

# **Culture and the uncultured: archaeological constructs based on behavioural debris (aspects of the “Warsaw Rubbish Project”)**

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The paper discusses aspects of the the results of an archaeoethnographic experiment on modern Warsaw street-rubbish and leads to a consideration of the relevance of the results to the study of culture and cultures.

**KEY-WORDS:** archaeoethnography, deposition, rubbish, culture.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The teaching of archaeological concepts to undergraduates often involves an element of discovery. I want in this brief paper to present selected aspects of a small-scale project which was carried out as a part of three undergraduate courses between 1992 and 1994 by myself with two groups of first year (“Introduction to Archaeology” course) and a second-year (“Source analysis”) group from the Institute of Archaeology, University of Warsaw. The project was carried out as assessed written work and in-class discussions in order to illustrate several archaeological concepts. With the first year groups we were exploring among other things the relationship between material culture and non-material aspects of culture, as well as questions concerning site formation processes. The second-year group began with these aspects, but considered the question of analysis of the implications of the results in more detail; their project involved an element of project design as well. In general, within the limits of what I was trying to achieve the didactic aims of the project were realised, but the results obtained and their discussion gave rise to a series of questions and ideas that I was not anticipating, some of which are introduced here.

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The problem I was facing was the need to find ways of allowing junior students to undertake themselves some form of "archaeological" investigation and without damaging "real" sites in order to think about and accumulate data on material culture and site formation processes for discussion in class. My attention was settled on the urban rubbish in modern Warsaw, in the streets and parks around the University. The idea of course is not by any means original, it is the stunted offspring of the Tucson Garbage project (Rathje 1974; Wilk and Schiffer 1979), and we also discussed among other things the cautionary tale of Millie's Camp (Bonischen 1972). Similar student projects involving urban rubbish are mentioned by Joukowsky (1980: vii–viii).

The survey of rubbish dispersal in present Warsaw was for our classroom exercises discussed as part of an imaginary archaeological project which might be carried out in 500 years time in "the ruins of abandoned Warsaw". One of the principal results was the demonstration that without written sources, the material we were studying would be impossible to date to within a close enough period to enable us to answer questions such as "the archaeological visibility of the collapse of the Soviet hegemony". In Poland we see all around us massive changes in the material world, all of them occurring in a very short time (these of course are a reflection of and participant in major socio-economic and political changes). The archaeologist cannot see that the decay of the old urban infrastructure relates chronologically to the explosive building of new structures for business and tourism, laying of new pavements and the appearance of western models of cars as well as the typological and quantitative changes in imported coca-cola tins. Also we noted that we did not find lying on the surface in 1995 material dropped there in 1985, even though that road, pavement or grassy space had precisely the same surface ten years before (excepting in the latter case worm-action) as we walk upon today.

In order to study patterns of rubbish disposal, each student selected and was asked to describe the nature of "the surface we walk on" and within three areas 5 × 5 m square to collect all artefactual and describe ecofactual material. In one group our discussion led to selecting of sites on the basis of surface evidence of function of nearby structures (ritual, public, residential, open space, communications and cemetery), the other two groups settled for random siting of trenches. In practice what this meant was that each student went out into the urban environment and selected areas which they were then supposed to examine as if it was a freshly-revealed archaeological surface from under an overlying sterile layer. They were to describe in minute detail the composition of the surface, as they thought it would be after five hundred years burial, and collect all artefacts from their "trenches". They were to submit "reports" of their work, together with the artefacts collected, and to draw preliminary inferences from the evidence produced

by the areas investigated which were assessed and then discussed in class. The cognitive value for the archaeologist of the artefacts collected was discussed.

In general, most of the students treated the project seriously, there were a few jokers who had selected areas facetiously in order to be able to submit used condoms (generally a post-Communist phenomenon in Warsaw streets and parks), a few who (even though I allowed three weeks) had only two hours before the class quickly collected material from around their halls of residence or homes (or the Institute of Archaeology carpark). Even omitting these less reliable results, the students examined about 150 findspots in Warsaw. Some students who had gone home for the weekends had submitted material from rural areas from different parts of Poland, arguing that a real survey would want to know the difference between material from urban and rural environments. This was a valid point, which we discussed, with the conclusion that there seemed not to be a difference in composition nor patterns of disposal of rubbish between many of these rural sites and material from the towns, but the quantity of rural material was too small for the pattern to be reliably assessed.

## THE RESULTS

The material was classified and tabulated using a modified version of the Tucson recording system. The details need not be presented here. The pattern of rubbish disposal however will be considered. In effect, looking at the rubbish disposal patterns, four types of site were distinguished:

A) Formal rubbish-disposal sites. These were the destination of the majority of rubbish produced by Warsaw's inhabitants. Although one of these was visited by one group, to study decay processes, these were not in general investigated by the Warsaw Rubbish Project. Although one or two are above-ground mounds of massive proportions, which would be easily visible in a future archaeological survey, most of the rubbish is disposed- of in below-ground dumps in landfill projects. These would be difficult to locate in survey projects. The various strata of these long-lived sites would be ideally datable if excavated suitably (and it seems likely that the changes in material culture of 1989 may be detectable only here).

