

The Cataloguing of Archaeological Collections in Museums

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THE PRESENT situation in rescue archaeology is gradually leading to a more realistic assessment of the capacity of existing museum institutions to absorb more archaeological material into their collections. Not only are there the pressing problems of conservation and display, aggravated in many museums by constant lack of trained professional staff, but there is the all important question of information storage and retrieval.

The present problem, as far as museums and archaeological material is concerned, is that conventional approaches to accessions registers and cataloguing are not suited to the complexities associated with excavated and stratified material. To identify, let us say, a bag of pottery from a complex excavation, an enquirer has to rely on an ability to understand the recording conventions adopted by the excavator, together with the published report which, if it exists at all, will be selective in the information it contains.

Site records are, by their very nature, incapable of being used conveniently by any enquirer. What is required is a cataloguing technique that can translate all the information about a complex site, and the material from it, into an easily usable format. This format must fulfill the museum requirement of being capable of use in a museum whose collections are not entirely archaeological, and the archaeologist's requirement of instant access to information about the least object from an excavation.

Cataloguing is the systematic ordering and description of a collection of objects. The ordering and identification within a catalogue depends upon the adoption of a convention for providing identification numbers. These numbers can be based on an arbitrary sequence such as the chronological sequence of an accessions register or they can be based on some aspect of the material itself as in a catalogue based on a classification system. Often, identification is by means of a conventional accessions number within a catalogue that has been sorted according to a classification scheme. For various reasons, cataloguing archaeological collections according to a classification scheme is not practicable, and in the system described below it is suggested that classified

access to the catalogue should be by means of indices.

This system is really a variation on that of using an accessions number for primary identification. In it each accession, be it an individual object or all the material from a complex excavation, is given the next available number in a consecutive sequence. The format of the number, however, is not based on an accidental factor such as date of accession, but is arranged so that in the case of stratified archaeological material it reflects the archaeological associations of that material.

Fortunately with stratified archaeological material there is an *a priori* arrangement that should take precedence over any other arrangement or classification scheme. This is the order imposed upon the material by the nature of its discovery and which, in itself, forms a primary source of information. This is the order in which it comes out of the ground—the trench (or area)—layer sequence. This order should be reflected in the museum catalogue as it should also be, in part, in the publication of the discovery. Even with unstratified archaeological material the details of collection usually allow it to be put into groups that have some archaeological significance.

In the cataloguing being carried out at Winchester City Museums according to the convention described below, three cards are being used. They are all used in the same filing sequence in the following manner. Type I is used to describe material from one archaeological unit (e.g. a layer within a trench). Stacked behind this will be a description of each bag of pottery or complete vessels on cards of Type II, and behind these will be a description of any small finds from that layer, on cards of Type III. Type III cards are also used to describe individual objects such as archaeological stray finds, historical artifacts, ethnographical artifacts, natural history finds etc. These cards are not designed for computer input but no doubt such a design could be achieved.

The basis of the catalogue is to award the next available number in a straight numerical sequence to a deposit. A deposit is that material deposited in the museum which can be considered as a group

ITEM NO.	PARISH	6"
321 2 3	WINCHESTER	NGR
Site 120, High Street 1956	Archaeol. Trench 3, layer 3 : clay layer with charcoal specks	Sp. loc.
Pottery bagged Roman	Quant 3 bags	Quant 1 bag 1 bag 2 bags
	Tile, Brick, Stone, Clay, etc. Burnt flint Stone fragments animal bones	Ac. Book II. 216 Ac. Date 10' 1956 Ac. No. Ob. from The Corner Shop Ltd. 120, High Street. Owned by City Museum
Pot. sorted Samian	S/ finds 1 bag 321. 20 321. 21 321. 22.	Features Feature 25 (Layer b) Site Note Book <u>XXXVII</u> , p. 15
ITEM NO.	PARISH	6"
321 2 3 1	Winchester.	NGR.
Site 120, High Street 1956		Sp. loc.
Form Dish with outturned rim	Quant restorable	Ac. Book II. 216 Ac. Date July 1956 Ac. No. 10' 1956 Ob. from The Corner Shop Ltd. 120, High Street. Owner City Museum
Fabric Hard grey ware	Rims 5 shards	
Surfaces Burnished inside	Bases 2 shards	
Dec. none		Status Gift
Other H 2. 4 cms Th. 0. 8 cms	Body 1. 16. 0 cms 2. 18. 6 cms 3. 10. 4 cms	Refs.
Drag.	Cond.	
Photo.	Lab. Lab. No. 324	

