

Contexts, Their Contents and Residuality

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Summary

Residual finds are those which occur in deposits later than the date of their origin and dispersal. Redeposited contexts are those which have been disturbed and laid down again subsequent to the date of their original deposition. Residual finds are often seen as an indicator of redeposition. This raises one question of the validity of finds for such a purpose, and another regarding the problems of identifying redeposited contexts where no finds are present. In addressing this, the placement of an archaeological context within a stratigraphic sequence is examined. This is followed by a consideration of the types of finds which are useful in the construction and interpretation of a sequence. Case studies are presented before a conclusion is made.

Context

Crummy and Terry, in a significant contribution to the site chronology debate, classified contexts into two groups. Their Class I deposits are those in which *all the finds are in their original positions* while Class II contexts are *those which contain residual material* (Crummy and Terry 1979). Fifteen years on it is easy to see this as simplistic. Their discussion was grounded in Roman archaeology, where dates were, indeed often still are, attributed to artefacts with a degree of certainty that is rarely attempted by students of other periods. This paper is offered by a specialist in medieval pottery, a class of find which cannot always be dated to within 50 or 100 years. The problem of residuality, or redeposition, may not therefore always be easily identified. This perspective has led to a consideration of the subject at a fundamental level.

In constructing a stratigraphic sequence for a site the following questions are likely to be asked of each context.

Question 1: *What is a context later than?* The answer to this question will initially be another layer and/or structure and can be answered without recourse to finds evidence. However, this question is also asked of contexts which have no physical relationship, for instance those which are horizontally discrete. Here, stratigraphy may lead the course of the enquiry, but

information gleaned from finds analysis will inevitably be of some use.

Question 2: *How much later is it?* The composition of a deposit or the character of an interface may help to answer this question, but finds are regarded as significant in providing a chronological framework for a stratigraphic relationship.

Question 3: *What is a context earlier than?* This question will probably be answered by the same means as question one.

Question 4: *How much earlier is it?* Similarly, this question will be answered by the same means as question two.

Question 5: *When was a context laid down?* If questions one to four have been answered then a relative date, or date-range, signified by *terminae post* and *ante quem*, will result. An absolute date may be indicated by finds, or by scientific analysis of the deposit matrix. This will not necessarily answer question 6.

Question 6: *How long did the process of deposition take?* Sometimes this may also be answered from the results of questions one to four. In some cases however, this will not be possible, for instance where deposits have been truncated. Finds evidence may be of some use in identifying short or long periods of deposition.

Question 7: *What happened to a context during or after the process of deposition?* The results of questions one to six may solve this. However, it can be the most difficult question to answer, and the task of doing so may invoke the problem of redeposition, for example where sealing layers have subsided into earlier features that are then re-cut. The structural evidence will certainly be significant here. Finds will provide a chronology for post-depositional events, and may also supply a cultural or environmental explanation for them.

If it is agreed that these are the problems which must be addressed before any deposit can be accurately placed within a stratigraphic sequence, and it is acknowledged that not all readers will accept this, then it may be possible to provide an alternative context

Context no.	293	294	295	296	297
Vessel no.					
1	4	3	-	-	-
2	4	2	-	-	-
3	2	2	-	-	-
4	2	8	-	-	-
5	8	9	-	-	-
6	1	2	-	-	-
7	20	3	-	-	-
8	1	-	-	2	-
9	4	1	-	2	-
10	2	8	-	1	29
11	5	2	-	4	8
12	-	3	-	6	-
13	-	1	-	15	-
14	-	6	-	4	-
15	-	10	1	18	3
16	-	1	-	2	5
17	-	6	-	-	8
18	-	-	2	5	1
19	-	-	-	3	6
20	-	-	-	1	7

Table 1: Distribution by sherd number of twenty cross-fitting vessels within medieval deposits at Southampton Castle (SOU123)

Date	Weight (grammes)	Sherd no.	% weight	% sherd no.
Early Medieval	19,218	427	90	88
High Medieval	2,102	56	10	12
Post-Medieval	44	1	<1	<1
Totals	21,364	484		

