

DOCUMENTING THE MATERIAL PAST IN THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF IRELAND

July 18, 2014 Donna Gilligan Finds, Museum Archaeology Archaeology, Artefacts, Collection, Documentation Assistant, Finds, Ireland, Irish Antiquities Division, Museology, museum, Museum Archaeology, National Museum, National Museum of Ireland Inventory Project

A very late entry from the museum archaeology sector! On the Day of Archaeology this year, I am working as a Documentation Assistant in the National Museum of Ireland – Archaeology, Dublin. I work as a team member of the museum's [Inventory project](#) in the Irish Antiquities Division of the institution.



The National Museum of Ireland – Archaeology in Kildare Street, Dublin city

This project involves the documentation of the entire collections of the museum – a vast amount of objects amassed over a hundred years of collecting and conserving the Irish past. Documentation involves the organisation of information relating to all objects within a museum collection. When an object enters the museum collection, its details are recorded – e.g. object type, origins, dimensions and features – and it is assigned a unique museum registration number for future identification. The object is then placed in storage, and its details, registration number and current location are added to the museum database. If the object is taken out of storage, placed on exhibition, or loaned to another museum, the database record for the object is kept updated in order to monitor and track its location. A database of this nature also allows curators and researchers to search museum databases for specific object types, and to record secure curatorial and conservation information regarding a specific object. The National

Museum of Ireland collection totals over four million objects, so without stringent documentation procedures, it would be impossible to maintain the required level of information, control and identification of their collections.

The Inventory Team documents the contents of hundreds of wooden drawers of artefacts from the storage crypt of the museum. The contents of the drawers can vary widely, and generally contain a mixed collection of artefact varieties and materials from several different chronological periods. Day to day, we can encounter a huge range of artefact types. These can consist of bronze swords, bone pins, flint scrapers, stone axes – and everything in between! We also deal with the more everyday domestic material unearthed from archaeological excavations, such as animal bones, organic samples and lots of pottery. Following a previous day of documenting a drawer of butchered animal bone, charcoal samples and clay pipe stems, I am rewarded today in my drawer of artefacts. I deal with a number of varied objects from an a donated antiquarian collection, which includes stone cannon shot, stone lamps, copper alloy dress pins and stone moulds used for casting jettons and bronze axes.



Stone moulds used for casting a bronze axe and jettons

Each artefact is identified, entered into our database with information on its find place, donor, distinguishing features and habitat. It is then given a new label and storage bag, and if necessary, repackaging for conservation needs.

The work can be challenging, with the former recording and storage standards of artefacts differing significantly over time, but this role gives me the opportunity to work hands-on with an amazing artefact collection. Each day gives me the chance to encounter and handle a previously unseen piece of our past, and gain an expanded knowledge and appreciation of our material culture.

To get an idea of the range of objects encountered during the National Museum of Ireland Inventory Project, a number of our most interesting and unusual artefacts are profiled on our [Documentation Discoveries blog](#) .