Finds Context and Deposit Status

by Steve Roskams

Introduction
In recent archaeological excavation, but particularly since the advent of the 'Rescue' movement of the 1970's, the case for government funding has been made in terms of the need to 'preserve by record' those sites threatened by redevelopment. If the archaeologist was pressed further, justification for allocating often substantial resources was based on the need to gather artefacts not just as individual finds, but in coherent assemblages - hence the requirement for a regulated context for their recovery. Despite the changes from unit- to project-funding, and latterly to developer finance, these broad lines of argument continue to be used when trying to acquire material support for excavation projects. Given this, it is more than a little surprising that, when finds are recovered in such controlled circumstances, very little work goes into linking site and finds evidence during the subsequent stages of analysis. This paper considers why this is the case and what needs to be done about it.

It is reproduced here essentially in the note form of the original presentation - 'warts and all'. The central points which it seeks to make would no doubt have benefited from wider reading and from incorporating comments made at the seminar itself. However, this was not possible in the limited period of time between giving it and the present volume being produced. Therefore it comprises, even more than is usual in archaeology, some preliminary conclusions from thinking in progress, rather than a finished item.

Of course, part of the explanation for the continuing dissociation of finds and field research mentioned above is obvious. As several other contributors to this volume make clear, organisational matters within the profession militate against specialist integration. Thus site staff move from place to place, putting pottery in trays and soil samples in bags, but have only limited contact with the artefactual or ecofactual workers who process the results of their endeavours at a later date. Similarly, further up the hierarchy, site directors write up the structural sequences according to one timetable, with or without access to pottery spot dates, coin lists etc., and finds specialists work to a different schedule, with different objectives and often in a different place altogether. The end result of this divergent research activity is the publication of site and finds in isolated sections of a report, or even in separate volumes which appear at very different times.

However, organisational matters are only part of the story, and might be better seen as a symptom of underlying conceptual problems rather than a cause in their own right. These fundamental issues result from a failure to theorise adequately the relationship between a find and its associated deposit. The calls of Hodder et al for contextual archaeology (Hodder 1987) have fallen mostly on deaf ears within the field profession. This is partly a function of the general divorce of theory and practice in archaeology, as in many other spheres of modern life, and partly because of the inherent weaknesses in the formulation of the ideas themselves. But it is mainly because nobody is putting in the theoretical groundwork necessary to enable our sophisticated field data to contribute to that contextual archaeology. If this can be done, the field profession is then surely capable of instituting the necessary organisational responses to enable it to flourish. This paper considers some ways forward for future practices.

The Conceptual Problem
In mentioning this lacuna in theoretical development, I do not wish to imply that none of the necessary work has been done. Indeed, issues such as site formation processes and the various transformations of the archaeological record have been looked at in considerable detail. If Schiffer's work (1976, 1987), with its potentially useful distinction between curation and rubbish survival, remains the magnum opus, many other archaeologists, including several involved in the seminar, have contributed to discussions of site evidence. Furthermore, articles by Stein (1987), Beronius-Jorpelund (1992) and Fedele (1984), amongst others, show that the challenge is also being taken up in North America, Scandinavia and on the continent. Equally, on the artefact side, some research has been published. Thus seriation has been promoted (Carver 1979 and 1983). Orton and Orton (1975) some time ago published a method to assess statistically artefact date against date of deposition, an approach recently taken up to good effect by Evans and Millett (1992). Vince (1985) has traced dated sherd through stratigraphic sequences, Bradley and Fulford (1980) have considered sherd size in specified deposits and Moorhouse (1986) has looked at cross-joins from some
Yorkshire sites. As a result of this endeavour, there have been some inroads into the problem in terms of the character of the finds assemblage itself.

However, if one turns from the consideration of artefacts and ecofacts as discrete entities to their investigation in relation to site evidence, the record is less impressive. Furthermore, when such work is attempted, the conventional approach is to define the 'status' of a deposit in terms of its physical characteristics and thereby suggest that the finds from that stratigraphic unit are of similar status. Thus a spread of grey, charcoal-flecked silt is interpreted as trodden occupation debris and assigned primary status, along with the carbonised grain which it contains. A dump of redeposited clay, on the other hand, is seen as secondary, as is the pottery within it. Such a procedure is unfortunate on three counts.

Firstly, the impetus to make these decisions on status often comes from funding agencies anxious to cut costs. They want to know which small part of the artefactual assemblage to investigate properly, and which to throw away (or, at best, leave to accumulate dust in 'the archive'). Given this situation, it is not surprising that some people, both archaeologists and non-archaeologists, are starting to question why precious resources were expended in recovering the non-researched material in the first place.