Table 2: Quantities of pottery for each period in the garderobe at Southampton Castle (SOU123)

classification. Here, Class 1 contexts are those where all seven questions have been answered. These can be placed in sequence with relative ease. Class 2 contexts will be those for which none of the seven questions can be answered. These represent those 'floating contexts' that plague all but the most fortunate matrix-builders. It is not the purpose of this paper to pursue a context classification, however, and that must remain an aside. It may be claimed that finds have no part to play in the building of a stratigraphic sequence. This is, in theory, perhaps the best way to approach such an exercise. Indeed, most provisional phasing is carried out before the finds evidence is available. However, in practice finds will help to answer the seven questions set out above; and given that these need to be answered in order to ascribe each context its stratigraphic value; it is worth considering just what finds can and cannot offer.

Finds

Finds may be classified according to their value as chronological indicators.

Class 1: Dated finds include coins, inscribed artefacts and scientifically dated material such as dendrochronological or C-14 samples. Few of the dates given will relate to the date of deposition however.

Class 2: Chronologically diagnostic finds are those for which no absolute date can be ascertained, but which retain characteristics that suggest a date-range for the period of their creation. Certain types of artefacts, such as ceramic building material, clay pipes, pottery, glass and metalwork, are the most common and are thus regarded as the most reliable types of finds in this group. Of these, pottery is possibly the most common, and pottery specialists are usually the first people to be asked to give dates to archaeological deposits. Ecofacts are rarely identifiable as chronologically diagnostic, although the bones of certain animals, such as rabbits, will provide a broad *terminus post quem*.

Class 3: Chronologically non-diagnostic finds have no datable characteristics. This group includes most ecofacts and materials such as stone, daub and formless fragments of ceramic building material and metal.

Given that Class 2 artefacts are those which are most often used in the establishment of a site chronology it is worth looking more closely at the ways in which they themselves are dated. Typological elements such

as manufacturing technique, shape and style, especially of decoration, are all deployed in the dating of artefacts. Most specialists will assign a date simply on the basis of an object's appearance. Typologies are of course chronologically relative, for although they allow the development of a type to be traced through time, no actual dates can be assumed. All too often a typology is set alongside a stratigraphic sequence. Put basically, if Type A is found in an earlier deposit than Type B then the one can be shown to pre-date the other. Dates are introduced into this sequence when certain types are found in association with dated finds (Class 1 above), or in contexts of known date, such as buildings. In short, the dates given to certain types of finds have been attained by the same means as the dates given to archaeological contexts; by stratigraphy and comparison. Finds specialists have refined their knowledge of finds to the extent that stratigraphic confirmation of their dates is rarely required. That is why excavators ask specialists to provide dates more frequently than specialists request dates from excavators. This fact may conceal a complacent attitude towards finds dating, for it is truly not as reliable as we would like it to be. It is revealing to consider that, ultimately, contexts are dated by finds that are dated by contexts. Does this mean we are all mad? Well, it does emphasise the foolishness of relying exclusively on finds for dating evidence.

Most finds, certainly of Class 2 types, will be given a date range. Medieval pottery in Southampton, for example, is placed into one of three ceramic periods: early medieval, the 12th and 13th centuries; high medieval, the mid-13th to mid-14th centuries; late medieval, the mid-14th to 15th centuries. A few types, particularly some imported wares that are known from excavations elsewhere, can be dated more accurately. These may provide dates for those types which are associated with them, but their presence will not necessarily allow the closer dating of archaeological deposits. The presence of each pottery type in every context is quantified to allow statistical analysis of many aspects, including the chronological information. The technique of dating by seriation is also discussed in detail by Crummy and Terry (*ibid*). This analysis will provide both a date-range and a consensus date for a deposit. The latter is based upon the premise that the ceramic period which is best represented is most likely to indicate the date of deposition, This of course only works where significant quantities of pottery are present. Other aspects, such as sherd size and condition, will also affect the assignment of a date, but it is ultimately simply a process of interpretation. The case studies offered below will illustrate this further and also show that residual finds are present in most

