

## Everyday Archaeology

Guest Editorial

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*My name is **Meaghan Peuramaki-Brown**, and I am an Associate Professor in the Anthropology Program at Athabasca University. I received my Ph.D. in archaeology from the University of Calgary, where I also completed my BA. I journeyed to London, England, for an M.A. in Artefact Studies, graduating from the Institute of Archaeology, University College London. Typically, each summer, I travel for archaeological field research. I've studied in Central America for over 20 years, focused primarily on the archaeological record of ancient Maya peoples, working alongside their modern descendants. I've published on ancient urbanism, conflict and warfare, pottery production, ritual entanglement, and more. During the COVID-19 pandemic, I could not travel to conferences and my field site. This lack of voyaging left me at home in Grande Prairie, Alberta, with a lot of time on my hands and building pressure to spend that time writing up previous research results. As a student academic, like so many others, I was never really taught about the writing process itself—I only ever learned how to set up or outline a research plan, do the fieldwork, and how the final product should look. As a result, I would write solely for the relief of producing a final product—no matter how torturous the journey—and miss out on the pleasures of the challenge of the writing process itself. So, with this additional time and mounting dread of the need to “produce,” I decided to take an eight-week online workshop for academics focused on the writing process. I also started writing almost every day for pleasure—no matter the topic. I went on to take part in another workshop focused on writing about my family's Finnish ancestry and resulting Finnish-Canadian culture. I am now in an advanced*

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*writing workshop, producing a book based on a deeply revised version of my dissertation. The following short essay, titled “Everyday Archaeology,” results from many reflective moments I’ve had on my stay-at-home journey of discovering the pleasures of daily writing time throughout this pandemic.*

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The conversation always happens on a plane. I sit down—preferably window or aisle—and just as I’m about to put my headphones on and go to sleep, the passenger next to me introduces themselves and asks what I do for a living. When I tell them I’m an archaeologist, they are thrilled; they think I’m Indiana Jones or Dr. Alan Grant. Once I clarify that I focus on human culture and societies of the past and not dinosaurs—more Dr. Jones than Dr. Grant, though not really—the excitement somewhat fades. It flares a bit when I tell them I focus specifically on the ancient peoples of Mesoamerica (Mexico and Central America). Inevitably, they ask: “So, what’s the most exciting thing you’ve ever found?” Most of them are really asking what I’ve found that *they* would find most exciting—typically stories of palaces, tombs, ‘treasure,’ and jungle adventures—versions of which I sometimes offer up. But if I were to tell them, honestly, the most exciting thing I have ever uncovered—a small lump of clay—I fear the excitement will entirely fade from their eyes.



*Drawing by Shawn Morton, based on a photograph by M. Peuramaki-Brown.*

As Mesoamerican archaeologists, we typically divide ourselves into two groups: Those scholars who focus their research on royalty, nobility, and elites and their associated identities and behaviours (the typical stuff of *National Geographic Magazine*), and those of us who tend to focus on non-elite, or commoner, identities and behaviours. Some have termed this latter focus “everyday archaeology” (Robin, 2020) or “archaeology of the 99%” (Holmes, 2019). I have jokingly referred to it as “mundane archaeology” and to myself as a “mundane archaeologist.” My favourite book on the topic, titled *In Small Things Forgotten* (Deetz, 1996), though not about ancient Mesoamerica, was given to me by an encouraging undergraduate professor. It remains one of the best jargon-free books about the archaeology of everyday life and was my inspiration to become a household archaeologist.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, while stuck for months around my apartment with limited things to do beyond the home, I found myself thinking more about my own mundane life and how it relates to what I study. Take, for example, the aforementioned lump of clay. It was a piece

of garbage or waste from pottery production made over a thousand years ago at a small rural site in northwestern Honduras. A household archaeologist spends much of their time locating such garbage deposits. Typical garbage from ceramic manufacture includes broken or reused pottery sherds (not shards), potstands, smoothing stones, etc. This item resembled a ‘pinch’ of clay that someone had squeezed and pulled between their fingers until it was roughly the shape of a balloon with the end tied off. Now, I cannot say for sure what this represents, but I always figured it was a piece of clay that a child had been playing with while their parent made a pot. I could place my fingers roughly into the small-ish fingerprints that covered the piece, allowing me to connect intimately with this individual of the past. Likely, the parent or child threw the clay pinch into the flames where the full pots were baking. Because I, along with so many others, was heavy into baking during the pandemic, it reminded me very much of a child today playing with a piece of dough while their parent teaches them how to bake in a kitchen. Inevitably, the parent puts the child’s disturbingly gray lump on the sheet alongside their Instagram-worthy product to bake in the oven.

So why is this lump of clay or dough so important? It comes down to the role of households in societies across the world and through time. In general, households—whether representing families or other groupings of individuals—are the foundations of our cultures; they are the primary setting in which culture is transmitted and reproduced. Here I am using culture in the sense that it is used in anthropology: the learned patterns of behaviour and thought that shape who we are and how we survive in the world.

As an archaeologist, I can take a lump of clay found in context, such as a garbage pile outside of a house (the physical domain of the household), and use a variety of methods and techniques (we have MANY) to potentially tell you *where* it was produced, *when* it was created, *what* it was made of and where the ‘ingredients’ came from, *how* it was made and *why*, and possibly even *who* produced it. So, in that case, think of a piece of dough—what could it say about who you are, where and when you live, what you do and how you do it, and what you want to be?

As a child, my Grandmother taught me to make *pulla*: a Finnish sweet bread. In this one act—as in cuisine practices the world over and through time—I was taught to connect with my elders (the Keepers of Culture); learned a skill that would help me survive in the world (subsistence practice); discovered ritual and appropriate behaviours, including coffee rituals that accompany the serving of *pulla*, which offer comfort and guidance; and, through observing, doing, and playing, encountered my family’s cultural practices and ethnicity, and therefore my own identity. Later, I taught my husband to do the same, along with other important Finnish-Canadian traditions that we carry through our daily lives. Archaeologists understand that we as humans shape materials like clay and dough, but in so doing, the same materials also shape us.

From a simple lump of clay, I can talk about pretty much any topic. So, the next time a fellow passenger strikes up ‘the’ conversation, I will be more truthful in my response. In so doing, the lump of clay or the ball of dough is no longer mundane. It becomes sacred and deserves to be recognized as we move through our daily lives in pandemic times and beyond.

Meaghan Peuramaki-Brown, PhD

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