

CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE WORKSHOP “WERKSTATTGESPRÄCHE ZU ABFALLHAUFEN UND KULTISCHEN ABLAGERUNGEN”

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Introduction to the contributions

Most archaeologists, irrespective of their cultural and chronological focus, are confronted with discreet assemblages of material remains in pits, depressions and natural cavities for which questions concerning their formation and interpretation arise.¹ These questions intensify when the deposits in question contain nothing that is obviously of an intrinsically ritual nature and consists instead of objects that – to a modern perspective – are more mundane and every day, for example pottery sherds and the by-products of craft activities. Are such collections of materials simply rubbish deposits formed either intentionally or by slow accidental accumulation? Or in certain circumstances, might they be the remains of cultic activities that have been carefully buried? As Egyptologists working with “mundane” deposits that are not easily identified with types of rituals recorded in the ancient textual record or in wall paintings and reliefs, we were both particularly interested in seeing how archaeologists working in different fields deal with these same problems, and archaeology could be used to identify commonalities and differences in attitudes towards, and treatment of waste, sacred, mundane and otherwise in pre-industrial societies. Central to the consideration of these questions is obviously a broader understanding of the treatment of waste in the past. For the longest time in human history, waste consisted mainly of perishable substances that was either eaten by animals, decomposed by the environmental conditions or decayed by time through different agencies.² Minor amounts of garbage could thus be deposited in the floors of houses, in the courts, streets or other areas outside of houses without inducing mass accumulations in short time-spans.

More intensely used areas for the productions of larger quantities of objects were a different matter and it seems that also in ancient times middens at the edges of settlements were commonly used to dispose of waste created through such activities.³

But what happened generally with non-perishable substances like metals or pottery vessels? When was an object considered as waste and when not, and how was it disposed of? A related issue is the treatment of objects that played a role in cultic procedures. Was each object used during the cult automatically considered as sacred? Could such objects be re-used in profane contexts until they finally fell out of use or were they disposed of in a particular way and in a particular place? This last question raises the issue of the context of depositional events, and its perceived importance for the interpretation of the nature of deposits. Often there is a tendency to distinguish between ritual and non-ritual contexts and to confer this meta-level meaning onto all materials tied to the context. But do, for example, all depositions found in cultic installations automatically have to be interpreted as cultic depositions? Moreover, were all parts of cultic installations equally sacrosanct? Was the floor of a temple court or the area in front of a sanctuary or around a tomb considered as sacrosanct, so that objects deposited on its floor or in its neighbourhood have to be attributed with a cultic function?

These are just some of the questions that we had in mind when we organised the workshop “*Abfallhaufen oder kultische Ablagerungen? Werkstattgespräche zu Abfallhaufen und kultischen Ablagerungen*” at the then newly founded Institute of Oriental and European Archaeology (OREA) of the Austrian Academy of Sciences in Vienna in

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¹ For a comprehensive discussion of the different kinds of depositions and their transformation through space and time, see SCHIFFER 1987 with modern adaptations by PFÄLZNER 2015 and RAINVILLE 2015.

² For an overview of techniques and materials found in house-complexes via micro-archaeological procedures, see for instance RAINVILLE 2015.

³ ARNOLD, F. 2015, also with an example of large accumulations in a house-court at Elephantine.

June 2014. In total, eleven papers were presented by members of the Institute and the University of Vienna. From a methodological perspective, Estella Weiss-Krejci gave an insight into the American Rubbish Archaeology. The remaining ten papers were case-studies that looked at problematic instances of deposition. The papers ranged considerably in date and geographic focus. These included: an unusual pit deposit at Çukuriçi Höyük (Barbara Horejs); waste management in Neolithic Anatolia (Felix Ostmann); mysterious deposits of ash in fortification trenches in Early Bronze Age Italy (Reinhard Jung); middens (or perhaps funerary deposits?) in 1st millennium BCE Saudi Arabia (Marta Luciani and Anja Prust); and Urnenfelderkultur work (or cult?) pits in Lower Austria (Monika Griehl and Irmtraud Hellerschmidt). From Egyptology, David Aston gave his account of the formation process of the massive deposit of over 30,000 pottery vessels and other objects from pit L81 at Tell el-Dab^a; Bettina Bader looked at the reuse of waste in the creation of unique architectural features in the Tell el-Dab^a settlement; Christian Knoblauch examined a group of pit deposits that have been identified as repositories of building waste or alternatively, pottery dumps; and Vera Müller looked at the phenomenon of deposition in Egyptology more generally.

Not all participants handed in their papers for this volume and a few presentations have already been published (GRIEHL and HELLERSCHMIDT 2015;

KNOBLAUCH 2016) or are just being prepared for publication (HOREJS; OSTMANN; ASTON; BADER; WEISS-KREJCI). Instead, with Teresa Bürge and Lucia Hulková we could win two young scholars from OREA for sharing their research results with us.

One of the main conclusions of the workshop was the importance of a clearly documented find context for the evaluation of a deposition. Often objects of everyday use gain an altered significance when used in other contexts and in the way they were deposited. Naturally, the combination of archaeological materials with ritual texts and depictions allows for a much wider spectrum of ritual practices than the evaluation of the archaeological record alone. Especially the case of Egypt reveals that several ritual practices have not been depicted or described but can only be gleaned by archaeological methods. Our discussions and some of the papers also stressed the importance of a corpus of similar or dissimilar deposits at the interpretive level. It is often only by comparative work that a convincing case for deliberate deposition with a specific character rather than a one-off random accumulation of debris with no special meaning can be made. In this respect, there is obviously a need for even greater attention to all types of deposits and depositional processes, especially in Egyptian archaeology which often focuses on the primary or intended use of space rather than on the secondary and tertiary processes that formed and transformed it.

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