Iridescent (shiny patina/coating), flaking badly, possibly opaque	Keep wet, do not wash	Double bag, water to cover, keep in wet box.
Gold	-	Wash	Dry perforated finds bag
Flaking gilding	-	Do not wash or clean	Contact conservation lab
Horn	Laminates	Wash gently	Double bag, water to cover, keep in wet box.
Iron	Magnetic attraction, brown or sometimes blue corrosion products	Dry out, do not wash or clean	Dry perforated finds bag in dry box with silica gel, cushion with acid free tissue.
Iron slag	Vesicular	Dry out, do not wash or clean	Dry perforated finds bag in dry box with silica gel, cushion with acid free tissue.
Ivory	Criss-cross lines	Keep wet, do not wash or clean	Double bag, water to cover, keep in wet box.
Jet	Black, shiny, resembles plastic	Wash gently with fingers/sponge	Double bag, water to cover, keep in wet box.
Lead/pewter	Heavy, grey/white corrosion	Dry out, do not wash or clean	Dry perforated finds bag in dry box with silica gel, cushion with acid free tissue.
Leather	-	Wash gently with fingers/sponge	Double bag, water to cover, keep in wet box.
Plaster (painted wall)	-	Damp sponge, do not immerse in water	Dry perforated finds bag
Resin (amber)	-	Keep wet, do not wash or clean	Double bag, water to cover, keep in wet box.
Shale	Grey or black, laminates	Keep wet, do not wash or clean	Double bag, water to cover, keep in wet box.
Shell (discard unless from significant dump)	-	Wash gently with fingers	Dry perforated finds bag
Silver	Black/mauve corrosion	Dry out, do not wash or clean	Dry perforated finds bag in dry box with silica gel, cushion with acid free tissue.
Stone (except shale or gilded)	-	Dry brush or wash	Dry perforated finds bag
Wood	-	Wash gently with fingers/sponge	Double bag, water to cover, keep in wet box.