Hoards, votives, offerings: the archaeology of the dedicated object

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Abstract

Objects given to supernatural powers have been remarkably neglected by archaeologists. This paper makes the case for the importance of such objects, whether they be described as votives, dedications, ritual deposits, ritual hoards, offerings or by some other term. It explores some archaeological reasons for their neglect, including the practice of publishing artefacts by type rather than by context, and argues that archaeologists should not assume that religious practices can be discussed only when there are texts available as guides. It summarizes the particular concerns of the papers which follow in this volume.

Keywords

Ritual; votive; dedication; gift; deposit.

When, in his highly influential *Behavioural Archaeology*, Schiffer seeks to summarize the processes by which an object is transferred from a systemic to an archaeological context, he suggests that there are three possibilities: discard, disposal of the dead and loss (Schiffer 1976: 30). That is, some objects end up in the archaeological record by accident, because they were dropped by negligent actors; some end up there because they were deposited in connection with the cremation or burial of the dead; and some end up there because they were deliberately discarded as refuse. What Schiffer's summary entirely neglects are objects that are deliberately deposited, not as refuse or in connection with death rituals but in an act directed at communication with or concerning supernatural (i.e. transcendent) powers.

Schiffer's oversight is not peculiar but typical (compare, e.g., the discussion of deposition in Hodder's chapter on 'The formation of the archaeological record' in Hodder [1982]). General works on archaeology repeatedly neglect objects whose deposit was an act of giving directed at an other-worldly power. Writing in 1990, Bradley observed that '[w]hen I began this research, it was difficult to persuade people that there was a problem to investigate; still less that votive deposition was one of the most important transactions

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in prehistoric society' (1990: xv). Bradley claimed to detect that by the time he was writing attitudes had changed. Thirteen years on, however, there is still not much sign of that, and part of the purpose of this issue of *World Archaeology* is to pick up and press Bradley's observation of the importance of votive deposition, and in historic as well as prehistoric societies. This volume looks at objects that were dedicated and asks what the object of dedicating them was.

Why does votive deposition matter? It matters because the exchange of material objects for supernatural returns has, in many societies, been both socially and economically significant. To attempt to understand the role of gifts between men in a society accustomed to give gifts to transcendent beings while neglecting those gifts that are given to the gods is like attempting to understanding a hierarchical society while ignoring the top status group. But more than that, however logically distinct gifts and commodities may be (Gregory 1997: 41–70), it is nevertheless true that the possibility that a particular object may be given as a gift has an effect on the use of that object as a commodity. A votive object or dedication is an object that is, in Appadurai's words (1986b: 13), in a 'situation in which its exchangeability (past, present, future) for some other thing is its socially relevant feature'. As such it is part of a very much larger class of objects that are exchangeable; but it is not only part of that class, it interacts with and helps shape that class. The to-be-dedicated object may have been made precisely for this type of exchange, as figurines or miniatures are. Equally, it may be an object made for everyday use and 'converted' into an item that might be employed in an exchange with supernatural powers, as a cup or piece of jewellery may be. But, in either case, the possibility that this object might be dedicated reflects back on the wider world of things. That a piece of jewellery, or whatever, might become a dedication has an effect on the way in which it is seen and used, even if it never in fact ends up dedicated. That energies are directed at the production of figurines whose only destination is the votive deposit reflects back upon the alternative uses of such craft skills, and so influences not only the way in which the maker of figurines is regarded but also the way in which all luxury goods (that is, to quote Appadurai once more, 'goods whose principal use is *rhetorical* and *social*, goods that are simply *incarnated signs*' [1986b: 38]) are regarded. In short, votive deposition matters because it is an integral part of the complex relationship between people and objects, of 'the social life of things' (for all that it is entirely neglected by contributors to Appadurai 1986a).

Even this claim may underestimate the importance of gifts made to supernatural powers. For gifts made to supernatural powers establish a particular model of reciprocity which has a profound effect on all exchange. Although some gifts to the gods are 'manifestly a vehicle for relations between men' (Gregory 1980: 644), in the case of the giving with which this volume is primarily concerned, where the relationship of the giver to the transcendent power is direct, to give a gift to the gods is to enter into a relationship from which the return is uncertain. Both when and how a supernatural power will react to a gift are not only unknown at the time that the object is dedicated, but remain unknown. What might count as a blessing is defined, and may be debated, by those who experience or observe the blessing; that blessings relate to past, or future, gifts is an 'item of faith'. To enter into an exchange with supernatural powers is to enter into a relationship in which the links between what is given and what is received will always, and necessarily, be

unclear. It is also to enter into a relationship in which what is received is fundamentally incommensurate with what is given. Success, health, the flourishing of crops, animals or family, these are not things that can be equated in any way with a figurine, a piece of jewellery or a sacrificial chicken. The giving of gifts to the gods thus establishes a pattern where exchange relations may be long term, and where it may be impossible to measure the return against the investment. And it establishes that as the pattern of exchange with beings who are more powerful. That the weak must repay exactly and in stipulated form and that the powerful may repay quixotically and in ways that cannot be measured against what was originally given is a pattern with heavy political implications.

If dedicating objects to supernatural powers is so important, why have archaeologists so often ignored it? Three factors seem to be particularly influential here. The first is the privileging of the object over the assemblage. The second is the sheer difficulty that there can be in recognizing that an object has been dedicated, rather than simply discarded. The third factor is that to study dedications not as individual objects but as assemblages is to study how people thought. 'Cognitive archaeology' has made only a recent appearance on the scene as a branch of enquiry.

Early archaeology devoted its attentions to the classification not of assemblages but of objects. There were good reasons for this. Until individual objects could classified neither their relative chronology nor their individual characteristics could be discerned. Chronology was essential for site interpretation, and awareness of whether one was dealing with the typical or the exceptional was essential for all interpretation. Such classification both demanded and created expertise, and it therefore became natural that, when experts were invited to assist with site publication, the material was divided up not according to assemblages but according to object classifications. An outstanding example of this practice is the *Praehistorische Bronzefunde* series, which attempts to catalogue all the Bronze Age metalwork in Europe, region by region, one type at a time. So standard and unthinking did this pattern become that, even when a single archaeologist was responsible for a site publication, the traditional divisions of the material might be maintained.

How destructive this treatment of the archaeological site by object class rather than by assemblage can be for the study of dedication and its objects emerges from the publication of excavations made in the 1950s by the British School of Athens at the site of Emporio on the Greek island of Chios (Boardman 1967). Archaeological investigation of Emporio was focused on the acropolis and the settlement on its slopes. On the acropolis, excavation concentrated on a sanctuary and temple of Athena, which yielded a sequence of artefacts dating from the seventh, sixth and fifth centuries, plausibly identified from their context and nature as votive offerings. While excavation was taking place on the acropolis, however, a further and rather richer deposit of archaic material was uncovered by chance close to the harbour below, and this too was excavated. No temple building was recovered here, but from the nature of the finds the excavators deduced that here too they were dealing with a votive deposit in a sanctuary (of an unknown deity). When this material was published, the decision was taken to group material from both sanctuaries and order it by artefact type, with the place of finding indicated in the catalogue entry by starting the entry 'Athena Temple' or 'HS'. Although the excavator himself in his general report on the 'Harbour Sanctuary' made some remarks about the differences between the two deposits, it was not for another twenty

years that scholars realized the interest of the divergences (Simon 1986: 111–16, cf. Simon 1997: 131–3; Morgan 1990: 230–2).

Close analysis of the Emporio material has now revealed that whole classes of object were regularly dedicated in one sanctuary, and never or rarely in the other. A clear pattern has emerged to the divergence that reveals a much more 'civic' aspect to the acropolis sanctuary, a much more cosmopolitan aspect to the harbour sanctuary. With regard to the life of women, in particular, the pictures presented by the two sanctuaries were strongly contrasting. All the earrings, pins and beads found came from the Harbour Sanctuary, along with two pairs of tweezers and oriental metal belts, which were probably offerings made by women on marriage; from the Athena sanctuary came a plate showing a striding goddess Athene, fragments of two locally made stone statues of standing maidens (*korai*) and open-work ritual *kalathoi* (wool baskets), along with ritual incense vessels and ritual miniature jugs and bowls. Here was a community that was articulating its debates over gender roles through its dedicatory practices. It is hard not to see the Harbour Sanctuary as celebratory of female sensuality, the Acropolis sanctuary as celebratory of matronly civic duty (and male civic duty too: most of the miniature votive shields come from the Athena sanctuary). In the light of this, the presence of imported material in the Harbour Sanctuary (Cypriot terracottas and limestone figurines, Etruscan bucchero pottery, a Phrygian cauldron) seems not to have been merely a consequence of that sanctuary being closer to the sea, but of the way in which such 'exotic' items were thought about, and thought with, by the community. Not only does understanding what is happening in either sanctuary demand knowledge of the other sanctuary, but only if the two deposits are seen as separate wholes can the role of either within the community be understood.

How do we recognize an assemblage as an assemblage of objects that have been dedicated? At Emporio the votive material from the acropolis could be recognized as such partly because it came from the area in which there was a building whose distinctive architecture marked it out as a temple. But the acropolis material was also marked out by the presence of distinctively religious iconography (the image of Athena) and of vessels made for use in religious rituals. The recognition of the Harbour Sanctuary as such is rather more interesting, for conclusive architectural evidence was lacking, and many of the finds (fishhooks, cups, etc.) might have come from a refuse deposit. What makes it distinctive as a votive deposit is partly the range of items, partly the presence of so many exotic items and partly the presence of more or less precious items: if this were a refuse collection it would mark a very unusual pattern of discard indeed.

Many votive deposits share one or other of these distinctive features – religious imagery, precious or exotic material, distinctive architectural context and concentration of non-functional items. However, as contrasts between the Athena Sanctuary and the Harbour Sanctuary in this case show, votive deposits can take very different forms, and it is not necessarily the case that any single item would be out of place in a rubbish deposit. In such a case it is necessary to appeal to the overall selection of goods deposited (predominance by a single type of object or vessel, even if that is a household object, is likely to indicate a special purpose deposit), to the context in which the deposit is found and to similarities with deposits found in more explicit contexts.

Although Colin Renfrew, one of the early champions of cognitive archaeology (cf. Renfrew 1982), rapidly turned his attention to cult (Renfrew 1986), even cognitive

archaeology has been relatively slow to show an interest in dedications. Many involved in cognitive archaeology have sought in the first instance to study cognition of that which the archaeologist can also cognize, rather than to move immediately into the necessarily speculative realm of cognition of the supernatural, or else have advanced into the supernatural world only with the aid of texts. In the collection *The Ancient Mind: Elements of Cognitive Archaeology* (Renfrew and Zubrow 1994) only four or five papers can be said to concern themselves with religious beliefs (as opposed to beliefs about death and the afterlife). Of these one is purely theoretical (Renfrew 1994), two are based at least in part on textual evidence (Schnapp 1994; Postgate 1994) and the other two make use of ethnographic data (Hill 1994; Marcus and Flannery 1994).

The gingerly attitude of archaeologists towards deducing beliefs from the material record alone is compounded by a curious unwillingness to acknowledge the central importance of the dedicated object. This is partly because of the absence of a single agreed term by which to refer to objects intentionally deposited to mark or establish an exchange with transcendent powers. On different occasions such objects may be called dedications, offerings, votives, hoards or simply 'deposits'. 'Dedication' emphasizes that what is important about the object is that it has been given and implies confidence in identification of the recipient as transcendent and some permanence to the gift. 'Offering' focuses on the act of giving, and allows that the thing given may quickly perish. 'Votive' (cf. '*ex voto*') claims a connection between the object and some prior vow or prayer. 'Hoard' simply draws attention to a quantity of similar items being found together, and makes no connection with any particular sort of action by an individual or group. The same is even more true of the colourless 'deposit', mainly used in association with a term which suggests the circumstances of the act of depositing, as in 'foundation deposit'. As this survey of terms shows, most of them import certain assumptions about the nature of the assemblage, which may seem to pre-empt the issue of interpretation. But absence of a single term and the over-interpretation that some terms import are hardly sufficient to explain why archaeologists treat the phenomenon as uninteresting.

How are we to explain, for example, the following? The index to Renfrew and Zubrow (1994) provides, under both 'offerings' and 'votives' (there are no index entries for 'dedication' or 'hoard' or 'deposit'), the same two references, one to Renfrew's theoretical paper and the other to Postgate's paper. In fact, the other three chapters concerned with religious beliefs also concern themselves with dedicated objects. Schnapp's paper is all about statues dedicated in temples. Hill (1994: 87–8) explores the interpretation of 'an intentional deposition' of three bones from a Carolina parakeet, a stone pipe bowl, a slate tool and an antler artefact in a small round pit in an Early Iroquoian village in south-western Ontario. Marcus and Flannery note that 'the most spectacular artefacts' – statues and beads of jade in one case, seven ceramic pieces arranged to form a scene in the centre of which was a miniature tomb in another – found in a building at San José Mogote were found 'in the offering boxes beneath the floor, where they had been left following "rituals of sanctification" at the dedication of the temple' (1994: 67–8). Most revealingly of all, Marcus and Flannery also observe that the fact that 'the Zapotec had turned secular ground into sacred ground by placing valuable, labour-intensive offerings in the foundations of their temples' is not something that our Spanish descriptions of Zapotec religion tell us: 'It remained for archaeologists to discover this' (1994: 71). Yet precisely this

distinctive archaeological discovery of religious offerings was then occluded again as the index preferred to refer the reader to Mesopotamian offerings for which there is textual evidence.

The preference for the 'safe ground' provided by texts before being prepared to talk about collections of objects as dedications is one found generally among archaeologists. Scholars interested in the ancient Greeks were already producing books on votive offerings at the very beginning of the twentieth century (Rouse 1902). During the twentieth century vast amounts of votive material were published from Greek sanctuary sites, and the ways in which material aspects of objects made them good to think with as offerings were in various ways clarified (Kilian-Dirlmeier 1985; Kyrieleis 1993). Even in the fine recent studies of Greek votive practices, however, textual evidence has been more prominent than strictly archaeological analysis (van Straten 1981, 1992; Linders and Nordquist 1987). Much recent work has been done on ritual deposition among the Maya, but here again texts play a significant part (Freidel and Schele 1989; Freidel 1998; Walker and Lucero 2000). Until Bradley's intervention, treatments of votive objects in prehistoric northern Europe had similarly begun from classical texts (Bradley 1990: 191–2).

Dialogue between archaeologists and those who work primarily with texts is only to be encouraged, and several of the papers in this volume will indeed engage with texts. Texts can often provide very good information about the belief systems and religious ideologies within which votive offerings are made, information which it may be difficult or impossible to gain from archaeology. But texts, and here I would include oral tradition, ethnographic accounts and so on, are a complement to, and not a substitute for, analysis of the material evidence.

Texts cannot substitute for the archaeological material because they are necessarily and inevitably partial. Texts may, as in the Zapotec case, completely fail to mention a common practice; they may illuminate one context for a practice while never revealing alternative contexts; they may highlight the unusual and ignore the usual – as Herodotus, who is, after all, interested in political history, picks out exceptional offerings at Delphi by the Lydian king Croesus in the sixth century BC but says nothing of the routine offerings of Greeks who came to consult the Delphic oracle. Most importantly, texts are very poor at indicating the relationship between the particular and the general. Texts may frame their interpretations in general terms, in which case it is likely to be quite unclear to what degree particular examples may vary from the general rule, whether because they are earlier or later in date, because they take place in somewhere geographically removed, or whatever. On the other hand, texts may describe a particular event, leaving it unclear what relationship that event had to general practice. Archaeological analysis of ritual deposits both enables a description of a particular votive choice and votive practice that is very much richer than any participant observer would think it appropriate to give, and enables analysis of variation between deposits which situates the particular deposition into the context of general practice. A good example of this is provided by Bradley's argument that 'the deposition of votive offerings in watery locations is evidenced over a long period of time, but may have been utilized in very different ways from one period to the next, so that what started as an informal transaction between the living and the gods was transformed into one of the central political activities in prehistoric society' (1990: 202).

Leaning on texts for the interpretation of ritual deposits can give the impression that making dedications is the prerogative of the sort of complex societies that have yielded written texts. This is very clearly not true. A plausible case can be made for such a deposit as early as the seventh millennium BC in Jordan (Garfinkel 1994). But the range of alternative explanations that has been provided for early deposits shows how keen scholars have been for any explanation (political crisis, economic manipulation) of depositional practice other than a religious explanation (see the summary of others' claims in Garfinkel [1994: 161–2, 178–80]). The ritual system was not a thing apart, and it necessarily related to the political and economic systems, but we cannot merely assume that it was subordinate to those systems.

In this volume we discuss the object of dedication in a wide range of societies and from a wide range of angles. The only conviction which all contributors to the volume share is that dedicated objects have been unduly neglected and will repay closer attention. The papers variously address three major questions. First, what makes a dedication a dedication? How do we recognize a ritual deposit? Second, how do we account for what is ritually deposited? Why did anyone think that depositing this or that particular object or group of objects was an appropriate way of marking or establishing communications with transcendent powers? Third, how can we explain why those who made the deposit chose to make it in that particular place? Why do some places attract ritual deposits and others not? And what does receiving a ritual deposit do for a place?

These are not questions that are independent of one another. One indicator that a deposit is a ritual deposit is that it is made in a particular place. Two papers here (Adams and Ceruti) discuss deposits made on mountain peaks: mountain peaks are likely places neither for disposal of the dead or the discard of refuse, and the discovery of any artefacts on a mountain top is bound to raise questions as to whether they may have been left there as part of some ritual. Place plays an important part also in Lymer's identification of rags tied at petroglyph sites in Kazakhstan as dedications. Here the object dedicated is in itself not at all special, but the site of dedication is a site marked out, literally, as special. By tying things with which they are personally closely linked to monuments known to be from a past age, the dedicants tie themselves into the powers of ancestors and by doing so assert a political claim of continuity and belonging.

The presence of a deposit which for other reasons can be identified as a ritual deposit may suggest or support ideas that the place of deposit was in some sense special, in particular that it might be a transitional space appropriate for an act of exchange. Nakamura's paper explores this consonance between the place of deposit and the role that that deposit was expected to play in relations between human and supernatural worlds, and in doing so raises explicitly the issue of the relationship between religion and magic that is implicit in the investment of particular objects with particular expectations, if not powers, through the act of dedication.

One particular class of deposit can be regarded less as acknowledging than as creating a special status for the place in which it is deposited. This is the foundation deposit. The occurrence of foundation deposits has been widely recognized – indeed, perhaps too easily, since there is a tendency to think that classifying something as a foundation deposit is the end, rather than the beginning, of an analysis. Foundation deposits mark the importance of what is being founded by establishing a privileged link between the

structure involved and transcendent powers. The presence of foundation deposits indicates a particular relationship to and sacralization of space on the part of those using the structure. How exactly that relationship is to be interpreted depends, however, on an understanding of the wider religious culture. This becomes a matter of some complexity in contexts where different religious systems meet. In their paper, Woodward and Woodward explore the extremely interesting case of an urban foundation deposit in Roman Britain, which can be seen alternatively as belonging to Roman traditions of the sacred planning of the town and to Iron Age British traditions related to the construction of particular structures.

Not all objects were thought suitable for that investment of expectation with regard to transcendent powers. Some sorts of object seem widely to have been found suitable, others rarely or only in particular circumstances. Human bodies constitute a form of dedication which is far from universal, but which, in some societies at least, clearly has been regarded as of peculiar power to facilitate communication with the transcendent (compare Walter et al. below talking about the bones and bodies of the dead constituting 'a potent detritus'). Two papers in this volume (Ceruti, Blom and Janusek) concern the sacrifice and dedication of human bodies. A third paper (Walter et al.) concerns sites of dedication made special by the presence of human skulls. Just as animal sacrifice plays a central role in communication with transcendent powers in a wide range of cultures at least in part because it allows ritual assertion of control over life, so the particular form of life once contained by human bodies makes them apt for communicating with the supernatural in a very particular way.

Whereas Ceruti's and Blom and Janusek's papers examine votives of a particular sort, Kleibrink et al. are concerned with the changing shape of a whole dedicatory assemblage over time. Change over time raises particular issues for interpretation: are such changes a mark of social change or should they be seen in terms of a changing conceptualization of transcendent beings and of human relations with them? Such issues relate closely to Crawford's identification as dedications of objects in Anglo-Saxon burials. Crawford argues that objects which others have regarded as deposited in graves as a more or less straightforward reflection of the social standing of the deceased need to be read instead as ways of articulating particular beliefs about relations with the transcendent. This paper constitutes yet a further important plea for a close analysis of patterns of deposition that is open to theological, as well as sociological, interpretations of the behaviour involved.

Ranging widely in time and space, these papers offer a number of quite different approaches to the identification and interpretation of dedicated objects. If they cause archaeologists to contemplate a wider range of interpretations of the assemblages they excavate and analyse they will have achieved the object to which they are dedicated.

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