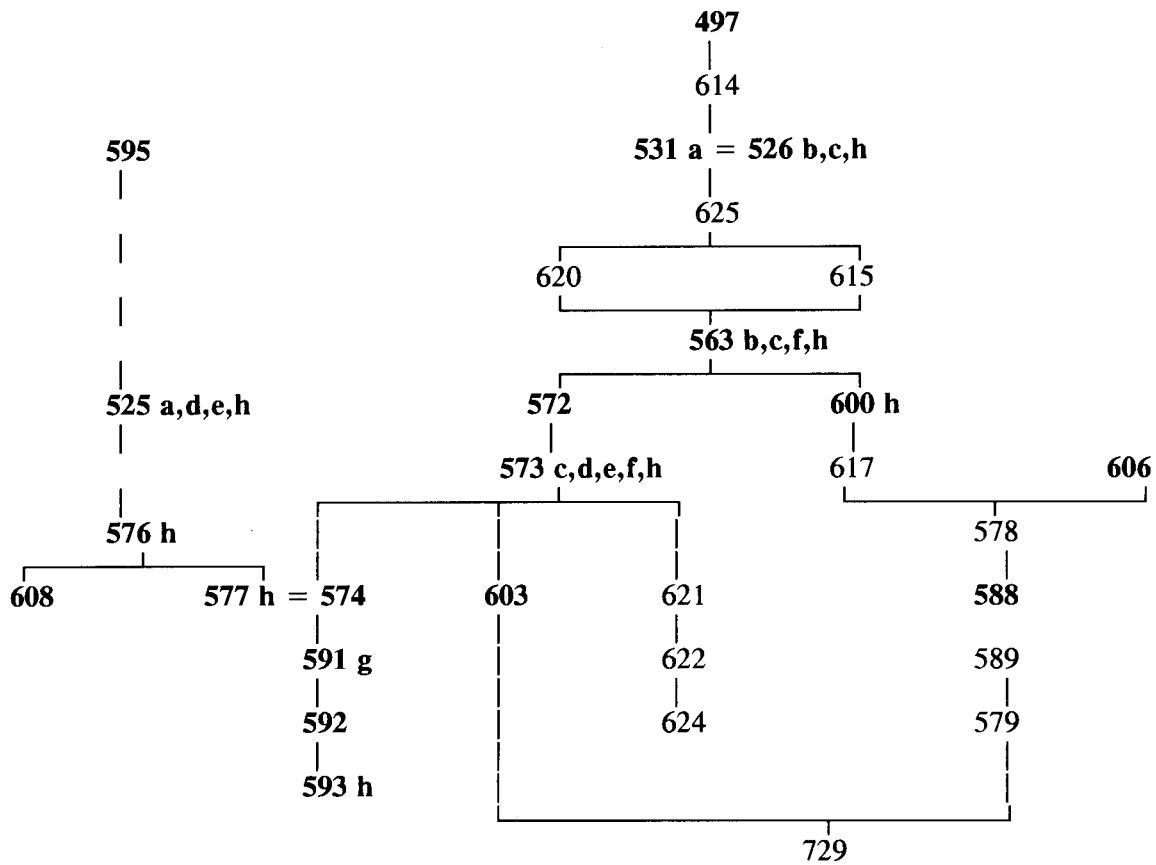


Figure 1: Schematised matrix of the fills of a section of the castle ditch, Southampton (SOU124). Pottery-producing contexts are shown in bold type. The distribution of each cross-fitting vessel is denoted by letters a to h (eg vessel 'a' is present in contexts 525 and 531).

urban contexts. Furthermore, finds that are later than the date of deposition are also horribly common. This infuriating phenomenon undermines even further the efforts made at dating archaeological deposits, for it is not necessarily true that contexts can be dated by the latest finds they produce. This serves to emphasise the fragility of our most common dating techniques.

Redeposition

Having examined the basics of stratigraphy and finds dating, the identification of redeposited contexts may now be discussed. Once again, a hierarchy of context types may be suggested. This is related to the probability of identifying a context as redeposited.