Fig. 1. Cards of Type I are used to describe the material from one archaeological unit. This may be anything from a stratified layer in a complex excavation to a group of randomly collected material with no stratified associations. Type II cards, stacked behind Type I, describe individual bags of pottery. In this case the sherds of a Roman pot have been separated and given a separate bag number which is related to the trench layer position of the find.

because it forms one accession and comes from one site. Thus an individual object will have the next available number, e.g. 321 (fig. 2). When it is a group of objects being catalogued, the group will be awarded the next number in the catalogue sequence (e.g. 321) and the individual objects will have consecutive subsidiary numbers—321.1; 321.2; and so on. Such a group might have archaeological associations (as would a Bronze Age hoard), or else it might form a group merely on the basis of its being given by one donor.

Archaeological material that is arranged in a trench/layer sequence can be catalogued as follows: one catalogue card of Type I is used to describe the material from one layer, and this material has a number made up of three modules based on this arrangement. For instance the site is awarded the next available number in the catalogue sequence (e.g. 321) so that the material from trench 2, layer 3 will be numbered 321.2.3, and the material will be ordered sequentially by trenches and by layers with-

in the trenches. Each trench/layer card (Type I) describes the number of bags of pottery and other material from the layer and lists the small finds from that layer. The bags are numbered consecutively 321.2.3/1; 321.2.3/2 etc.; and each can be described on cards of Type II, which would be stacked behind the parent trench/layer card (fig. 1).

Select sherds or bags of a particular type of pottery can be removed and stored in a separate sequence for ease of access and can still be immediately related to its parent bag or position in the trench layer sequence. The heading 'pot-sorted' on Type I cards is used to indicate such a situation. Small finds are numbered sequentially for each site as described for groups of objects above: they are catalogued at the end of the trench/layer sequence and should be stored for convenience in a separate shelf sequence. Extra large objects or objects on display can have their location within the museum recorded in the space marked 'sp. loc.'

Complete vessels, as for instance those found in

a grave group, are best treated as bags of pottery for the purpose of cataloguing.

Unfortunately, some archaeologists still tend to give separate layer sequences for each feature. Not only is this an undesirable archaeological practice but it means that for the purposes of museum cataloguing these layers have to be re-numbered to fit into a consecutive site sequence. This is an extra task, but the alternative is to create a cumbersome extra module in the cataloguing format.

There are two ways of dealing with material that is not sorted according to a suitable trench/layer sequence. The first is to re-sort the material into a trench/layer sequence making sure that all information relating to the original description of the layers (e.g. "black layer at the bottom end of the trench") is recorded on the catalogue card. If this is not feasible, and it often is not, then the material can be sorted into the most convenient arbitrary groups. These groups would be numbered consecutively with the digits 00 as the centre module of the three module number e.g. 321.00.1. Again, any relevant archaeological information has to be recorded on the catalogue card. In the case of some rescue or field walking situations the most convenient arbitrary groups would be the material picked up on a certain day or from a particular part of the site. In all these cases the digits 00 in the number indicate that the material is sorted according to criteria other than that of a trench layer sequence.

Some features such as an Iron Age storage pit discovered by 'sounding' or a grave revealed by a bull-dozer might well themselves be considered as a 'trench.' Similarly, loosely defined areas of excavation (e.g. "the area around the entrance to the enclosure") might be considered as a trench. If no layer differentiation can be noticed then the layer part of the catalogue number would be 0. For instance, the material removed from the grave mentioned about might be marked (c.o. exemplar) 321.1.0. In this case there is room for discretion on the part of the cataloguer who might feel that the group has no meaningful excavation context and prefer to number it 321.00.1.

Access to the catalogue can best be provided by means of locality, subject, donor indices, etc. Subject indices can either be alphabetical or classified, on item cards or on punched feature cards according to taste.

The successful application of a site-orientated catalogue for archaeological collections requires close co-operation between excavators and curators. If the excavator sorts his material according to a compatible format as it comes out of the ground, it means that it can be made available for study as soon as it comes into the museum. It reduces the risk of bags of pottery and the like going astray.

