Session Proposal

European Association of Archaeologists (EAA) 12th Annual Meeting
Krakow, Poland
19th to 24th September 2006

Organizer: Drs. John Chapman and Bisserka Gaydarska

Theme:

Archaeology and Material Culture: Interpreting the Archaeological Record

Session Title:

OBJECT RE-FITTING STUDIES – BEYOND CHÂINES OPÉRATOIRES TO SOCIAL INTERPRETATIONS

Abstract:

What happens when a complete object breaks into fragments? In many cases, the fragments are permanently discarded and a replacement is made or acquired. But this was not always the case; it turns out that there are many reasons for the extension of a fragment's biography well after the break, whether for further use in another capacity, for *ad hoc* building material, as a container, for children's play or for enchainment of social relations. When a complete object breaks, the fragments may have remained in one place or they may have been dispersed. There have been two parallel responses to these distributions. In the first response, the distribution has been ignored and the single fragment treated as the basic unit of analysis, for the extraction of information about chrono-types, patterning and meaning from sites. The second approach typifies major lithic and ceramic assemblages, where the analyst seeks to process large quantities of objects per season in order to maximize the joins between fragments in different contexts. While both methods have a long history, the two have developed in radically different directions. For lithics analysis, the identification of the châine opératoire has been used since the 1970s to answer technological and functional questions, including the production of vital spatial information. By contrast, given the paucity of careful contextual data from the majority of ceramic re-fitting operations, it would appear that the overall priorities remain the re-creation of whole vessels for study and display rather than understanding fragment dispersion. It is rare, but valuable, to find details of the contexts for re-fitted sherds in these large-scale operations.

Before we proceed to examine previous re-fitting studies, we should ask what information on past social practices re-fitting studies can actually provide? Hoffman has argued that re-fitting studies have moved on from maps with lines to contributions to occupation type, duration, redundancy and use of space. But is this so? Do such time-consuming studies simply provide an estimate of low-level taphonomic processes concerned with object breakage and dispersion? Or is there more to re-fitting than meets the eye? And where does the social come into these pictures?

This session challenges re-fitting specialists involved with any kind of material culture (ceramics, figurines, bones, chipped stone, polished stone, etc.) from any period in Europe

and beyond to look beyond the technological and the spatial aspects of re-fitting and come up with social interpretations. We are in urgent need of new ideas to make use of the vast quantity of data is tied up in usually unrelated re-fitting studies.

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