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# NOTES ON THE LIFE HISTORY OF A POT SHERD

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## **Abstract**

This article discusses various life history approaches in archaeology: short life histories study the lives of things in the past (until they end up in the ground), long life histories study these lives going on until the present. Both approaches share the assumption that although people are free to give to a thing any meaning they want, their material essence necessarily remains unchanged. As an alternative, I present an ethnographic approach, studying the 'life' of a pot sherd on an excavation project. *All* the thing's properties and characteristics, including its material identity and age, are taken to be the outcome of processes taking place in the present. The data presented shows in some detail how 'momentary, fluid and flexible' archaeological classifications and interpretations of material culture are. It emerges that the material identities ascribed to things are not their essential properties but the result of specific relationships of people and things: their very materiality is potentially multiple and has a history.

**Key Words** ◆ ancient artefacts ◆ archaeological excavation ◆ life history of things ◆ Monte Polizzo, Sicily ◆ sociology of archaeology

## INTRODUCTION

This article is about a fairly ordinary pot sherd found by Erica Grijalva on 4 July 2000. Erica found the sherd while digging in a trench on top of Monte Polizzo – a large hilltop settlement in western Sicily. Most of the occupation deposits on the mountain date to the 6th and 5th centuries BC. That settlement was possibly associated with a people known to the Greeks as Elymians who lived in an inland area that was disputed between the Elymians, the Greeks and the Carthaginians. Among the

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participants of the large international excavation project that now occupies Monte Polizzo every summer, its highest part is known as 'The Acropolis'. This is where, during the summer of 2000, a team led by Ian Morris of Stanford University began their excavations. He and his team revealed a semi-circular stone structure on the very top of the mountain, as well as the remains of a rectangular building nearby (Morris et al., forthcoming). In 2001, this building turned out to be one of a complex of at least three rectilinear rooms with a courtyard and multiple terrace walls (Ian Morris, pers. comm.).

The sherd under scrutiny was found in Layer 8 of Trench 17651 (now known as N106), north of what is probably the outer wall of the rectangular building B 1. Trench supervisor Trinity Jackman said about this layer that 'it consists of pretty fine, sandy material but is initially quite compact. It seems like a fill layer – there is a pit directly to the north east. We are trying to figure out what happened here. It is quite an important area actually.'

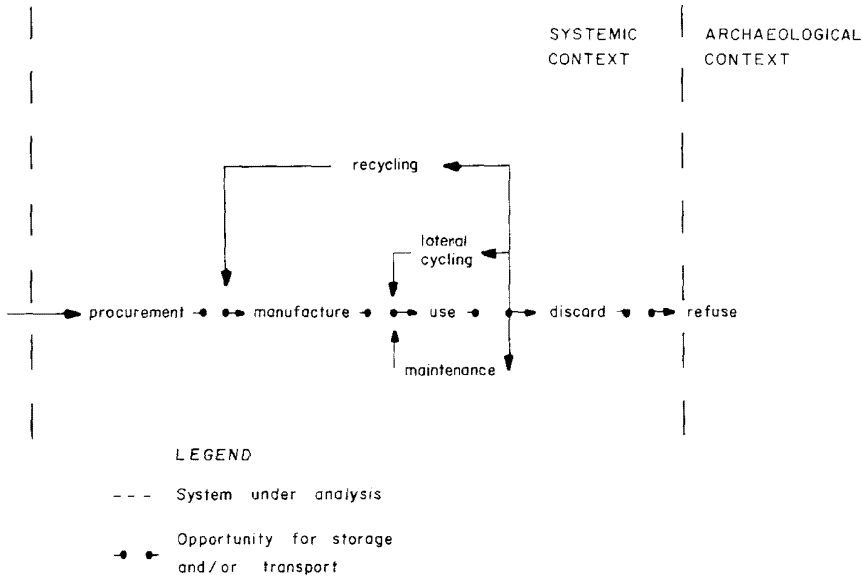
I will return to the significance of this sherd later. But first I need to discuss my decision to adopt a particular kind of 'life history' approach. Over the past decade or so, life histories (or biographies) of ancient sites and artefacts have attracted considerable interest among both archaeologists and anthropologists. Archaeologists infected by this particular intellectual virus range from Michael Schiffer to Michael Shanks, and from Richard Bradley to Julian Thomas and Christopher Tilley. Recently, an entire issue of the journal *World Archaeology*, was dedicated to 'The Cultural Biography of Objects' (Chris Gosden and Yvonne Marshall, eds, 1999). Arguably, the observed popularity of 'life histories' and 'biographies' of things is partly due to some difference in opinion as to what specifically this approach actually stands for. In particular, there are 'short' and 'long' life history approaches.

