HEROM

Journal on Hellenistic and Roman Material Culture

Edited by
Daniele Malfitana, Jeroen Poblome, John Lund

Includes a thematic section on:
Minding Gaps in the archaeological record

Composed and edited by
Smadar Gabrieli, Kristina Winther-Jacobsen and John Lund

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and Roman Material Culture

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For editorial guidelines, please contact the editors Daniele Malfitana (CNR/University of Catania – daniele.malfitana@cnr.it), Jeroen Poblome (University of Leuven – jeroen.poblome@kuleuven.be) or John Lund (The National Museum of Denmark – John.Lund@natmus.dk).

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THEMATIC SECTION:

MINDING GAPS IN THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL RECORD

by Smadar Gabrieli, Kristina Winther-Jacobsen and John Lund

MINDING GAPS IN THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL RECORD

Smadar Gabrieli, Kristina Winther-Jacobsen and John Lund

INTRODUCTION

Material evidence from the past is the lifeblood of all archaeological research, and diligent efforts by many generations of researchers have made an abundancy of such material available to us. Artefacts have been sorted into typologies, which in turn have been converted to relative chronologies by seriation. Although data may be plentiful, the archaeological record is always fragmented. And at certain times and places, the archaeological record appears to be extremely scarce, which poses a great interpretive challenge for the archaeologist. These gaps are investigated in the contributions gathered below in the thematic section. It is composed of papers read at an International Workshop in the Saxo Institute, the University of Copenhagen, in June 2019: '*Mind the Gap! Ceramic Studies and discontinuities in the Archaeological Record'* that arose from Smadar Gabrieli's Marie Curie research project: '*Bridging the Gap, the Lost Centuries of Cypriot Archaeology between Rome and the Crusaders*'[1].

Gap periods are at times referred to as "Dark Ages", but the two concepts are not congruent, though they may overlap. There is thus no lack of archaeological material from "The Greek Dark Ages", i.e. between the 11th and 8th centuries BC, as defined by Anthony Snodgrass, or from *c.* 1125 to *c.* 900 BC, according to Vincent R. d'A. Desborough. Both scholars seem mainly to have used "Dark Age" as a convenient tag for a period without literary evidence[2]. Hence, while it is legitimate to refer to gaps in the archaeological record as Dark Ages (though not in the Snodgrass/Desboroughian sense), the reverse is not necessarily true.

Some gaps appear to be real, but others are merely perceived. Our ability to date the finds plays a key role here. Absolute and relative chronologies and seriation are taught in "Introduction to archaeology" courses, and in Classical archaeology, controversies concerning these are usually considered a battle that was fought long ago, apart from minor adjustments. Typologies are much less firmly set in post-Roman archaeology, however, and even in Classical archaeology there are relatively recent examples to remind us of what is at stake, such as the attempt in the 1980's and 1990's by David Francis and Michael Vickers to adjust the chronology of the Greek Archaic period[3]. Chronologies are old and perceived wisdoms, but it needs to be

1. Three papers read at the workshop could not be included in this publica¬tion: Micaela Sinibaldi, *Handmade pottery of the Islamic period from excavations and surveys: Bridg¬ing the gap in the case study of the Late Petra Project*, Edna Stern, *Bridging the gap between the fall of Crusader Acre (1291) and the revival of Ottoman 'Akka (c. 1750), and John Lund, "Centuries of Darkness" revisited – an updated ceramic sidelight on Cyprus between c. AD 150 and 350* (Lund 2020).
2. Cf. Snodgrass 1971, pp. 1-25; Desborough 1972, pp. 11-12.
3. Francis - Vickers 1988, e.g. note 7. Typologies and chronologies of Late Antique are still being revised and refined, e.g. Reynolds 2012; Vroom 2007.

acknowledged that they should be considered a work in progress – certainly at the local level.

Gaps in the material record have traditionally been viewed separately and studied in isolation, and one of the aims of the workshop was to take a broader view by bringing scholars together, each with expertise on a particular gap period, in order to investigate what – if anything – these periods had in common and ultimately to answer the "big why". May we, for instance, interpret gap periods as times of crisis? This term is anathema to many archaeologists and ancient historians, even if few would probably deny that crises of shorter or longer duration have characterized later historical periods[4]. To a certain degree, the answer to the question depends on how one chooses to define "crisis". It would probably make things easier if we could substitute this word with more precise descriptive terms such as lethal pandemics, climate change, and famine, which according to certain scholars lead to demographic and economic downturns[5].

Some gaps traditionally explained by major social disruption and economic collapse are associated with handmade pottery[6], and yet archaeologists of historic periods have tended to ignore this corpus. We have therefore added as a second theme of the workshop aspects of manufacture of handmade pottery in historic periods. The study cases concentrated on the eastern Mediterranean, and on historic periods.

Gaps in the archaeological record may be temporal or spatial, short- or long-term, and comprise a limited territory or cover a wide geographical area. Most importantly: some are real, but others are merely perceived. We wanted to explore how perceived gaps can be identified, and ways to their resolution.

The papers read at the workshop explored the following reasons for gaps – or more often perceived gaps – to persist.

