

Archaeology of a California Mission

Field Specimens Processing

Directions: Read and fully consider each of the following procedures as they will constitute the required procedures for the lab portion of the field investigation here undertaken. When information or data is not properly recorded, or specimens are not fully cataloged, critical information may be irretrievably lost or distorted. Information and data that has been so compromised thereby becomes worthless for the purposes of archaeological study and interpretation. So, please consider and learn these procedures so that your excavation team will not be compromised at the stage of data analysis and interpretation.

Data Control

Data control is imperative to all activities of the field laboratory. The first step in this process is to identify and label each bucket of soil recovered from the excavation unit with a Unit Number, Level Number, Objective (e.g., 20 cm.), Date, and the name or initials of ALL Excavators for said Unit. Do this by noting the required data on a length of survey flagging tape using a black permanent marker. The annotated flag should be tied to the bucket handle.

Upon undertaking the sifting or sieving of Unit Level soils, all materials and specimens recovered from the dry screen should be placed on a processing tray. The tray in question should be clearly marked or flagged with an identification card noting the relevant information, including: Site designation (e.g., CA-MNT-18), Unit Number, Level Number, Objective, Excavators and Recorder's initials, and Date.

Processing Lab and Field Specimens

The first step required for processing field specimens is to soak and delicately clean specimens with a non-abrasive brush and water. To that end, you should prepare a processing tray with a layer of paper towels so as to absorb any and all moisture from the soaked specimens. The tray should be clearly identified with any and all relevant field unit information, including: Site Designation (CA-MNT-18), Unit Number, Level Number, Objective, Excavators and Recorder's initials (if not the same) and Date. The soaking and cleaning of specimens should be completed in a bucket that has in turn been clearly marked with pertinent field information as noted.

A toothbrush will be used to gently remove soils and clays from the surface of each specimen so treated. Do not scrub materials too harshly! For specimens such as tile, or foundation stone, a larger brush may be used. Permit specimens to properly dry before bagging and tagging. Conduct a preliminary sort of the processed specimens by material types, if identifiable, at this time. Please permit adequate time for materials, so processed, to completely dry before bagging and tagging. **Note:** *In those rare instances in which you have no choice but to bag specimens wet, please enclose the Field Specimens Catalog Card in a second plastic bag so as to protect it from attendant moisture in the specimens bag itself.*

Catalog Data Entry

1. Hand process and sort – with tweezers or other suitable tools – all specimens collected. Material types include, but are not limited to: Shell, Lithics, Glass, Metal, Ceramics, Tile, Siltstone, Wood, Bone, Charcoal, etc. Distinct specimens, particularly those modified apart from their material type, such as burnt or cut bone, should be separated from the broader material types or groups.

2. For quality assurance, please consult with the lab supervisor or project archaeologist so as to check your sorting and identification of specimens or material types at varying stages of the process.
3. Please complete the Field Specimens Catalog Card, taking into account both quantities and weights prior to bagging by Material Type or Lot. Each material type will receive its own specimen's bag and Field Specimens Catalog Card. Make use of only those Field Specimens Catalog Cards that have been assigned a pre-stamped catalog number in the upper right-hand portion of the catalog card. Each specimen or specimens Lot find will receive its own individualized Catalog and Field Specimen Number. Please assure that all data entry areas of the Field Specimens Catalog Card are fully completed prior to submission. The Catalog Card should be placed within the plastic field specimens' bag along with those specimens documented therein.
4. Upon completion of the Field Specimens Catalog Card, and any and all unit level specimens processing, please enter relevant information into the Field Specimens Catalog form as well. It is imperative that all completed specimen's bags and Catalog Cards be recorded within the Field Specimens Catalog. Information recorded in the Field Specimens Catalog is entered as follows: Site Number, Excavator(s), Recorder(s), Date, Feature, Unit Number, Level Number, Objective, Catalog and Field Specimens Number, Description, Material Type, and Weight. Upon completion of the Unit Level, please begin a new Field Specimens Catalog page. You are to complete a single Field Specimens Catalog form per unit level. Do not attempt to complete a Field Specimens Catalog form for each individual date during which said unit was under excavation. One Field Specimens Catalog form per unit level is all that is required. Each new date during which the unit level is under excavation must be recorded onto the Field Specimens Catalog form if completion of a level takes more than a single day.
5. Once any and all relevant information has been recorded in the Field Specimens Catalog, it must then be entered into the Wireless Site Catalog Tool available at http://wireless_archaeology.csumb.edu/, or made available on-site with a Microsoft Excel database electronic surrogate Field Specimens Catalog. Finally, please be sure to fully document any and all relevant Unit Level and specimen information on an ongoing basis.

Note: Your team is responsible for any and all materials, processes, and procedures undertaken within any given unit area or within any given activity. If your team members depart the site without properly completing any of the aforementioned procedures, then team members will not be permitted to proceed with excavations until such time that any of the aforementioned procedures that have not been properly attended to are addressed in full. As such, it is imperative that you do not leave other team members holding the bag with respect to completing with any and all project requirements and procedures.

Specimens Post Processing

Photography: Once all essential processing of individual specimens or Lot finds has been completed, the next stage of the process will be to produce illustrations, photographs (digital and or film), and related secondary forms of documentation. Where photography is concerned, you should make use of the Photo Catalog Form used to keep track of each and every photo taken of individual specimens or Lot finds. In this way, we can match Catalog Card numbers to those photographs produced of individual specimens. In each instance where photography is concerned, you should work closely with the Project Archaeologist, Lab Supervisor, and or other staff member assigned said task. Once you have produced a digital, film (B&W or 35mm Transparency), xeroxographic, or digital scan of the individual specimen under consideration, you should note on the Specimens Catalog Card that you have produced a specific type of image by checking the appropriate category provided as check boxes at the bottom of the card itself.

Archival Treatment: The final procedure required of specimens post-processing is that of replacing the specimen in the Ziploc bag provided for that purpose in such a way that the most diagnostic feature (e.g., ceramic decorative pattern, molding or other distinctive feature) faces outward and is visible from behind the Specimens Catalog Card placed in the same specimen bag. The card should be inserted into the Ziploc bag in such a way that the card is right side up with the Ziploc portion, or opening of the bag, accessible from the right side of the horizontally positioned bag. This will permit a standard placement of all Ziploc bags into archival boxes. The final step in the process will generally be handled by the Lab Supervisor who is charged with labeling any and all specimens boxes, and then placing said curated specimens and boxes into a secured shelving area.