Class 1: Contexts containing dated finds should in theory be the most easy to date.

Class 2: Contexts containing chronologically diagnostic finds can be given a date range or a consensus date.

Class 3: Contexts containing only chronologically non-diagnostic finds will be assigned a relative date from the stratigraphic evidence.

Class 4: Contexts containing no finds will also be dated on the basis of the stratigraphy.

Residual finds will be identified only in contexts of Classes 1 and 2. If residual finds are the main indicator of redeposition, then Class 1 and 2 contexts are those which will most frequently be shown to be redeposited. Class 3 contexts will have points of comparison with Classes 1 and 2, if the latter contain similar undatable finds (the question of whether or not this makes such finds chronologically diagnostic will be passed over here), but for these, and Class 4 contexts, structural and stratigraphic factors are the primary indicators of redeposition. How often therefore are contexts that have not produced datable finds identified as redeposited? Not often enough perhaps.

This suggests that contexts which cannot easily be ascribed dates are often not regarded as significant, yet they pose many structural and cultural problems that cannot be ignored. Here, then, is an argument for setting aside the finds evidence during the initial phasing of the stratigraphy. One further point arises. If deposits are identified as redeposited only if they contain certain types of finds, then an unknown proportion of redeposited contexts must go

unrecognised. Is this important? If it is, then archaeologists need to refine methods of stratifying and dating contexts, because it is clear that the evidence provided by finds is inadequate, if only because they do not occur in every deposit. If it is not important, then perhaps there is no need to worry too much about the phenomenon of residuality and redeposition. After all, in urban assemblages especially, residual and intrusive finds are a fact of life, but they rarely distort the overall interpretation.

Case Studies

Table 1 shows the relationship between the fills of a closed feature, a garderobe at Southampton castle, and the pottery recovered therefrom. Fragments of each of twenty vessels were recovered from two or more of the five medieval fills. It has been argued that this series of cross-fits demonstrates that the in-filling of this feature took place as a single operation despite the fact that each layer is distinctly different (Brown 1986). Fragments of Vessel 11, for example, were found in four contexts, closely linking their deposition. It is probable that this material was derived from another source, perhaps an adjacent above-ground midden. Given that contexts 293 to 297 represent a single phase of deposition the answering of stratigraphic questions 1 to 7, as listed above, is straightforward. Furthermore, it should be possible to use the pottery to provide a date of deposition. Table 2 shows that almost all of it is early medieval, probably early 13th century. However, some later pieces are also present, and these may be dated to the mid-13th century at the earliest. A date c.1250 is the earliest option and this represents a consensus date based on the date-range indicated. This date and the date-range relate not only to the closing of the garderobe, but also to the accumulation of the material utilised in that operation. The fills of the garderobe should therefore be viewed as redeposited. However, the large sherd size and the unabraded condition of the pottery suggests that if an earlier deposit was used then it had not been standing for very long before being transferred to the garderobe. This chronology could hardly be described as refined, and the main use of the datable finds here is to suggest a timescale, if not a precise date, for the filling of the feature. This is also true of the second case study.

Figure 1 is a schematised matrix of the fills excavated within the castle ditch at Southampton. This shows how cross-fitting sherds from eight different pottery vessels are distributed throughout the sequence. It has been argued in this case that the ditch fills

Context no.	Early Medieval	High Medieval	Late Medieval	Post-Medieval
497	1	1	6	-
525	-	15	4	-
526	2	31	8	1
531	-	7	7	-
532	-	35	6	-
563	2	22	10	-
572	-	2	-	-
573	1	57	13	-
574	3	31	3	1
576	-	15	4	1
577	1	19	6	-
588	2	1	-	-
591	-	8	-	-
592	-	1	-	-
593	-	4	-	-
595	-	3	4	1
600	-	6	3	-
603	-	2	1	-
606	-	17	-	-
Totals	12	277	75	4
% Totals	3	75	20	1