• An economic downturn, and/or a shift in mode of subsistence and in landscape use, may lead to a comprehensive change in material culture that will be out of recognised context, and therefore for all intents and purposes invisible. Such a change in circumstances may also coincide with a paucity of texts, strengthening the impression of a real gap in settlement and decline in population. This was the case in post-Roman Cyprus, the gap that was at the core of the Marie-Curie project.

• Increasing reliance on local/regional production, when long-distance networks were disrupted for one reason or the other. In the absence of datable types that can

4. The literature on crises in general, and the "3rd century crisis" in particular, is vast, cf. Lund 2015, 246, note 138, to which may be added Andreu – Blanco - Pérez 2019, Cimadomo *et alii* 2020, Hoyer 2017 and Perego – Amicone 2019.
5. Cf. Harper 2017; see further Scheidel 2018, where mass mobilization warfare, transformative revolution, state failure and pandemics are paradoxically seen as factors decreasing economic inequality.
6. Cf. Lis 2018.

be used as reference points, and usually with a large proportion of little-studied coarse wares, assemblages covering a few generations may become invisible. Jackson and Vionis emphasise the need to study local assemblages on their own terms, but Vionis demonstrates that in part of the eastern Mediterranean local industries were in fact interconnected within a common '*koine*'. Gabrieli's paper is an example of a case study.

• Often the reason behind the perpetuation of a perceived gap is methodological. James and Eger and Vorderstrasse point out that transition periods can be seen as gaps because points of reference disappear (e.g. end of production in Corinth): because neither specialists of the period leading to the transition, nor those of the one that follows, consider it within their sphere of study — a point reiterated by Jackson; because assemblages contain shapes that are typical of both previous and subsequent periods, and therefore seem to be mixed; and because they are marked by changes other than new typologies (i.e. change in proportions of their components), which are not recognised as a temporal change. In such cases, as James and Sanders show, reconsidering the date-range for known types and carefully studying complete assemblages rather than individual types, as well as quantification, are keys to dating transitional assemblages. Surveys are particularly likely to miss periods that are not marked by particular types.

• Survey collections also pose other methodological problems. They are affected by the agenda of the survey (e.g. placing emphasis on a specific period), and by the fact that rural sites are often poor in fine wares and imports, which form the basis of much of the chronological framework. Eger and Vorderstrasse devote particular attention to the effect of survey methodology on identifying rural settlement, and so on understanding landscape use in transitional or understudied periods.

• Collection policies. "We keep all the diagnostics", with the implicit correlate "We throw away everything else", is a serious problem[7]. In brief, we can say that sometimes only vessels whose date is known are kept as diagnostics, and the collection is often confined to rims, bases and handles, as well as glazed or decorated body sherds. Whole categories of vessels may disappear in such a way. In the Hellenistic-Roman theatre in Paphos, for example, a charonian tunnel was carefully blocked with amphorae body sherds laid in orderly layers: rims and necks, toes and handles were all removed[8]. Under the diagnostics-only policy, this significant change in the structure of the theatre would have remained undated, although body sherds of LRA1 amphorae, to name but one of the identifiable types of body sherds in this fill, certainly allow a date-attribution, even if a broad one. A policy of keeping a representative sample is also problematic, because for unknown categories, particularly the coarse ware that often accounts for the bulk of gap-period assemblages, nuances are usually not recognised, and consequently the sample is far from representative.

7. For a discussion of the diagnostics issue, see Lund *et alii* 2018.
8. Unpublished, personal information from Smadar Gabrieli.

• Selective collection and retention is coupled with the inevitable problem that only a small portion of the assemblage can be illustrated and published. Unknown types are often culled, and since it is not often that future researchers will be able to access the original assemblage, they do not surface in the investigations for subsequent studies. The need to reassess previous work is a recurring theme in the papers, and Sanders demonstrates the potential for re-evaluation of long-standing convictions in light of new methods and information. Jackson focuses on ways to ensure access to data for future scholars who will find it difficult if not impossible to access the assemblages themselves.

• A different kind of gap, one of distribution along trade routes, is the subject of Duggan's paper. One feature that sets this gap apart is that it was not recognised as one until accumulating data led to its resolution. The implications of such gaps are considerable for interpretations of economy and political relations, and Duggan calls attention to the difficulty of overturning accepted interpretations and convictions.

• A number of papers included discussions of handmade pottery, but it was the central subject of two. Gabrieli's article is relevant for both themes, and discusses the resolution of a long-term gap in Cyprus through a largely unknown handmade corpus. Armstrong uses an outstanding assemblage from Xanthos to demonstrate the fallacy of the common attitude in the archaeology of late periods, which equates manufacture of handmade pottery with 'household production' and decline. She explores reasons for the contemporary use of handmade and wheel-thrown pottery.

Narratives of transition periods, or periods of crisis, such as the end of the Roman Empire in the eastern Mediterranean, or the decline of the Mamluk Sultanate, are currently undergoing major revisions. Rather than rely on monocausal historical explanations, a new look, particularly at the archaeological data, has brought about a much more complex understanding of the processes that lead to the perceived gap and the local responses[9]. The majority of articles in this volume contribute to this revision by careful re-evaluation of typologies and methodologies. Our dating systems were initially established long ago, at a time when there were much fewer data to consider. The archaeological record is fragmented, and it follows that relative chronologies are a work in progress. The shear accumulation of data annually puts us in a strong position to start bridging the gap.

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9. Rautman 2014; Walker 2012.

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