B) Sites with no rubbish detectable (B1), and sites with only occasional pieces of litter, (B2), the odd cigarette-end or spent match, a sweet-wrapper. Much of this latter rubbish is in any case biodegradable. The majority of sites tested by random survey fell into this category, as did specific types of sites in the "directed" survey (such as cemeteries, the environs of churches and other public buildings).

C) Sites with variable quantities of variable types of rubbish from casual littering (C1) and/or wild dumping (C2) – the latter tended to attract the former.

Many sites of this type were examined by the “directed” survey because they were artefact-rich. The range of artefact types in category C<sub>1</sub> was startling, ranging from whole cars and their parts through items of clothing, to broken glass, food wrappers etc. Most noticeable among the C<sub>1</sub> material however was the containers of fast take-away foods (McDonald’s, Burger King and Coca-Cola tins) which are an entirely post-Communist phenomenon, and cigarette packets.

D) Sites with “socially-deposited” rubbish assemblages. These are relatively common and consist of dense scatters of broken glass from bottles, mostly containers from alcoholic drinks, and bottle caps from drinks bottles. Among this is usually a quantity of type C<sub>1</sub> material, often again cigarette-packets and food wrappers. This material is generated by groups of (generally) male alcoholics who gather in the daytime in public places, secluded park benches, in bushes, hedges, and small clumps of trees and spend several hours drinking and chatting together. The “social margins” that create this material is a small percentage of Warsaw’s population.

## CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

The most startling point however was that if we take any textbook definition of an archaeological culture (such as “a series of artefacts and phenomena which repeatedly occur in association in a specific area and time”) and we accept that what is usually used as the basis of archaeological cultural division is precisely the sort of rubbish from ancient societies which we have been looking-at in the Warsaw Rubbish Project, we look for our repetitive assemblages. Note that type B sites, the most frequent, are omitted totally as being invisible from the point of view of material culture. The only regularities we find are the ubiquitous Coca-Cola/McDonalds complex (which may be abbreviated here as CMD) and type D sites. I wish briefly to discuss these two complexes here.

The CMD complex is very visible and occurs widely, but rarely in regular assemblages with other classes of finds. This material is also scattered in a similar manner right across the northern hemisphere. Before 1989 it was largely a western European phenomenon. The use of Coca-Cola in communist Poland (outside of its original cultural context) was an example of acculturation. For several reasons however, Coca-Cola bottles and cans rarely ended-up as street rubbish in the Peoples’ Republic. With the collapse of the Soviet hegemony the CMD complex erupts onto the material cultural scene in the early 1990s. Without the texts, would the future archaeologist correctly interpret this evidence? It is a good example to demonstrate to the first year student the unreliability of simplistic invasionist models and the complexities of examining cultural change.

While the CMD complex has already (in the space of five years) become ubiquitous in the street rubbish of Warsaw, it is not found as such in the areas outside the big towns within which these fastfood outlets are located (although Coca-Cola cans alone do occur). What we do find however in most small towns and other concentrations of population are the type D assemblages. It is this relatively ubiquitous, repetitive and internally homogenous group of material which the archaeologist of the future would probably seize upon as the cultural marker of our times. Our sample is unable to answer questions of the time-depth of such deposits, nor are we able to say anything about the geographical extent of this culture (and whether it has sharp boundaries or fuzzy ones), nevertheless having recognised it at its “type site” (the streets of Warsaw), it would remain to trace its extent to the east and west and study its varying typological content with time (whether this group can be split into “pre-War”, “Stalinist”, “later Peoples’ Republic” and “post-Communist” phases at all). We can see that modern culture in Poland would probably appear in future archaeology textbooks as “the Glass Flask Culture” or something similar, of which the CMD complex would be regarded as a component of its later phases.

What is particularly interesting is that this “Culture” is formed not by the whole society living in Warsaw, but by a certain element, the so-called “social margins”; one of the characteristics of which is that their way of spending part of their life generates a specific and repetitive type of material element which is relatively ubiquitous in the archaeological record. This material (the bottles) reflects the behaviour creating this group, and for the post-processualist (the alcohol in those bottles) is the reason for this type of behavioural response. What is clear however is that the behaviour creating the “Glass Flask culture” in the archaeological record is practiced by only a small percentage of Polish urban society (most of whom do not dump rubbish or litter in streets). Even members of the “social margins” may practice this type of depositional behaviour only part of the day. Yet it is this behaviour which has left the most “characteristic” mark on the archaeological record. Such a context urges some caution in the application of concepts such as material correlates of culture, for in this case our archaeological culture is a result of the selective deposition of material correlates of a particular type of behaviour within – or on the margins of – a culture. Indeed, is it possible to speak of one uniform culture in a complex (or even simpler) society?

This is not to say however that the material left by the social margins in Warsaw should be used to propose that all archaeological cultures relate not from social activity, but anti-social activity. Past attitudes to rubbish disposal may well have differed from ours. It is interesting to note however in this connection that Andrew Sherratt has several times suggested provocatively that some forms of prehistoric pottery vessels used as cultural markers may have been used in some narcotic-related

activity and the postulated former alcoholic content of the Bell Beakers is also a tempting hypothesis to explain their occurrence over large areas of western Europe (Sherratt 1987; 1991). This suggests that not all archaeological cultures were in fact what they may to us seem to have been. It seems that “societies make archaeological cultures, but they cannot make them as they please”.

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