Secondly, and not unconnected with the issue of funding, a decision on deposit status based on site evidence is usually considered as an end in itself. Any judgements made are rarely compared to assessments derived from studying the finds along the lines given above. Thus the work of the expert looking at wear indices on coins, or rim percentages on pottery, is not compared to that of the site stratigraphist. The latter's work has provided the answer, so why bother wasting time and money repeating the exercise? However, if various specialists utilise such different criteria to identify residual material, there is no guarantee that they are speaking the same language, or even have the same concept of residuality in mind.

Thirdly, and most fundamentally, any study which attempts to define status directly from the physical characteristics of a stratigraphic unit is making a basic error, and this is the nub of the matter. Status is a property of neither the deposit itself, nor of the assemblage derived from it. It is a property of the 'relationship' between these two entities. The recent, but now conventional, use of the word 'context' in place of the old-fashioned 'layer' to mean stratigraphic unit has done much to muddy the waters over this issue. An example will explain what is at stake. Consider a piece of wall plaster derived from a wall on site. It makes no sense to ask 'What is the status of the wall, based on its characteristics?' or to enquire 'Is the plaster of primary or secondary status?'. The only valid answer to such questions is "It all depends", and what it depends on is how the plaster related to the wall on the ground. If it was applied to a prepared surface immediately after the wall's construction, this may be considered a primary relationship. If the plaster is mixed up in its core with reused stone, having been unintentionally redeposited from disturbed levels several centuries earlier in date than the wall, it lies in a secondary relationship. To repeat, status is a relational property. To define it in a particular circumstance, one requires information on two elements - the find itself and its specific context on the site. Both are necessary; neither is sufficient in isolation.

Some Definitions of Status

With the above conceptual issues in mind, it should be possible to define several such relationships, several different types of status, which go beyond the simple division into primary and secondary usually adopted. A preliminary attempt is made below. In each case functional, chronological and spatial information on both find and associated stratigraphic unit is needed, variations in the relationships between these factors producing the different types described. Some of the most common have been picked out, though with more thought and investigation, one could no doubt produce finer distinctions and subdivisions.

Type A - finds contemporary with, and functionally connected to, the stratigraphic unit from which they were derived. This is the closest form of relationship and would apply, for instance, to ironworking slag found in the ash deposit in the bowl of a furnace. To prove its existence, one requires specialist identification of the material and secure interpretation of the function of the associated feature from its structural characteristics.

Type B - finds broadly contemporary with, yet functionally and perhaps spatially distant from, the context in which they were found. This would apply, for example, to the same type of industrial residue mentioned above, this time lying in a deposit spread on the surface of a yard outside the building containing the hearth. It has chronological significance for the period concerned, but no specific functional implications for activities on the spot at which it was recovered.

Type C - finds functionally and chronologically unrelated to the context in which they were found, but derived locally. Thus on a deeply stratified, multi-period site occupied from the Roman period to the present day, second century pottery found in a twelfth century rubbish pit, having fallen in from its sides during the medieval digging of the feature, would qualify. Such material has functional, and perhaps even spatial, implications for the site in question but neither of these concern the period of the
pit fill in which it was found.

Type D—finds functionally unrelated to the context in which they were found, imported to the place of deposition, and earlier in date than that context. Thus, for example, boat timbers, provably of early medieval date by dendrochronology but incorporated into a late medieval structure, would fall under this category. Although these may be of great interest to those studying medieval carpentry, and relevant to an investigation of processes of timber recycling, they tell us nothing about the later structure or of vernacular architecture at that time, except in so far as they were modified in order to be accommodated in the new building.

This last example makes one final thing clear. Strictly speaking, the property which we are identifying when assessing status is not even that between the find in its entirety and its associated stratigraphic unit, but between a defined aspect of the data embodied in the find and that unit. Thus the information derived from the now redundant early medieval carpenters' marks on the timber of the last example are irrelevant to a study of fifteenth century prefabrication, whereas the complex joint on the same timber cut when it was reused may be of vital importance.

**Conclusion**

If the haziness surrounding the concepts of residuality and deposit status could be removed, and the types of distinctions outlined above could be constructed more thoroughly and used more widely, archaeological research and archaeologists themselves would benefit in a number of ways. Firstly the finds assemblages recovered in controlled conditions from our excavations would be more fruitfully investigated. Also funding agencies would have more return for the resources invested in their original retrieval. Finally, and perhaps most important for the health of the profession, a more fulfilling and productive working relationship between field, artefact and ecocraft specialists would be developed. We have a duty to ourselves, our colleagues and our sites to see that this is done.

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