It means that with properly ordered site plans and notebooks detailed information can be available before publication: in some cases it may remove the need for publication if photocopies of museum records are made available for limited distribution to reference centres. All this has a special relevance at a time when rescue archaeology institutions are developing at an unprecedented rate.

SUMMARY

1. Individual objects:

Next available number. e.g. 321

2. Groups of objects:

Group has next available number. e.g. 321. Consecutive items within the group have subsidiary numbers thus: 321.1 321.2 321.3 etc.

3. Excavated material:

The site is given the next available number. e.g. 321. The material is sorted according to trench/layer sequence so that all material from Trench 2, layer 3 is designated 321.2.3. The material is sorted consecutively. All material from Trench 2 that is unstratified is designated 321.2.0. Each bag of material from Trench 2, Layer 3 is designated consecutively 321.2.3/1 321.2.3/2 etc.

4. Grave groups:

Individual complete pots from a feature such as a grave can be considered as a bag of pottery and designated this: 321.3.2/1 which is pot 1 from Layer 2 (fill of a grave) that appears in Trench 3 of Site 321.

5. Small finds:

These are treated as groups of objects as in paragraph 2 above. In this way, small find 66 from Site 321 will be 321.66. These are best stored in a separate shelving sequence.

6. Recorded pottery:

Sherds of special pottery that one might want to store separately can be stored sequentially in small envelopes marked with the parent bag number. The appropriate information can be included in the relevant layer card.

7. Collected material:

This is material that is collected and has no trench layer sequence. The site is given a number in the basic series. Each group of material has a two module number as in paragraph 3 above. However, the first module is 00 to show that the material is not sorted according to conventional stratigraphy but is sorted into arbitrary groups. The second module runs consecutively from 1 for each group, e.g. Group 8 from Site 321 is 321.00.8. Each group will have some association that will mark it out from the rest of the material. It might be attributable to an archaeologically definable feature or it might be material picked up from a certain part of the

ITEM No.	PARISH	6"
321	WINCHESTER	NGR
Site	Sp. loc.	
Object	Found during construction of railway in 1898	
Late Bronze Age socketed gouge		
Dimensions H (L)	6.8 cms	W 1.2 cms (socket)
W	1.4 cms	Th.
Photo	Cond.	
X-ray		Lab.
Draw.		

Fig. 2. Cards of Type III are used to describe individual objects. These might be archaeologically stratified small finds, stray finds (provenanced or unprovenanced), historical artifacts, natural history specimens, etc.

site or material picked up on a certain day.

8. Excavated material already sorted:

Where material is already sorted according to other conventions, it can either be re-sorted or where this is not practicable it can be sorted according to the procedure outlined in paragraph 8 above. In both

cases the relevant archaeological information must be recorded on the catalogue cards.

9. Coins:

Sorted in a separate numerical sequence with the prefix C.

Excavation of Medieval Custom House

THE SITE IN Upper Thames Street of the medieval Custom House and associated waterfront is currently being excavated by Guildhall Museum. All that has been found of the Custom House building is the chalk and mortar foundations of the front wall, the south-east corner and, at the west end, a wing projecting southwards towards the river. These foundations are in the form of a series of rough relieving arches. The tops of the arches have been sliced off by the modern basement, which has also totally destroyed all the floors associated with the building.

The foundations are cut into a series of organic layers (similar to those found at Baynards Castle) below which are a series of medieval river gravels. In the gravel and organic layers a mass of finds has been recovered (dating mainly from the 13th and 14th centuries) including, as well as the usual pottery, much leather and many wooden articles. The earliest of the gravels, which could possibly be Saxon, also contains a large quantity of Roman pottery.

In the southern part of the area under excavation the remains of the 14th century waterfront have been found. This is a complex structure with cross beams, upright posts, etc. and is remarkably well preserved. When the waterfront was subsequently moved further forward into the Thames (i.e. southwards), the earlier one was covered up.

Remains have also been found of the Roman waterfront. It, too, is of a timber box construction, with a rubble and mortar filling; the front part either fell or was



The medieval waterfront

pushed into the river at a later date, perhaps in the Saxon period.

The excavation which is being directed by Tim Tatton-Brown, is expected to continue for at least two more months. More volunteers who are able to work during the week, are required.