

“I Discard, Therefore I Am”: Identity and Leave-Taking of Possessions

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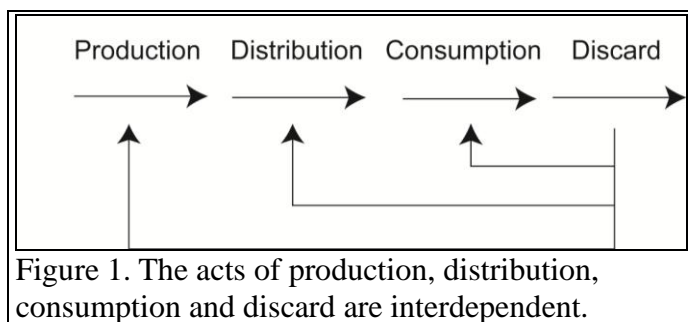
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ABSTRACT: *The human engagement with material culture is usually analyzed in terms of production, distribution, and consumption. Each of these stages is indicative of decision-making: in the fashioning of objects, their circulation in the social realm (through gift, trade, or theft), and their use by the recipient(s). No less complex a phenomenon is what follows consumption: discard. Studies of the placement of trash in both modern and ancient contexts provide insights on the way in which the leave-taking of possessions is as pointed a statement of identity as their production, circulation and possession. This paper considers both sacred and secular trash as a component of material culture and identity, using examples from contemporary South Asia and from the ancient urban site of Sisupalgarh in eastern India.*

I would like to start this paper with a brief anecdote about something that I recently witnessed in the neighborhood that I go through on the way to my university. This is a rather nice neighborhood, in which the morning commute is populated by, among other people, the nannies and maids who walk from the bus stop to the homes where they work. One day I saw a pair of women walking along the sidewalk as they passed a little piece of public land that has been made into a landscaped green space. One of them finished the snack that she had been eating, and threw her wrapper aside into one of the bushes. Now, here was a person who was going to spend the rest of her day cleaning up after other people, and who probably had impeccable standards of cleanliness in her own home. But the act of discard in a public place said a great deal about her perceptions of the social, class, and ethnic distinctions that accompanied the transition into her neighborhood of work.

The rich irony of this scenario, and the potential for trash to serve as an expression of autonomy, provides a window into a reconsideration of discard in the archaeological record. As a person can physically handle only a limited amount of objects at any given moment, the setting-down of some items is inevitable. At what point in the process of putting-down do those objects become “abandoned”? What prompts the individual to actively discard unwanted items as a deliberate act of making “trash”? How, when, and where do individuals discard their unwanted items? When does the violence of the act of discard emphasize the individual’s understanding of the object’s capacity for meaning and memory, ranging from the gentle afterthought of littering to the forceful hurtling of an undesired item? How are differing understandings of trash negotiated and engaged with by individuals living in close proximity? And under what circumstances does trash become the focus of ritual and social activity?

Trash as an Integral Component of Human-Object Relationships



Although many archaeologists have written about discarded materials, their analysis of human engagement with trash is usually stated in terms of a relatively straightforward and linear sequence of production, distribution, and consumption followed by discard. However, we should envision each of these activities as having feedback loops

in which trash is deliberately incorporated (Figure 1).

As the first part of the cycle of engagement with material culture, *production* is inherently linked with discard because the acts of manufacture produce a number of by-products that must then be removed, such as debitage, shavings, and ashes. Production also results in some items that are not suitable for their intended purposes, such as the “wasters” of pottery that are removed from the production context into the discard pile. Archaeologically, however, we know that “wasters” can be utilized for other purposes, even contributing directly and indirectly to the production of subsequent specimens through recycling. Waste that is integral to the production of new objects includes ground-up sherds used as grog in the manufacture of new pottery or cut-up cloth made into new textiles. Trash may even be generative of new ideas; we might, for example, consider the widespread use of microliths starting in the Upper Paleolithic not only as a judicious use of scarce resources, but a creative means by which the existence of lithic trash provided the impetus for a new type of technological innovation.

