Ceramics

Ceramics are perhaps the single most common type of artifact in prehistoric archaeological sites. They can be used to recognize prehistoric activities ranging from daily meals to religious feasts, to reconstruct trade networks, and to understand basic economic aspects of societies. The description and analysis of ceramics, therefore, is critical to many archaeological analyses. This lab introduces some of the most commonly used analytical methods. In this lab, you will be given a set of archaeological ceramics. Your group needs to describe three categories of attributes related to each of the potsherds in your assemblage: 1) form/shape; 2) materials/forming techniques; 3) decoration. Analyze each potsherd individually in all three categories before moving on to the next potsherd, so the potsherds are in the same order on each sheet (the data sheets will be provided in lab).

Form/Shape
a) what part of the vessel does the sherd represent: rim, body, base, handle, spout?
b) for all rim sherds, estimate rim diameter using the rim chart
c) what is the overall vessel shape? Use descriptive terms like dish, bowl, vase, jar

Materials/Forming techniques
a) color of the paste (clay that makes up the body of the pot)
b) apparently porosity (number and size of bubbles visible on a broken edge of the sherd)
c) coarseness of particles as seen on a broken edge of the sherd (coarse, medium, or fine)
d) wall thickness (use calipers)

Decoration
a) decorated or not?
b) colors used in decoration
c) method of applying decoration (dipped, painted, transfer print, etc.)
d) style of decoration (naturalistic, abstract, geometric, etc.)

When all of the sherds have been analyzed, spend some time as a group discussing the questions below. Write these up for your lab report and include all three data tables. You are strongly encouraged to actually analyze the data quantitatively, rather than just form impressions.

Questions:
1) Characterize the patterns and variability you observed. For example, does there seem to be more variability in materials, form, or decoration? Are there certain attribute states that co-occur with others, such as a particular vessel shape with a particular decoration? Actual analysis of variability and co-occurrence (with numbers) would be a good way to go about this.

2) Based on your impressions of how these vessels were used, make some general statements about where certain types may have been found at the site—assuming they are de facto or primary refuse. For example, are certain types more likely to be found in a storage room, kitchen, barn, or dining room?