

ARTIFACTS AND FEATURES ARCHAEOLOGICAL TERMINOLOGY

The Museum's Coso petroglyph tours are world famous, but you may not be aware that we are active in many other areas related to archaeology. This article is one of an occasional series describing some of the archaeological things we do.

Today we discuss a few definitions, including the title of our series, "Artifacts and Features". These are everyday terms with specific meaning in the archaeological world. An "artifact" is anything portable that was made by humans; a "feature" is a human-made structure which is not portable. Thus, projectile points, potsherds, and metates are artifacts, while a rock ring, a fire hearth, and a building are features. Thus artifacts are typically collected, analyzed in a laboratory, and curated, while features are photographed, measured, and sketched in situ and left there. For clarity, archaeologists always use the terms in this technical sense.

Archaeologists also like to talk about "sites". An archaeological site is any locality where human activity took place in the past, and includes artifacts and features. A site is always bounded, that is, it has finite boundaries. Typically the boundaries are determined by end of the artifacts or features, but not always, because sometimes a site may be made up of a collection of distinct areas which are logically related. For example, a site might include an occupation area, a milling area, an area with baking features, and a flaking area. If the areas seem to be logically related they are termed "loci" (singular "locus") and grouped into a single site. So defining a site frequently requires judgment. It is important to remember that sites, and the artifacts and features which make them up, are protected by State and Federal law.

But not everything falls into these neat categories, so other terms are also needed. Animal bones are often found in archaeological sites, frequently in large quantities. Such bones are usually referred to as "faunal remains", and analysis of them is important to shed light on ancient diet and other uses of animal products. The faunal remains from a site normally include bone, but may also encompass teeth, hair, hide, horn, and paleofeces. For example, bone and horn were often used to make tools and ornaments, hair was used in textiles, and hides were used to make leather.

Plant remains from a site are called the "botanical remains", and include seeds, wood, fibers, pollen, and charcoal. Phytoliths, which are microscopic silica particles within plant cells, are sometimes collected as well. Analysis of the botanical remains provides data on diet, plants used as fuel or fiber sources, and materials used for tools and construction.

Other terms include "manuport", which is any object (generally a rock) which has been brought into a site from somewhere else. Fire affected rock (FAR) is just that, rocks with charring, cracking, or smoke blackening. And an "isolate" is any artifact found in an isolated situation; for example, a single projectile point or rock with rock art, found in an area with no other indications of human presence, is an isolate.

Use of this terminology increases the precision of archaeological writing, and is, in fact, used in Site Records (discussed last month). Artifacts and features are important parts of the archaeological record, and are thus an appropriate title for our series of articles.