

Ceramics are among the most common finds in most archaeological dig sites. They are important for defining the development of culture within a civilisation.

Pottery items were thrown away in huge numbers as they were cheap and easy to manufacture and it was just simple logistics to throw an item away rather than attempting to repair. It was predominantly settled societies that produced pottery as opposed to nomadic societies due to its lack of portability in nomadic instances. Pottery therefore provided a wealth of information for the archaeologist.

Classification:

Construction Method

1. Handmade - the earliest forms - often coil made or pinched. Coil made items showed evidence of the coils on the insides of the pots. Handmade pottery was indicative of small scale production, made by part time potters and made only when needed.
2. Wheelmade - commonly seen in the Bronze Age - seen as forms that were “pulled from the wheel leaving coiling finger marks on the pots surface. Wheelmade pottery could be indicative of mass production by a full time potter for widespread market distribution.
3. Moulded - Usually classified as mass produced “factory” made. Used profusely by the Romans.

How was it fired:

1. Pit fired - early firing method usually of lower temperature
2. Low temperature kiln - lower temperature pottery would often show signs of not firing all the way through the clay substance- visible in a broken piece as a layered appearance to the clay.
3. High Temperature kiln - fired all the way through evenly

Fabric

What is the clay type?

Substances were often added to the clay to create “temper” or to make the clay more *plastic* or a more workable substance. Tempers such as vegetable matter or minerals were often used and can often be seen within the clay substance, sometimes to the point where the actual temper itself could help locate the origin of the pottery.

The colour of the clay, its hardness as well as surface treatment such as “slip” helped identify its style and hence its locality. Course fabric with blackened exteriors could indicate a cooking pot.

Burnished

To produce a smooth silky surface the potter would press a piece of stone or the like against the outer surface of the pot as it turned on the wheel thereby aligning the molecules in the clay.

Shape

Two main categories were:

1. Open - such as bowls and cups which commonly had both surfaces finely finished
2. Closed - such as jars and jugs which usually only had the outside finely finished

This observation is particularly helpful when studying pot shards or pieces commonly found on dig sites. Other observations when studying shards should be the angle of curve of the piece, whether it has a foot or base, does it have a neck, does it have a rim that turns in, out that is straight or flat? Does it have a handle, and of what type - decorative or functional? Does it have spout, and of what type? Necks or lips indicated it was a serving pot for liquids. Large wide mouths on the pottery indicated storage. A small narrow cylinder could indicate a drinking cup.

Decoration

Is it decorated or plain? Is the decoration in a glaze, painted on or incised?

Grain storage vessels often had residues, as did perfume containers. Lipid analysis on the contents could reveal much about the use of the item.

Pottery styles were not exclusive to specific cultures. Many styles could be imported from local villages or from outside the country altogether. Sometimes if a foreign style of pottery was desired a village could employ a foreign potter that would make his own style of foreign pottery for the village but using local clays. Observance of pottery styles, coupled with clay substances and tempers helped to develop a pattern of trade as particular styles were generic to a particular area when coupled with the fabric make up.

So what does pottery show us? The following information can be gleaned from the excavation of pottery either whole or in shards:

- Culture
- Activities - seen in the styles and range of pottery
- Decorative influences
- Importance of the people (seen in tomb pottery)
- Belief structure - seen in decoration (or lack of) or overall design
- Technology - seen in complexity of pottery styles
- Trade
- Dating of the dig site stratum

During your excavation of your kit assess the following questions:

What style of clay is the item made from?

Is it courseware or fine ware?

Is there any temper added to the clay?

Do the edges show signs of high temperature firing or low temperature firing?

Does the item look hand made, wheel made or moulded?

Is there any surface treatment in the form of a slip, a glaze or decoration or burnishing?

As the piece is restored note its shape and design. What is it and what do you think it would have been used for? What was its function?

Considering your kit has no dates applied to it, are you able to tell its age period from the pieces form and style based on your research?

What else can you tell from your excavation?

Cultural/ Activity/ decoration/ belief structure/ technology/ trade.

After completion of your kit including excavation and restoration, do research on your excavated piece to see what further information you can glean. Write a report describing the item you have excavated, assessing its use and what it tells you about the people and the area in which it was found.

