

Conservation FAQ's and Facts: an on-line guide for archaeologists

Colleen Brady, Molly Gleeson, Melba Myers, Claire Peachey, Betty Seifert, Howard Wellman, Emily Williams, Lisa Young

Introduction

How do I find a conservator?
What adhesive is best for mending ceramics?
How do I mix Acryloid B-72 for labeling artifacts?
How do I create microclimates for storage?

It was “frequently asked questions” like these that prompted a group of archaeological conservators in the Mid-Atlantic area to develop an interactive CD of conservation and collections care guidelines. Although excellent resources, containing similar information, exist, many archaeologists in the US report that they are reluctant to use these books because of their focus on sites in Europe and the Mediterranean. This project was aimed at producing an inexpensive, user-friendly guide for Mid-Atlantic archaeologists containing the most current information on conservation. Additionally, it was hoped that it would promote better communication between the conservation and archaeology communities.

Background/Process

In recent years, the authors have collaborated to organize conservation and collections care sessions for the annual Middle Atlantic Archaeology Conference (MAAC). During one planning session, the idea was posed to create a resource kit for archaeologists with useful conservation papers and PowerPoint presentations from past MAAC conferences, as well as answers to some frequently asked questions (FAQs) received from archaeologists. Originally, the goal of the project was to focus on FAQs specifically from Mid-Atlantic archaeologists and to distribute the information in the form of a CD at the following MAAC.

The project began with one brainstorming session where the authors made a list of questions they had received from archaeologists in recent years. In order to ensure that the list was as comprehensive as possible, the authors then took the FAQs to several archaeologists for input. After a preliminary list was made, work on the CD was divided among the eight authors and several contributing authors. The idea for the project and the proposed list of FAQs were presented at two archaeological conferences, where the list of questions was distributed along with feedback forms for the audience. Although the authors could not demonstrate or distribute the completed version of the CD at these conferences, they felt that presenting the project to archaeologists during the writing phase would help ensure that the CD was addressing the right questions and was valuable to archaeologists. As the project progressed, the list of FAQs quickly grew from 10 to over 100, resulting in a document that is over 130 pages long. The longer document became less region-specific and now many of the principles elucidated in the text are

universal, although others are specifically geared towards the types of materials and conditions commonly found on sites in the Mid-Atlantic region.

Content:

The FAQs are grouped into 12 categories, and then arranged in a layered format so that they lead from the broadest approach (e.g. the definition of preventive conservation) to the narrower one (e.g. how one monitors relative humidity). The 12 categories are:

1. Conservation—Who, What, Where, When, Why and How?
2. Preparing for Conservation on Archaeological Excavations
3. Handling Freshly Excavated Artifacts on Site
4. Initial Processing of Archaeological Materials
5. Materials Identification and Condition Assessment
6. Conservation Treatments
7. Research and Analysis of Artifacts
8. Collections Storage and Curation
9. Storage and Curation of Archaeological Documentation
10. Display of Archaeological Artifacts
11. Laboratory Maintenance
12. Disaster Planning for Collections

The FAQ answers are intended to be succinct. For several topics, supporting materials in greater depth are included as attachments in the form of Word files (e.g. bibliographies, supply lists, published papers, etc.) or PowerPoint presentations (e.g. a presentation demonstrating the use of the Beilstein Test).

Challenges

From the beginning, the authors wanted to avoid creating a cookbook of conservation treatments and procedures; however, they also wanted to avoid answering each question with the statement, “contact a conservator.” It is standard practice for many archaeologists to use conservation methods such as electrolysis or desalination. Many archaeological manuals from the 1970’s and early 80’s include practical information on desalination and electrolysis. Often, this information focuses specifically on the “how-to’s” and fails to discuss the “why’s” or any of the nuances of the treatments. Occasionally, the information has been further simplified by years of verbal communication in processing labs. The authors decided that the best approach to this situation was to put the treatments into context by providing the “why’s” for these techniques instead of a step-by-step “how-to” manual. Treatments are presented in the CD with the intention of informing archaeologists of their purpose, their limitations, and what processes are involved, so that the archaeologists can make informed decisions when discussing conservation treatments with conservators. For example, all treatment options for waterlogged wood are presented and briefly discussed, including the use of sugar, PEG, acetone-rosin and silicone oils as bulking agents. No instructions are given on how to perform these treatments; rather, information is focused on how to evaluate the treatment options and to determine which treatment is appropriate for a particular artifact or group of artifacts. There is also a brief discussion on recent research in waterlogged

wood conservation pertaining to the role of elemental sulphur and iron sulphides in the long-term deterioration of archaeological wood.

This project challenged the authors to re-examine the relationship between conservation and archaeology as well the relationship between conservators and archaeologists. One unexpected benefit the authors found during the creation of this CD was that as they discussed the materials with archaeologists, they improved existing relationships and created new ones. Some archaeologists (and some conservators) view conservation as an isolated field, other archaeologists believe that the use of professional conservators separates conservation from archaeologists and impinges on the archaeologist's ability to analyze the artifacts and site. They want conservation to be "put back into the hands of archaeologists." These views result in a disconnect between conservation and archaeology, and can make it difficult for the two fields to work together to achieve the same goal. It is not realistic to have archaeologists handle all the conservation decisions alone. In truth, it would neither be possible nor desirable for all archaeologists to work on their projects, do their research, write up their results, *and* ensure that their artifacts were properly preserved and cared for. Conservation is most effective when its goals are integrated with those of the archaeological research program. The purpose of this CD was to help "bring conservation back into archaeology" by expanding the dialogue between conservators and archaeologists.

The FAQs are available on the Society for Historical Archaeology's website, www.sha.org. It is our intent to add additional materials over time in order to ensure that the information offered is as relevant for those on the West Coast as for those on the East Coast. The format of the materials makes it easy for conservators working in those areas to develop new materials, should they so desire, and we invite them to contact us.