

WHY ARCHAEOLOGICAL ARCHIVES MATTER: PRESERVING THE PIECES OF OUR PAST AT THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF IRELAND – ARCHAEOLOGY

July 29, 2015 Donna Gilligan Archives, Conservation, Curation, Day of Archaeology, Education, Explore Posts, Finds, Museum Archaeology archives, Artefacts, documentation, Finds, Inventory Project, Ireland, Museum Archaeology, National Museum of Ireland - Archaeology, Research, Society for Museum Archaeology, storage, Why Archaeological Archives Matter

On the 2015 Day of Archaeology, I am working with the reserve archaeological collections in the Antiquities Division of the [National Museum of Ireland – Archaeology](#) as a member of the museum's [Inventory Project](#). This work involves the identification, organisation and [documentation](#) of a vast quantity of varied archaeological artefacts, which are mainly stored in wooden drawers in the basement storage area below our exhibition space – an area commonly known to us as ‘the crypt’.



The storage crypt of the National Museum of Ireland – Archaeology

We document the collections from the crypt by the process of each team member working on one drawer of material at a time. Any individual drawer can contain a varied and eclectic mix of artefacts, often unrelated by chronology or provenance, with sometimes the only shared connection being that they were acquired or accessioned by the museum in the same year. Following the post theme of “Why

Archaeological Archives Matter” suggested to us members of the [Society for Museum Archaeology](#), I decided to share my work with the museum reserve collections in order to discuss this subject.



Artefact storage drawers in the crypt of the National Museum of Ireland – Archaeology

Of the last few drawers that I have documented, the artefacts have ranged widely in type and age, with some recent examples including Neolithic pottery, a bronze spearhead, a stone spindle whorl, a copper alloy seal matrix, a clay pipe stem, and some post-medieval glass and pottery sherds.



A sample artefact drawer from the reserve collections

The museum's reserve collections may often be mistakenly underestimated in value by the public due to the fact that they consist of objects which are not on permanent view in the exhibition galleries, but the worth and importance of these collections cannot be overstated. The placement of objects in the reserve collections can often be due to their inability to match the themes displayed in the institution's current exhibitions, or simply due to the lack of space to display such an enormous number of artefacts. A number of unusual and unique artefacts from the reserve collections have been re-discovered and re-assessed during the work of the [Inventory Project](#), a number of which have been detailed on our [Documentation Discoveries](#) blog.

The museum reserve collections span all archaeological chronologies and typologies, and offer a physical timeline of the development of material culture, seen within the changes and advances of material choices and the design of objects. As an example, seeing a flint javelin head, a bronze spearhead, and a collection of musket balls all in the same storage drawer clearly shows some of the development in weaponry throughout thousands of years of the human past.



A sample artefact drawer from the reserve collections

A large section of the reserve collections consists of domestic material uncovered during archaeological site excavation – items such as pottery sherds, samples of shellfish and butchered animal bone, and waste material from craft and industry. While perhaps not aesthetically arresting or unique, objects such as glass sherds, clay pipe stems and metal slag samples offer us valuable and extensive information on everyday life and practices in both the near and distant past. The reserve collections also offer an extensive base for archaeological researchers and students to study specific artefact types or groups, or the complete physical results of an archaeological excavation.



A sample artefact drawer from the reserve collections

The artefacts hold further valuable information in their detailed documentation in the museum's paper and digital records, which can consist of topographical files, accession registers, object archives and collection databases. These sources record important supplementary information relating to the object provenance, find circumstances, typology, associations and acquisition – all of which provide researchers with an improved and necessary understanding of the full story in the life of the artefact. Overall, the archaeological archives of the museum reserve collection are held in trust for a number of reasons – for conservation and security, for potential future display, as well as for their use as a research base for the future. Work with these collections constantly educates me on our sizeable and impressive national material culture, and the continual need to conserve and collect these important pieces of our past.