

ANCIENT MAYA TRASH IS AN ARCHAEOLOGIST'S TREASURE.

July 12, 2014 Jessica MacLellan Day of Archaeology 2014, Finds ancient technology, archaeologist, Guatemala City, Maya civilization, Maya society, University of Arizona

If you try to think of a verb to describe an archaeologist's work, you will probably come up with "dig." And dig we do. However, for every day an archaeologist spends excavating, she must spend many more analyzing artifacts in the lab, interpreting results, and writing reports and papers. After completing a 10-week field season in the jungle, at the Maya site of Ceibal, I am writing to you from our project's lab in Guatemala City, where my team members and I are busy analyzing our finds. (You can read a little about our project [here](#).)

I'm a graduate student at the University of Arizona, working on my Ph.D. dissertation. My dissertation research involves excavating ancient Maya houses and the areas around those houses, some of which date back to around 800 B.C. (You can see some cool preliminary results [here](#).) When you excavate households, you find a lot of ancient people's trash. Archaeologists love trash. The most common kind of artifact I find is broken pottery, which we call ceramic sherds. I spent today, the Day of Archaeology 2014, sorting, counting, recording, and labeling these bits of ancient bowls and plates. Below you can see my cozy workspace:



Sorting and recording pottery sherds in Guatemala City. MP3 player for audiobook entertainment.

This kind of work is more tedious than glamorous, but it's an important step in interpreting the archaeological record. Ceramics are used to study all kinds of interesting topics, including trade, social status, and ancient technology. We sometimes even find residues of ancient foods and drinks in ceramic vessels.

Right now, I am most interested in my piles of sherds as a way to date the different floors, buildings, burials, and other deposits I have excavated. In the Maya area, archaeologists are constantly refining our knowledge of how local ceramics changed over time. Our knowledge of Maya ceramic types allows us to quickly put together the basic timeline of an archaeological site. (We also use other methods of dating, such as [radiocarbon dating](#), but for various reasons those are not always feasible, useful options.) Without that timeline, we couldn't begin to understand the events that took place in the past. By carefully recording and publishing the ceramic finds from our site, we contribute to our discipline's broader knowledge of ancient Maya ceramics. We create representative collections of sherds for others to study, and we reassemble whole ceramic vessels that will eventually be curated by Guatemala's Institute of Anthropology and History. Some of the nicer Maya dishes may even end up in the national archaeology museum.

Other project members, who hail from Guatemala, the US, Europe, and Japan, are busy analyzing the stone tools, human bones, animal bones, and other artifacts excavated at our site. Each provides an important, different piece of the puzzle in our quest to understand ancient Maya society.

Next time you break a dish in your kitchen and clean up the pieces, stop to think about what a future archaeologist might someday learn from your discarded trash!