Typology

Typologies are used by archaeologists to understand patterns in the artifacts found at archaeological sites. Archaeologists create a typology by defining types of artifacts (lithic tools, pots, etc.) that are considered to represent separate functional or stylistic categories. Note that these categories are created by the archaeologist and do not necessarily reflect the categorizations that the ancient people themselves would have recognized.

Typologies can divide artifacts into functional categories (e.g., spear point, arrow point, knife, etc.). This type of typology can help archaeologists compare activities at different sites. For example, if we find one site has a variety of hide scrapers and tools for wood working we may conclude that the activities that took place there were quite different from a site that contained only arrowheads. Functional typologies can also help us compare sites through time. For example, we may see a change in hunting technology from spear points to arrow points.

Alternatively, typologies can be based on stylistic differences between artifacts with similar functions. Style changes in pottery decoration or projectile point shape can be used to assign relative dates to sites, for example, and can also sometimes indicate movements of people or ideas.

Some important points about typology:
- Typologies are arbitrary ways of categorizing variability. There is no one "right way" to create a typology.
- Typological categories are research tools, not reconstructions of ancient ideas, so they should be created in such a way as to best answer the research questions the archaeologist is asking.
- Artifacts vary in many ways (size, function, color, material, etc.). Not all of this variation needs to be included in a typology. A typology may use only some of these characteristics.

In this lab, you will be given an assemblage of modern hardware—screws, nuts, etc. The hardware varies by size, color, shape, material, and other characteristics. You will create two typologies for this hardware, pretending (to the extent necessary) that you do not know what each item is used for, or what the differences among the items mean.

It is important to understand that what you are creating is a classification system that can subsequently be used to compare different assemblages of the classified artifacts. You are not analyzing the assemblage of hardware that you are given; rather you are developing a systematic means of quantifying the variability in that assemblage or any other.

A variety of questions can be asked of artifact assemblages. You could ask questions about human activities, such as "What is the range of activities at this site?" or "How many different kinds of tools can be used for the same task?" These questions would best be answered by a typology that focuses on the function of items. Alternatively, you could ask questions about
artifact style, such as “How important is decorative variation to the people who use these artifacts?” These questions would best be answered by a typology that focuses on the style or decoration of items.

The best typologies are constructed in such a way as to minimize what we call “inter-observer variability.” That is, archaeologists want our type definitions to be clear enough and specific enough that any two people would place a given artifact in the same category. This is most easily accomplished by making a typological tree in which you divide and re-divide a pile of artifacts based on well-specified, objective criteria. “Long vs. short” is not a good division; “pointed vs. blunt” is a fairly good one. (If you do want to take size into account, choose a measurable characteristic and a specific value to split on.) Each lab table will be given an example of a typological tree to help you get started.

**Directions**

1) Assume that the assemblage is made up of pottery-manufacturing tools. Develop a typology that would be useful for analyzing the aspects or stages of the pottery-manufacturing process represented by a given assemblage.

2) Assume that the assemblage is made up of jewelry. Develop a typology that would be useful for analyzing the relative wealth represented by an assemblage and the stylistic similarity (and thus social/cultural/ethnic solidarity) between or among assemblages.

Your write-up should consist of the typological trees for each of these questions, and around one page discussing the reasoning behind the major divisions that you made in creating the trees.