Table 3: Quantities (by sherd number) of pottery from each period in the fills of a section of the castle ditch, Southampton (SOU124)

Date	Weight (grammes)	Sherd no.	% weight	% sherd no.
Early Medieval	22	2	1	2
High Medieval	2,284	106	64	90
Late Medieval	55	5	1	4
Post-Medieval	1,206	5	34	4
Totals	3,567	118		

Table 4: Quantities of pottery of each period from a burnt deposit excavated in Southampton (SOU124, Context 40)

accumulated over a period of time, during which the pottery was tumbled about and found its way into different layers. Table 3 shows how pottery of the late medieval periods is distributed among all but the fills earlier than context 606. Sherds of cross-fit vessel H are present in these fills and also those above, including 526, where a post-medieval sherd was recovered. This demonstrates the mixed quality of the ditch-fills and suggests longevity for the period of deposition (*ibid.*). Although stratigraphic questions 1 and 3, as listed above, can be answered, it is difficult to address the other five. Many of these deposits may be identified as redeposited within the confines of the ditch itself and few of these contexts can be assigned any accurate date.

The final example is a single deposit from a domestic dwelling within the medieval town of Southampton. Here, a burnt layer covered the site, sealing the walls of a 13th-century house. The destruction of this building may result from a French-instigated attack on the town in 1338. The proportions of pottery of different periods recovered from this deposit are shown in Table 4. High medieval pottery is the best represented and burnt pottery comprises 65% of the high medieval material by sherd weight. This is likely to be associated with the destruction event and can be interpreted as being more or less *in situ*. Among the unburnt material there is a negligible residual presence. The remaining unburnt finds may be presumed to post-date the deposition of the burnt layer. Much of this is high medieval and possibly represents the dumping of waste on the site in the aftermath of destruction. Although the post-medieval material comprises a significant proportion of the total pottery weight, this is represented by just five sherds. The higher breakage rate shown for the high medieval pottery suggests that the layer had lain exposed for some time after deposition. A consensus date for this context might be in the post-medieval period, but an actual date is provided by the presence of burnt pottery that can be related to the creation of the destruction deposit. The presence of post-medieval pottery, and the relative sherd size difference between this and the high medieval finds indicates the subsequent history of this deposit and goes some way towards answering stratigraphic question 7; what happened after the deposit was first laid down?

These case studies illustrate the variety of interpretations that can be placed on stratigraphic and finds evidence, and also highlight some of their shortcomings. Furthermore, it is hoped that the value of finds has been shown to extend beyond the provision of dates to allowing an insight into site

formation processes. Surely this technique is of greater value in revealing and understanding redeposition.

Conclusion

The techniques of stratigraphic analysis and the dating of finds have been set out here as a means of examining attitudes to residuality and redeposition. This may lead readers to consider in greater depth the problem of identifying redeposition where there is nothing but structural evidence.

As a pottery specialist it is dispiriting to be relied upon by excavators to provide little more than chronological information. Some finds cannot give dates of sufficient accuracy, but they do offer a wealth of cultural information (see Brown 1988). Animal bone, chronologically non-diagnostic, is one of the most common finds from excavations. Because of this it has enormous value in interpreting the social and structural dynamics of a site. Integrating this evidence with that from other types of finds, whether chronologically diagnostic or not, and with the stratigraphic information, will reveal the true potential of finds studies. Here is an opportunity to make a political point about evaluations, small holes in the ground, competitive tendering and the nurturing of specialist expertise, but that is not the point. What it is important to understand is that archaeological interpretation must bring together every available strand of evidence. The study of residuality and of redeposition is no exception. This is a complex phenomenon that cannot be unravelled simply by looking for, or at, dates.

One final conclusion must be that redeposition is a very difficult subject to write about. This has not simply been an exercise in propounding internal hierarchies. Hopefully, the approach of examining techniques of stratigraphic and finds analysis has clarified some of the principal issues and will form the basis for further discussion. I can't help feeling, however, that if any of this makes sense to you, then yes, we probably are all mad.

Bibliography

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