In a provocative book entitled “On Garbage” (2005), John Scanlan has explored the dynamic and deliberate relationship of production to waste. He notes that every act of manufacture results in something that is designed to be used and eventually replaced, with the result that garbage is the preordained fate of every manufactured item (2005:34). This factor is accelerated in the process of fashion--what archaeologists would call “style”--which carries with it the seeds of each object’s obsolescence not only through use-wear but through the mere passage of time. Although Scanlan is explicitly focused on the modern world, the human propensity to produce and consume at elevated rates appears evident far back in our ancestry. Examples include the 20,000 year old lithic site of Kutikina, Tasmania, where there were “over 75,000 stone flakes and tools recovered from a less than 1% sample of the site” (Feder 2004:259). Projected to the entire site, the foragers living there would have made and used 7.5 million tools. High rates of discard can be seen in the early agricultural period as well. Randi Haaland (2007:172), for example, reports on a Khartoum Neolithic settlement that yielded 30,000 fragments of grinding stone in an excavation of just a small portion of the site.

Distribution provides multiple opportunities for energy expenditure in the moving, removing, and redistribution of objects. Bodily waste and food waste are discarded daily through deliberate acts of place-making, in which each individual engages in an autonomous cognitive process about the location, timing, and visibility of the waste that is generated. Space and waste are

intimately connected, with the interiors and exteriors of living spaces categorized by the types of debris that are allowed. Areas that are outside of and between structures become places of discard for different types of materials, sometimes codified according to the type of waste (see Hodder [1982] for ethnographically observed discards; Halstead, Hodder and Jones [1978] for Iron Age England; and Terry et al. [2004] for the ancient Maya).

The distribution of trash can change over time with the introduction of new technologies and new types of trash, resulting in depositional patterns that demonstrate a deliberate response of individuals to their surroundings (see Brugge [1983] for ethnographic observations of Navajo activity areas, and Kuijt and Goring-Morris [2002:373] for archaeological documentation of changes in trash behavior from the Natufian to the Pre-Pottery Neolithic A phase of the Levant). The emplacement of usable objects in open spaces can, over time and with the absence of effort, signal abandonment and disuse along with changing perceptions of ownership. Within interior spaces, the deliberate clearing of rooms results in patterns of microdebris on the insides of structures and patterns of macrodebris removed from the interior to the exterior by means of doorways, windows, and drains.

Trash also is an integral part of *consumption*, with many finished objects being intertwined with waste material. In the modern world, packaging provides the most obvious form of trash associated with consumption. Even without the additional packaging that we experience today, however, there is waste material inherent in even the most basic activities. Stones have cortex that must be removed to produce a sharp edge, while organic materials have bark, pith, or thorns that need to be stripped away. Nearly every food available for human consumption has some inedible part, such as bones, shells, fibers, or seeds that are thrown aside. Food waste has been a particular focus of archaeologists who work with the ethnographic record, in which the discard of bones and other debris from food consumption has been linked to cultural prescriptions of gender and cleanliness (e.g., Beck and Hill 2004; Hodder 1982). Even the discard of food leavings is not necessarily linear and unidirectional, however. Tim Ingold has observed that “Among some hunters and gatherers, materials initially dumped as waste may be reprocessed for consumption as emergency food, in the event that all other sources fail, so that the dump comes to function as a kind of store” (Ingold 1987:201).

As Ingold’s remark indicates, humans engage in spatial and temporal assessments of context to assess the relative value of available items. As archaeologists we should increase our awareness of items that are “trash” one minute and highly valued the next as part of the cycle of bricolage that probably characterized most daily activity in the ancient world. Individuals assess the potential value of objects and environments and deliberately engage in both conscious discard and selective salvage in their handling of material objects (Smith 2010). As a result, the development and treatment of trash is not a linear phenomenon but constitutes an active realm of both conscious creativity and habituated patterning that can be discerned in both the contemporary and the archaeological record.

