

What can we learn from studying broken pieces of pottery?



Some of the pot sherds at the Maxwell Museum, University of New Mexico that were analyzed as part of the Tijeras Pueblo Ceramic Project.

The broken fragments of pottery (potsherds, or just sherds) that are so abundant on Ancestral Pueblo sites in the Southwest may at first glance appear as useless bits of trash. Not for archaeologists! For us, pot sherds are a valuable source of information about how people lived in the past. For example, we can use these humble sherds to determine the shapes and sizes of pots people made, and how they used the pots for daily domestic tasks and for special occasions such as feasts. Based on how potters followed (or didn't follow) community norms of style and technique, we gain clues about how apprentices were taught and learned to make pots. The chemical and

mineralogical composition of potsherds tells us where pots were made and thus reveal how communities interacted, sometimes over large distances. By tracing the movement of pots and the knowledge of how to make them, we can also trace the peoples' migrations and how they fit into newly forming communities. And much more. The information built into pottery, as it is created, turns out to be vast.

This exhibit highlights some of what archaeologists have recently learned about the people who lived at Tijeras Pueblo in the 1300s, based on broken fragments of pottery recovered from the site. This research was part of the Tijeras Pueblo Ceramics Project, conducted at the University of California, Santa Cruz (UCSC), under the direction of Professor Judith Habicht-Mauche. She was assisted by volunteers from the Friends of Tijeras Pueblo, as well as by a number of undergraduate and graduate students at UCSC.

The sherds analyzed for this project were recovered from the site in the 1970s during University of New Mexico archaeological field schools directed by Jim Judge and Linda Cordell. Their collections are housed at the Maxwell Museum, University of New Mexico.

Click on each of the other pages to find out more about what we have learned about the people who lived at Tijeras Pueblo, based on broken bits of their pottery: