CLEANING AND VALUE

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CLEANING AND VALUE

INTERDISCIPLINARY INVESTIGATIONS

edited by
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Archaeology and Cleaning: Some Reflections on the Archaeological Process

Ulrich Veit

[1]Within prehistoric archaeology the term or concept of cleaning is present in at least two different contexts. Its first and more important use lies within the realm of field archaeology. 'Cleaning' here represents an activity that forms an integral part of the excavation process, even if the rank of cleaning within a hierarchy of archaeological practices is relatively low. This becomes obvious when looking at the simple fact that cleaning is something normally not performed by the director of an excavation but by workers or excavation assistants. Nevertheless, cleaning has proved vital for archaeological pattern recognition and it requires some experience to produce good results in the cleaning of plana and profiles. In this sense, this aspect of cleaning in archaeology may be relevant from a history of science or laboratory studies perspective.

Apart from this aforementioned context, the reputation of cleaning within archaeology is not the best. On the contrary, cleaning processes in past societies are an obstacle to archaeological work and knowledge production, since cleaning may have destroyed traces that potentially could have allowed conclusions to be drawn about certain aspects of past behaviour and are now no longer accessible to researchers. On the other hand, repeated cleaning procedures in clearly defined archaeological contexts (like houses, settlements etc.) may themselves produce a certain deposition pattern for the archaeological record and therefore these patterns produced through cleaning processes may bear important knowledge about past cultures.

In this respect, one might expect that modern archaeology contributes a lot to a "(pre-) history of cleaning practices". Surprisingly this is actually not the case. I suspect that this results from the fact that archaeologists today still act in the mode of treasure hunters rather than in the mode of trace hunters. In this article I will discuss selected aspects of the overall topic 'archaeology and cleaning' and present some examples. These examples are related to two specifically archaeological aspects that relate to the overall theme of this volume, namely the handling of findings and conclusions at excavations as well as

1 I would like to express may thanks to the organisers of this volume and of the associated workshop not only for the kind invitation, but also for choosing such a demanding topic.

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ethnographies (or better: ethno-archaeologies) of cleaning practices. Since ‘cleaning’ is neither an established field of research for prehistoric archaeology as a whole nor for myself, the character of my presentation will, to a certain extent, be experimental.

‘The term cleaning refers to a conglomerate of practices. These are rooted in social norms, morals and organizational structures. The term includes aspects of materiality, social organization, creation and conservation of value, devaluation as well as destruction’.

This well-chosen formulation from the call for papers may serve as a starting point for my paper. Surprisingly, this statement works equally well if you replace the word cleaning by the word archaeology. Indeed, all the points mentioned here are valid for archaeology as well. But this certainly should not mean that archaeology is the same thing as cleaning: in fact, archaeology is definitely not cleaning per se. The connection between both fields is much more complex. Perhaps one could argue, in a first approach, that the affinity between archaeology and cleaning stems from the fact that both fields are in some sense associated with dirt, waste and refuse.

Indeed, archaeological relics are regularly described in terms related to dirt. A fine example comes from Joachim Reichstein, who compares the archaeologist to a mole. He writes: ‘The heraldic animal of archaeologists is the mole. Since […] Aristotle the opinion exists that this digging small mammal is blind. Certainly not! The snout positioned in the dirt, in his eyes the shine of history.’(Reichstein, 1991:p.38, my translation). Reichstein here refers to the idea that dirt is a constitutive feature of at least field archaeology, but nothing that could prevent an archaeologist from following his idealistic aims.

His message is clear: the archaeologist -in the same way as the mole -does not fear dirt[2]. This clearly is not to say that cleanliness is not as important for moles or archaeologists as it is for other animals or representatives of other professions. Nevertheless, Reichstein’s formulation is not unproblematic. Therefore, the metaphoric association of archaeology and dirt has to be questioned -or at least to be qualified.

1.

In my opinion there are at least four qualifications to be mentioned, of which the first one shall be addressed in this introduction.

1. Unquestionably, dust and dirt are concomitants of archaeological excavations. Cleaning practices, therefore, are part of the archaeological process, but they are secondary to the archaeologist’s craft. This is proven by the fact that cleaning on excavation sites is normally performed by co-workers or excavation assistants and not by the director of an excavation.
   In any case, excavation is not primarily cleaning but, more accurately, clearing! And in this sense, archaeology since the days of Heinrich Schliemann has often been portrayed as ‘the science of the spade’ (Veit, 2006a, with further references). Nobody would speak of ‘the science of the broom or brush’. Archaeology is known for ‘breaking ground’ and ‘discovering artefacts’- and not for cleaning them[3].

2 This fact perhaps can be illustrated by historical photographs from the early days of the discipline. A very spectacular one, that shows only the body and legs of the colleage, with his head hidden in the excavation trench, has been published by K. Hudson (1981, p 64. Fig 16.).

3 Clearly the ‚breaking-ground‘-metaphor itself from a more theoretical point of view has ist own problems and is not able to represent the archaeologcial process as a whole. But that is quite another story.

Since it is not possible to cover the topic 'cleaning and cleanliness in archaeological excavation' here in all its facets, I will present only one example that highlights some relevant central aspects. Central to my example is the famous British archaeologist Sir Mortimer Wheeler. Photographs from his numerous excavations all over the world unmistakably demonstrate the high rank of cleaning and cleanliness for his excavation work. Probably no other archaeologist after Wheeler has ever reached such a degree of perfection and it is hard to assess the costs of man-power and organizational, as well as practical, skills required to produce these results.

Wheeler justifies these costs in his famous pocket-book Archaeology from the Earth, which in the mid-twentieth century enjoyed a very wide distribution. Intensive cleaning of archaeological structures by the use of a standard set of tools here is presented as a precondition for archaeological photography and publishing (which in Wheelers time had been largely limited to black and white figures). He writes:

> 'No amount of mechanical skill is a substitute for the careful preparation of the subject. Clean, sharp angles between the divergent planes of a section, carefully and emphatically cut with the trowel, knife, or edging-tool, are essential if the section is to tell its story with the minimum confusion. Furthermore, a spotlessly clean trench is no mere "eye-wash", if only because it gives the spectator a justifiable trust of orderliness and accuracy of the work. Even the top edges of a trench should be neatly trimmed and the grass cut and swept along them; a stray blade of grass in the foreground of the picture may be overlooked by the eye but may loom embarrassingly in the lens.', Wheeler, 1954:p.200.

Another factor contributing to a perceived cleanliness and order in Wheeler's work is that of leadership and discipline. Both rank high in Wheelers understanding of his profession, which he executed for most of his career in colonial contexts. Wheeler obviously transferred the strict rules of military life to field archaeology. In this sense, the cleanliness on his excavation sites also has to be regarded as an expression of British leadership and discipline. With respect to the high price that the workers involved in these projects had to pay – especially those in the Near and Middle East – one might even think of an obsession for cleanliness which expressed itself in oppressive rule. I will, at this point, refrain from psychological speculations regarding Wheeler himself. I also do not intend to pathologize professional archaeology as a whole in a similar way as it has been done recently in a debate with regards to the inclination of some archaeologists for gathering large collections without any idea of how this mass of material could be of use for archaeological interpretation (Hofmann et al, 2016). Instead it seems vital, to keep in mind the decisive colonial context in which these projects were situated. To a certain degree the structural violence reinforced by colonial governance seems to be reflected in such overly disciplinary behaviour and in the underlying idea of cleanliness.

Let me now proceed in my list of qualifications, which I find necessary to define the relation between archaeology and dirt.

2. Only in very few cases are archaeological objects experienced as dirty by archaeologists, as disgusting and even dangerous in the sense of provoking a fear of physical contact[4]. On the contrary, objects' prolonged presence in the soil -initiating processes of decay, especially of organic materials -may perhaps be regarded as a kind of cleaning. Even archaeological research in medieval latrines is often not as problematic as one might expect from a more removed perspective.

3. It is true that archaeologists mostly deal with refuse, that is to say with things out of use and out of place, which additionally are, to a large degree, fragmented. Nevertheless, these relics are instantly transformed into whole things in the archaeologist's mind -especially into representations of certain object types. The currency of archaeological discourse is not the fragment but items such as strong storage jars, for example, which serve as representatives of overarching artefact types.

4. In the same way, archaeologists that use the term 'settlement refuse' don't normally think of 'refuse' in its strict sense, but rather of the partly unintentional traces of past structured actions. Traces in the soil are taken as indications for a distinctive spatial and social organization of domestic and craft activities.

2.

This kind of archaeological reasoning clearly rests on a semiotic, or 'hunter paradigm' as known from a number of other disciplines like art history or psychoanalysis (Ginzburg, 1988). Such a characterization of the archaeologist as a 'trace hunter' who deals with dirty refuse – and thereby works in a way similar to a criminal investigator – indeed is very popular today, even beyond the discipline.

At the same time, it is far from being generally accepted as the valid representation of archaeological work. Some post-modern archaeologists, including Cornelius Holtorf, have raised objections to this kind of representation (2004:pp.314f.). According to Holtorf, the so-called 'hunter paradigm'is based on false assumptions and cannot therefore be applied to archaeology. But his criticism uses a one-sided interpretation of archaeology as a method for revealing 'historical truth'. This, clearly, is an incorrect interpretation of what the discipline does. I agree with him that an incontestable and unequivocal relationship between causes and effects does not exist. Each trace can potentially be read in very different ways. This is reflected in an old rule of archaeologists: only with intent is it possible to discover what one has been looking for. Put more abstractly one could perhaps conclude: in the end, it is only interpretation which produces the 'trace' and makes it significant.

But this is only one side of the coin. At the same time, 'traces' are a product of past events which had real material impacts. Without such events, archaeologists wouldn't have a chance to construct any 'traces'. So, traces are neither situated exclusively in the past nor in the present but somewhere in between. They are situated between the event and its symbolic interpretation (fig. 1).

Unfortunately, this kind of reasoning has often remained outside of our theoretical reflections related to the past. Indeed, most archaeological theorizing only begins at the point at which a 'fragment' or a 'trace' has been transformed into a man-made object.

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4 This has been an experience of the Garbage Archaeology of the 1970ies (e.g. Gould/Schiffer 1981).

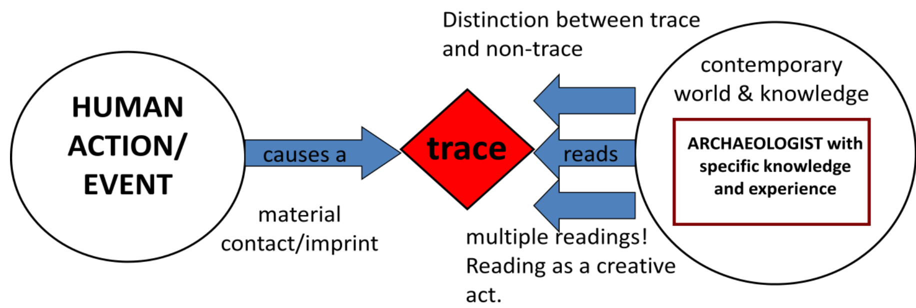

Figure 1. Traces as cultural constructions (Ulrich Veit).

Theories then formulate rules for the way in which these artefacts should be classified and analyzed as members of a special series of artefacts or as elements in special contexts. Round and rectangular buildings, for example, are distinguished as distinctive house types and their spatial and chronological distribution is plotted in order to detect the origin and spread of these types.

The work of the archaeological 'trace hunter' is older and more fundamental as that of the 'typologist'. It involves pattern recognition processes that try to connect single postholes, visible on an excavation plan, to former building types of a specific layout (*e.g.* round or rectangular houses). A similar method is used when trying to analyze the spatial distribution of so-called 'refuse' within dwelling spaces -with the exception that pattern recognition is even more difficult here.

I will come back to this crucial question soon. But first of all, let me sum up our four points concerning the relation between archaeology and dirt.

- Excavations are not about cleaning but about clearing.
- Archaeological objects normally are not experienced as dirty, disgusting and even dangerous.
- The currency of most archaeological discourse is not the relic but whole objects which serve as representatives of certain object types.
- 'Settlement refuse' is not analyzed as 'refuse' but as evidence of structured actions in the past.

3.

These points make it very clear that archaeologists are indeed dealing with dirt, waste and refuse, but they are not the primary focus of archaeological interest. Quite often, they don't even figure as the starting point for formulating questions or conceptualising research. Most archaeological research, up to today, begins its work with a focus on 'treasures' in the common sense of the word. Classic examples could be precious metal hoards and grave inventories with valuable objects, pieces of art or finely crafted objects[5].

5 Hänsel / Hänsel 1997; Wieczorek / Périn 2001. – Another traditional object of archaeological interest in the past have been ‚monuments' in the sense of a special ceremonial architecture (large scale communal buildings for ritual purposes).

Besides these classic treasures, objects of minor material value may also be of particular interest to archaeologists and the public. We could call them 'talking objects' (Daston, 2004) because they evoke a special narrative. These objects may be described by superlatives, for example if they were located at the beginning of an object series (the oldest, largest, heaviest and so on). Some objects stand out as curiosities, as for example a sixteenth century dildo found in a former convent for noble ladies -an object which indeed is very evocative (Landschaftsverband Westfalen-Lippe, 2004:p.61).

For the majority of archaeologists still working in the tradition of nineteenth century positivism, tools and other kinds of everyday objects are the main sources for their interpretations and analyses. Back then, such objects were primarily regarded as fossils of different types with the help of which one could formulate chronological phases. More recently, in extension of this nineteenth century paradigm, archaeological interest has also come to include the traces on objects, documenting special modes of production, use, misuse and even destruction.

The same is true for different kinds of refuse originating from activities related to production, distribution or consumption and even for tiny samples of dust and dirt that have to be analyzed. With the aid of such classifications, we are able to distinguish different ideal methodological types of archaeologies which may be labelled 'monumental', 'typological', 'behavioural' and 'molecular' archaeology. From a history of science perspective, these different types can be associated with different stages in the development of prehistoric archaeology as indicated by the 'invention dates' given here (see box). These dates remain open to debate.

Different Objects of Archaeological Interest – Different Archaeologies

- *Treasures* (e.g. metal hoards & grave inventories with valuable objects)
- *Monuments* (especially large scale ceremonial architecture)
- *'Talking objects'* (curiosities, superlatives)
    - **Monumental Archaeology** (Renaissance - present)
- *Tools and everyday objects*
    - **Typological Archaeology** (1830 - present)
- *Traces* (of actions, production, use, misuse, destruction …)
- *Refuse* (production / distribution / consumption)
    - **Behavorial Archaeology** (1960 - present)
- *Dust and Dirt* (as well as micro-samples of solid materials)
    - **Moleculary Archaeology / Forensic Science**

To name an example of contesting this chronology, Dietmar Schmidt has argued that the idea of a prehistory developed in the 19th century, primarily as a result of the contemporary scientific discovery of waste (2003; 2004; 2005). For Schmidt, even early prehistory has to be classified as a science of waste. He illustrates his thesis by referring to the discovery and study of the Swiss lake dwellings and the Danish kitchen-midden around 1850. Schmidt refers especially to the famous German pathologist Rudolf Virchow who devoted a considerable amount of time to the study of prehistoric remains (for details see Veit, 2006b).

Indeed, Virchow's theory of the invention of cooking is mainly founded on the archaeological study of ancient kitchen waste. What Schmidt fails to see here is that this new field of research could be described much more adequately as the application

of existing geological and palaeontological methods for the analysis of archaeological deposits and less as the discovery of waste through cultural history. Following a logical paradigm, archaeological deposits were analyzed as geological deposits that bear witness to the natural history of man. But this new research paradigm didn't last very long. It was challenged some decades later by the discovery of palaeolithic parietal art, which opened up new perspectives for the archaeological imagination (Veit, 2016).

Prehistoric archaeology as a whole from the early 20th century onwards was dominated by a rather narrow historical culture paradigm with a focus on material evidence of architecture, art and craftwork. Cover illustrations of relevant publications from the time illustrate the evocation of archaeology as treasure hunting (*e.g.* Hoernes, 1892; a cover reprint is to be found in Sklenář, 1983:p.143).

A rediscovery of waste and garbage within archaeology only starts in the second half of the twentieth century, when we see the rise of behavioural archaeology in the United States. With the adoption of the idea of taphonomy a new interest in geology and palaeontology becomes evident.

4.

The changing attitudes of archaeology to dirt and refuse may be perhaps best illustrated by turning towards one of the key sites of modern archaeology and its excavators. The site of Troy (western Turkey) is inextricably connected to the names of Heinrich Schliemann, Wilhelm Dörpfeld, Carl W. Blegen and Manfred Korfmann. While Schliemann became famous for his – probably to a large degree constructed or even faked – treasures (such as Primos) and the historic narratives he presented to the public, Dörpfeld was especially successful in studying architectural remains. While their work remained important during the 20th century, new perspectives developed. To name one example, Carl Blegen in particular attempted to introduce a new perspective to dirt by systematically analyzing and interpreting the debris-fillings of the Troy ruins (Blegen et al, 1950; Blegen et al, 1951).

Carl Blegen interpreted the thick infills of EBA period III buildings – labelled alternatively as 'debris', 'rubbish', 'garbage' or, more neutrally, 'floor deposits'-as a result of careless housekeeping. He writes:'The accumulation of debris within the houses shows the people of Troy III to have been careless housekeepers: in the course of time the floors became littered with refuse shells, animal bones, sherds, and decomposed matter; when the garbage became unbearable, a new floor of fresh clean earth or clay was laid down, only in its turn to be covered with rubbish.' He later added: 'When a floor became offensively encumbered with rubbish of animal bones, shells, potsherds, and other litter, it was covered by a new floor of fresh earth or clay which in its turn suffered the same fate […]. At intervals, interrupting the succession of floors, thicker masses of clay, perhaps fallen from the roof, perhaps brought from outside, indicated a more serious readjustment of levels.'(citations taken from Blum, 2002:pp.105, 108f.)

In the light of new theoretical insights and excavations, however, this kind of ad hoc interpretation has to be questioned. Referring to common sense, Blegen clearly underestimated the complexity of archaeological formation processes as demonstrated by modern behavioural archaeology (*e.g.* Schiffer, 1987; Sommer, 1991). According to behavioural archaeology, different types of refuse as, for example, secondary refuse or abandonment refuse are distinguished. Contrary to the so-called 'Pompei Premise', the

archaeological record could not be regarded as a snap shot of a specific moment in the past (cf. Binford, 1981; Schiffer, 1985).

With these fresh ideas in mind, Stephan Blum, a member of the Korfmann-excavation team, re-analysed refuse management and archaeological fillings of Early Bronze Age Troy (2002). He postulates that the buildings excavated by Blegen were indeed cleaned from everyday refuse on a regular basis during their time of use. According to Blum, the archaeological fillings -as visible to the archaeologist -were mainly composed of refuse and debris that began to form after the buildings had been abandoned:

> '*(…) during the abandonment of buildings, almost all things left within the spaces are useless things. Objects that can be regarded as typical of the living culture are commonly not part of archaeological contexts or severely underrepresented in them. Cultured objects found on the floors of buildings are predominantly objects which only reached the location where they were excavated after the active use phase of the respective buildings, be it as abandonment, de facto, secondary or tertiary refuse. They therefore may not correspond with the activities that were carried out in these locations under normal circumstances.*', Blum, 2002:pp.137.

This insight has consequences for archaeological interpretation far beyond the site of Troy. It shows that ancient behaviour-including cleaning practices -can hardly be understood by means of conventional settlement archaeology. In most studies, the archaeological record does not reflect daily routines but rather occasional events, especially those connected to the abandonment of whole settlements or single archaeological features -as for example storage pits, which normally contain all kinds of materials, sometimes even human skeletons (Müller-Scheeßel, 2013). Without a careful study of post-depositional transformations of the archaeological record we are unable to draw sound historical conclusions (for a further debate of these question see also Sosna & Brundlíková, 2017, part 3).

5.

From an archaeological perspective, one is confronted with a somewhat ontological problem when attempting to understand ancient mentalities and ideologies concerning dirt and waste. In contradiction to the convictions of some behavioural archaeologists, dirt and waste are not universal concepts. They are cultural categories which, in their current form, only emerged during the nineteenth century. Seen from a historical perspective, refuse is a by-product of modern infrastructures like refuse collection or waste water circulation (van Laak, 2017).

In the contemporary Western world, floor and road surfaces are a major factor in preventing the resurfacing of dirt and waste. Unlike in the past, dirt and waste don't just disappear unnoticed into the soil by becoming a 'natural' part of it. In the same way, faeces in urban contexts are no longer recycled locally or collected for reuse (van Osten, 2016), but are dealt with by an elaborate and expensive waste water infrastructure. This shows that our understanding of dirt and waste is not directly applicable to pre-modern, and especially to prehistoric conditions.

Recycling is another key word of modern industrial waste management, that is today regularly also applied to pre-modern archaeological contexts. But in the case

Figure 2. Garden installation, Eastern Friesland, 1985 (Photo: Ulrich Veit).

of these early cultures the underlying idea must have beenquite different from the modern idea of waste management. We are facing here a special form of object-related behavior, that has to be distinquished from our modern mentality to replace repairable or still usable objects quickly by new ones – because this is convenient and not expensive. Durables in the prehistoric past – as well as in other pre-modern contexts – were used as long as possible or they were disposed of for ritual purposes (Hänsel & Hänsel, 1997). When things lost their function, the materials from which they were made may have been used in a variety of secondary contexts.

Similar practices of re-use may be found in the recent past and, in certain cases, even today (Ludwig-Uhland-Institut für empirische Kulturwissenschaft der Universität Tübingen & Württembergisches Landesmuseum Stuttgart/Volkskundliche Sammlung, 1983). This point is illustrated by the work of an unknown Frisian 'artist' that combines a characteristic element of modern waste water infrastructure with a particular sense for practical value and aesthetics (fig. 2).

For those familiar with modern art, especially Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades (*La Fontaine*), this piece of popular art may evoke some earlier debates about the question 'what is art' and what is valued as art? This concept of value is vital for understanding the role of cleaning in an archaeological context, since cleaning (or recycling) practices never serve practical reasons alone. They are always also an expression of ideals of cultural order, of purity and pollution. Questions that deal with dirt and cleaning always possess a social and a moral dimension (see also Reno, 2017).

Taking this point into account, dirt and cleaning may become the topic of a social archaeology of prehistoric times. For the moment, however, it seems as if truly convincing case studies in this field are still amiss (nevertheless, see: Sommer, 1991; Sommer, 1998; Fansa & Wolfram, 2003 and recently Sosna & Brundlíková, 2017). Instead, a large number of studies are situated in the field of historical or contemporary archaeology, using a broad spectrum of data.

Figure 3. Graffito at Zürich/Switzerland, 1982 (Photo: Ulrich Veit).