Trash as Cache

The concept of “trash as cache” provides one important means of analyzing human interactions with discarded goods. Individuals can forage from previously-unused or discarded materials for items of potential value. Parameters of value can change according to individual and household circumstances or when broad social conditions prompt a redefinition of worth. From the individual perspective, this might mean eating food that in better times would have been

discarded or fed to an animal, or wearing clothes that might otherwise be transformed into rags or given away. From an institutional perspective, it might mean the management of waste streams not only for present disposal but also for future use. For example, some analysts of modern landfill operations advocate the separation of waste to facilitate future extraction through selective “mining” of deposits (Lave et al. 1999). Landfill management also can include the planning for post-discard use when the facility is full, such as conversion to wildlife habitat (e.g., Robinson and Handel 1993). In ancient times the institutional engagement with trash as cache included “manuring” fields with urban discards including human waste (Wilkinson 1982).

The purposeful engagement with the locus or objects of trash does not always result from hardship or deprivation. Trash as “cache” illustrates the way in which humans creatively use discards and the discard environment as part of important social processes. Two related examples come from modern contexts in



Figure 2. Figure of Ganesha with reused metal can.



Figure 3. Tying objects to a tree as a votive activity, eastern India.



Figure 4. Tying objects to a tree as a votive activity, eastern India (close-up).

India, where discarded items regularly become the focus of deliberate ritual activity. One example is the use of recycled tin cans as a component of worship, where they are used to hold incense and other ritual objects (Figure 2). The other example consists of what could be termed “votive trash” in the form of objects tied to a tree as a talisman of luck and wish-making (Figures 3 and 4). In eastern India, items tied up around tree branches include strips of newspapers and folded-up wrappers of snack food packages. The use of discarded, secular objects is not because of the lack of new materials in this culture, but because the discards are close to hand, colorful, and possess material qualities appropriate for tying (“performance characteristics” in the words of Schiffer and Skibo [1997:30]). The focus of the event is the actual process of tying, after which the person is meant to walk away from the scene leaving the tied object as a memento of purposeful action.

Trash as Cachet

Trash also is a means by which people can demonstrate their social capital through the evidence of consumption. Although we are accustomed to thinking of trash as unwanted detritus, its accumulation can serve as an affirmation of the human presence. A modern example again serves as the focal point of this observation. In India today as in many other countries, there is an increasingly pervasive appearance of small-size plastic packets of biscuits and salty snacks. The availability and consumption of these individually-sized portions validates C.K. Prahalad’s (2005) observation of identity-making that occurs through the purchase of inexpensive items resulting in an economic effect that he terms “the fortune at the bottom of the pyramid.” Brightly-colored snack packets are prominently displayed at roadside stalls, and their presence as litter is ubiquitous even in small villages far from the major supply lines of such commodities. Although environmentally hazardous, this distribution of long-lasting trash around structures and bylanes provides a demonstration of household wealth and acquisition autonomy.

“Trash as cachet” provides a durable signature of material culture engagement that can last much longer than the original event of consumption. In cultures that do not remove trash from view, discards serve as a steady, permanent signal of individual purchasing power and household wealth. Trash as cachet governs both the outright discard of materials and the liminal stages of abandonment and disuse. The ethnographic record provides examples of chiefs who keep stockpiles of yams specifically to rot as a demonstration of wealth that is so abundant that goods can be thrown away (Weiner 1994:392). But even at the level of the ordinary person, the accumulation of discard is a way to affirm existence through the display of past prosperity that yields social capital in the present. Trash is forever, especially in social contexts when the durable record of consumption remains visible in front-yard middens and publicly-accessible spaces.

In the archaeological record as well, trash has great longevity compared to the event that generated the discards. Spectacular examples of the social meaning of discards can be seen in the incremental deposits of waste materials in middens, particularly shell middens which represent the rapid accumulation of discarded molluscs and other household waste. Shell middens are found all over the world, and represent a deliberately piled-up collection of discards that incrementally signal the group’s size and longevity of place. Just like any other type of mound, shell middens become invested with meaning and often serve as the locus of burials once the

mound has begun to accumulate. Rather than viewing midden burials as simply part of the general habits of discard, or as an easy place to dig a grave, the placement of burials in middens and shell mounds signals a sanctifying of the dead that also enhances claims on land.

Trash also can signal the creation and expenditure of social capital when people deliberately break objects as part of ritual or communal activities. Researchers in the Maya region note that fragmentary objects such as potsherds are found in dedicatory caches or deep in caves, indicating their enduring worth in the ritual sphere even when no longer serviceable as a utilitarian item (e.g., Robin 2002:255; Hutson and Stanton 2007:138). Discarded and damaged objects also can be the repository of memory through inheritance that links one generation with another. In an insightful article entitled “Forgetting your Dead,” Brad Weiss (1997) describes an incident in Tanzania in which a broken bicycle became an heirloom. Although economically useless, the bicycle represented what he describes as “an *obligation* to remember which...not only preserves the legacy of prior generations, but actually *projects* itself forward in time” (Weiss 1997:167, emphasis in original).

Trash and Urbanism

The human propensity to turn cache into trash and back again is evident at every level, from simple hunter-gatherer groups to complex societies in the form of chiefdoms and states. In urban contexts starting around six thousand years ago, the trend towards “trash as cache” and “trash as cachet” continued to be expressed, but in spaces characterized by higher population density. The archaeological investigation of both ancient and modern cities reveals that when people live in concentrated population centres there is an acceleration of production, distribution, and consumption. As a result, cities have a lot of trash not only because there are more people but also because there are more objects per capita.

Information from the long-term archaeological research project at the ancient city of Sisupalgarh, India, can be used to investigate the patterns of identity formation that urban dwellers have inherited from earlier phases of human social history. Sisupalgarh was occupied from the early centuries BC to the early centuries AD, and was one of several dozen urban centers of this era in the Indian subcontinent (Lal 1949; Mohanty and Smith 2008; Smith 2008). Its urban core is surrounded by a rampart that covers more than one square kilometer of ancient habitations. The site also contains other markers of long-term labor investment in monumental architecture in the form of standing stone pillars and formal gateways. Research at the site in the past decade by our team has included systematic surface survey, geophysical survey, and excavations to address ordinary inhabitants’ activity patterns in the ancient city.

Sisupalgarh’s 7-meter depositional history shows nearly a thousand years of occupation starting in the mid-first millennium BC, with a significant economic shift evident about halfway through the site’s life. The first half of the occupation is characterized by a material assemblage that includes high-fired, well-burnished pottery that often bears evidence of use-wear. These carefully-curated vessels often also have evidence for post-firing graffiti that can be interpreted as ownership marks. Subsequently there was a rapid transition to a markedly different material culture assemblage: bricks and tiles appear for the first time, along with rapidly-made and low-fired vessels in a variety of new forms. Vessels ceased to be slipped, and there is no evidence for



Figure 5. Trash deposits on exterior of structure at the archaeological site of Sisupalgarh, India.

use-wear or ownership marks. In addition to the use of clay for making bricks, tiles, and vessels, there is an abundance of terracotta ornaments in the form of bangles, rings, pendants and earspools.

Excavations of the upper phases of household contexts at Sisupalgarh reveal a truly striking quantity of discarded objects including complete and nearly complete vessels (Figure 5). Smaller fragments of pottery also are abundant, and the bimodal distribution of sherd size in and around structures enabled us to propose that the structures were

made of pisé (puddled mud) that incorporated surrounding discards back into new structures. Other types of recycling included the use of broken bricks as wall foundations and broken tiles as flooring materials. Reuse was not limited to the domestic context: the site's monumental encircling rampart was regularly augmented by successive layers of refuse-filled soil matrix, and the area of ritual architecture in the center of the site included a substrate that incorporated a large amount of crushed pottery as stabilizing material for the subsequent placement of monolithic stone columns.

