WATERLOGGED MATERIALS

GLOSSARY

Waterlogged: objects recovered from an archaeological context in a wet state. This includes objects from marine and riverine environments.

STORAGE

- Do not store waterlogged materials in a wet state on high shelves or over dry materials.
- Seal waterlogged samples carefully in plastic bags or boxes to prevent drying out. If a waterlogged object does accidentally dry out it should not be re-wetted, but left dry and an explanatory note supplied.
- Storing waterlogged materials in a wet state long-term is not recommended. Seek specialist advice about treatment and drying out. Large waterlogged objects (e.g. timbers) will need conservation prior to storage.
- Waterlogged materials from marine environments contain high levels of salt and may need desalination before storage. Seek specialist advice.
- Once waterlogged finds have dried out and been treated, store them according to their material types.

Wooden writing tablet © Bristol Culture

Medieval wooden bowl © Bristol Culture

LABELLING AND MARKING

Use archive labels inside the bag and mark box or bag.

- Undertake a documentation check to ensure that the information is correct before remains are marked.
- Ensure that marking is clear and legible.
- Be aware that labels can fade more quickly in a wet environment.

ENVIRONMENTAL DATA

The general rule is to maintain waterlogged materials chilled and dark, as close as possible to conditions in the ground.

- Temperature: below 10°C.
- Humidity: 45-55% (over 65% is a high risk for mould).
- Illuminance: 300 lux maximum.
- UV Radiation: 0–10 microwatts per lumen ideal. 75 microwatts per lumen maximum.

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INDICATORS OF DECAY

- Mould.
- Very dirty water.
- Orange corrosion products deposited onto the storage bag or box.
- Purple surface deposits (vivianite, a phosphate mineral).
- Bad smell (sulphur). Biocides can also smell bad.

WHERE YOU WILL COME ACROSS WATERLOGGED MATERIALS

- In archaeological objects of all periods.
- In archaeological excavation archives.
- In marine archaeological collections.

HANDLING

Ideally, handle waterlogged material in a sink or outside (if large). A well-ventilated area is recommended as they can smell bad (sulphur, biocides).

- Use nitrile gloves, and wear a suitable facemask if needed.

LOOK OUT FOR

- Waterlogged materials that are part of composite objects (e.g. bone-handled knives) may need different storage and handling conditions.
- Be aware that treated waterlogged objects can be less robust than they appear. Use two hands to support them. Handle small items over a padded surface or in the box.

Leather knife sheath © Bristol Culture

HEALTH AND SAFETY

- Waterlogged materials may have been previously treated with toxic biocides.
- Waterlogged materials can be contaminated with mould or with chemicals from the excavation site (e.g. toxic metal salts, cess-pit material).
- Wear a facemask if mould or biocides are a risk.
- Use gloves (long ones if needed), avoid opening bags and boxes.

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SOURCES OF FURTHER INFORMATION

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