This paper does not claim to give a detailed review of prehistoric or historic case studies. I will mention, therefore, one example of a promising research field for an archaeology of the contemporary. Urban graffiti is a specific element of modern visual culture and a subject of the public discourse around dirt and cleaning. Graffiti is therefore an interesting class of evidence for a social archaeology of modern society. Because their production normally remains invisible to the public -it mainly happens at night -the attempt to interpret graffiti resembles, to some degree, the work

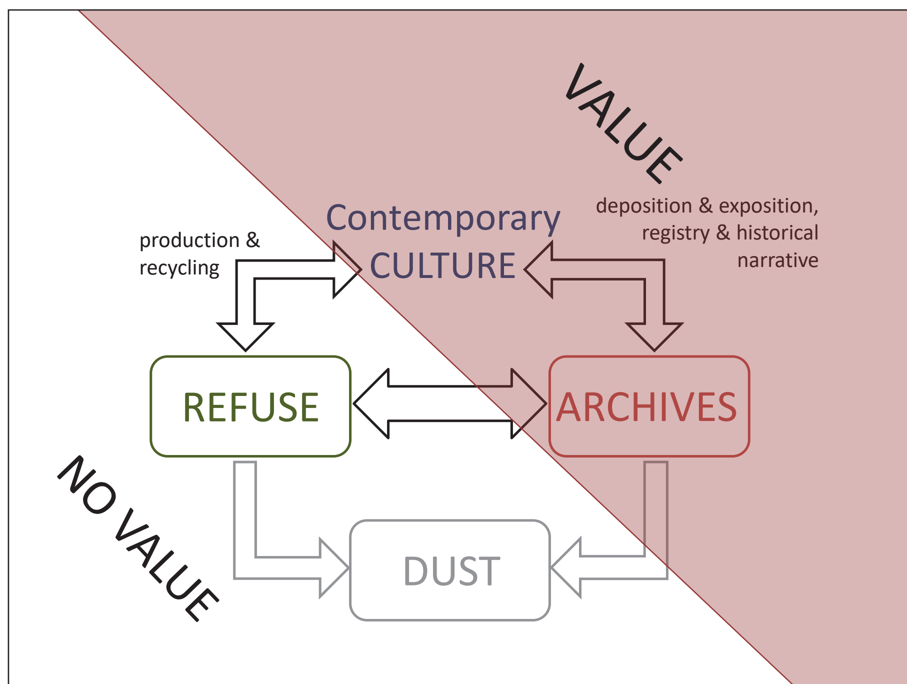

Figure 4. Archaeology and the production of value (Ulrich Veit).

of archaeologists. Some standard archaeological methods, like typography, stylistic analysis and even stratigraphy, may be useful in this context. Possible key elements for such an analysis would certainly be the specific locations (accessible surfaces with high visibility), the diverse techniques of application and, of course, the textual and pictorial elements used for the graffiti -sometimes including ironic comments with regards to their urban context and contemporary society (fig. 3). At the same time, their existence is always at risk, since these kinds of public statements may be seen as pollution and destruction.

Conclusion

I hope that I have been able to raise at least some of the questions that are of relevance for the overall topic of this volume with regard to archaeology and especially to prehistoric archaeology. It should have become clear that a straight equation of archaeology and cleaning is problematic. Instead, archaeology could perhaps be more accurately described as a practice -among others -involved in the transformation of the state of material things (fig. 4).

In the case of archaeology it is mainly the transformation from ‚invisible‘ to ‚visible‘, from ‚dark‘ to ‚bright‘, from ‚forgotten‘ to ‚effective‘, and finally from ‚refuse‘ to ‚valuables‘ that were stored and exposed. We could also speak of a transformation of ‚refuse‘ to ‚symbols‘ in the sense of a (re-)activation. One might perhaps be inclined to add a further pair of words to this list: dirty and clean. But as I have tried to demonstrate, at least with regards to archaeology, this binary metaphor does not work very well.

Postscript

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