The active reuse of bricks, stones, tiles and pottery as building materials in both residential and monumental areas of Sisupalgarh illustrates the use of "trash as cache." Our excavation team repeatedly uncovered small, casual piles of bricks and tiles between structures, which may be interpreted as the stockpiles of future building material created by the ancient inhabitants of Sisupalgarh. At the same time, the large amount of discarded materials ranging from vessels to ornaments would have been easily and daily experienced by the inhabitants. The use of "trash as cachet" enabled residents to advertise both their consumption capacity and fashion sense through the visible display of domestic refuse and discarded ornaments.

In addition to the sheer amount of trash evident in the upper layers of the site, two particular instances of archaeologically-recovered trash behavior illustrate how trash was not merely detritus but was actively cognized as a component of daily life. The first example lay in an area of residential architecture on the northern side of the site inside the rampart, where we excavated for three seasons in a large horizontal and vertical exposure. One area had a consistently high level of discarded materials including complete vessels as well as large quantities of sherds. Under more than two meters of this accumulation, we encountered a deliberate emplacement of a special-purpose type, consisting of a complete shed deer antler and several nestled cups. This unusual, probably ritual, emplacement was highly unexpected given that the area was afterwards almost immediately devoted to randomly-discarded items.

Evidence from another area at Sisupalgarh similarly provided insights into the way in which trash-related behavior was integrated with other types of symbolism. In an excavation area outside of the rampart, we encountered three phases of activity whose depositional sequence mirrored the long occupational history seen on the interior of the rampart. In this exterior zone in both the first and the third phase, the area of investigation revealed large-scale dumping as evidenced by the high density of pottery, the appearance of pits, and the distribution of disarticulated architectural elements such as stone blocks. In the middle phase of occupation, however, the area was marked by the appearance of round stone-lined features that have a special affinity with Buddhist and Jain architecture (Ota 2007). The presence of non-domestic features indicates that the area of investigation was cyclically transformed from an area of ordinary domestic activity to one of special-purpose use, as signaled through the presence of trash.

Discussion

At Sisupalgarh, as at many other urban archaeological sites, the visible display of past prosperity was evident in the passageways and courtyards that were part of the lived daily landscape. In this and other ancient contexts, when trash was discarded around dwellings and remained visible long after the consumption event, trash might have constituted a stronger statement of identity than any other form of active material use. Trash requires daily deliberate actions on the part of the community, not only those who discard items but also those who pick through it, walk around it, trample it, move it, or ignore it.

The examples from Sisupalgarh suggest that the distinction between trash and non-trash in ancient sites was much more complex and subtle than it is today. Our contemporary expectations of trash disposal incorporate the expectation that discards should remain out of sight and out of mind. However, the deliberate handling of trash as a validating event, and the incorporation of discards as a component of ritual activity, facilitates the analysis of trash as a dynamic component of human-material interactions in both the past and the present.

In turning to the present day, the implications for trash behavior as a component of identity formation provides important insights into human behavior in dense populations. Human cognitive attachment to material culture favors the continued use of objects as referents and social symbols, resulting in the retention of trash as long as possible. We can analyze this phenomenon in terms of the component parts of the current mantra “reduce-reuse-recycle.” The exhortation to reduce is not particularly effective, and the suggestion that people should reuse is only marginally more appealing. By contrast, the encouragement to recycle plays directly into the human cognitive propensity to signal identity through discard: not only do we get to hold on to our trash longer while searching for a place to recycle it, but there is now a whole new repertoire of consumables, ranging from recycling bins to the products made from recycled materials.

Conclusion

The simple act of discard--its timing, frequency, and location--is a matter of individual autonomy within a cultural context that is itself actively maintained or modified in each act of throwing

away. For more than a million years, human interactions with material culture have resulted in the retention of trash in full public view. The effectiveness of trash as a social and economic marker comes from its potential to buffer economic fluctuations on both the individual and group level, and its ability to signal wealth through accumulation.

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