

Garbology

What is garbology?

The study of a community using its waste. Developed as a subsphere of archaeology by Professor William Rathje of the University of Arizona, who pioneered the archaeology of garbage in the 1970s and 1980s.

Usefulness for archaeologists?

We study what is left behind and what survives. In certain periods there might be very rich archaeological remains in middens and rubbish pits. There are always problems of bias: how different materials are discarded will be culturally constructed, what survives will vary according to specific environmental factors

Today's task: have a look at the random collection of rubbish (about half a week's worth of debris from a West Wales household - only from the clean recycling!). This assemblage of material provides an opportunity to examine and explore patterns of sorting, discard, value and consumption. Elements of the assemblage(s) may provide indicators to the individual consumer as well as wider communal and cultural identities. You will need to sort (and re-sort) the material to make various comparative observations. When looking at the material you will also need to consider condition, usage, material, origin, gender and complexity. Thinking about the following points what does this assemblage tell you about the person/people who generated the discard?

Think about:

How many people created this assemblage (single, couple, family group, larger?)

- Age, gender, status profiles
- Bias in the creation of the assemblage
- Patterns of consumption and discard

What this tell us about our society?