## SHORT AND LONG LIFE HISTORIES OF THINGS

As Michael Schiffer stated recently, it is commonplace in archaeology to make assumptions about the life history of, say, a house or a ceramic jar. Schiffer went on to explain what he meant by that:

Artifact life histories are usually divided into sets of closely linked activities called processes; in the case of a ceramic jar, processes include the collection of clay and other raw materials, clay preparation, forming the clay into a vessel, smoothing and painting its surface, drying and firing, transport, exchange, use, storage, maintenance, reuse, and discard. (Schiffer with Miller, 1999: 22)

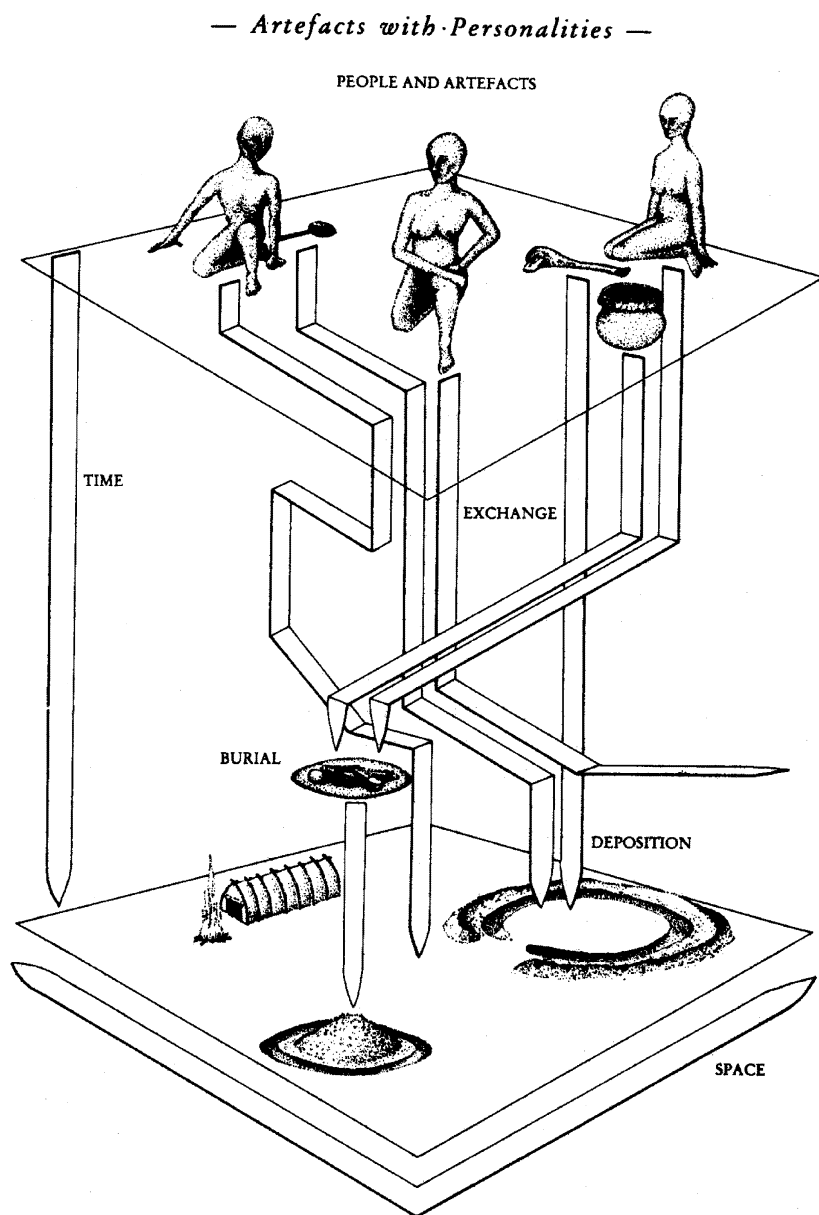
This can be illustrated with a simple flow model (Figure 1). Schiffer considers the 'life history concept' to lie 'at the core' of a behavioral



**FIGURE 1** Michael Schiffer's flow model illustrating his 'short' life-history approach to 'durable elements' such as artefacts (1972: Fig. 1). A slightly revised version can be found in LaMotta and Schiffer (2001: Fig. 2.2)

methodology in archaeology, since 'an artifact's life history is the sequence of behaviors (i.e. interactions and activities) that lead from the procurement of raw materials . . . to the eventual discard or abandonment of the object in the archaeological record' (LaMotta and Schiffer, 2001: 21). His general idea is to use the life history approach to help account for observable patterns of finds and features on archaeological sites; or – to use his own language – to develop credible, predictive laws about the cultural components of the formation processes of the archaeological record by studying its material elements in their systemic context (Schiffer, 1972; LaMotta and Schiffer, 2001: 21–2). Once the 'durable elements' had left their 'systemic context' and entered the 'archaeological context', they were subject to various natural formation processes which, to Schiffer, represent phases of decay rather than additional episodes of life. It is to Schiffer's credit that he has long been aware that divergences from the standard sequence of processes such as various kinds of discard practices and reuses that might occur (see e.g. Thompson, 1979), quickly add a considerable degree of complexity to the model.<sup>1</sup>

More recently, other archaeologists have looked again at life histories of things, drawing on recent work both in anthropology and in science



**FIGURE 2** Julian Thomas' illustration of the interaction of artefacts, people and places in later Neolithic Britain: a different kind of a 'short' life-history approach. (From Thomas, 1966: Fig. 6.10)

Birth, Childhood	c. 4000–2700	TRB culture, Globular Amphora culture	megaliths built and used as burial sites
Youth	c. 2800–1600	Single Grave culture, early Bronze Age	reused as burial sites  <i>closing of megaliths</i>
Earlier Adult Life	1200–600	late Bronze Age	throughout: secondary burials,
	600–1 cal. BC	pre-Roman Iron Age	finds in and near megaliths,
	AD 1–600	Roman Iron Age (and Migration period)	tradition of enclosed burial mounds, imitation of mounds
	600–1200	Slavic Period	<i>'paganization' of megaliths?</i>
Later Adult Life	1200–1400	early German Period	finds in and near megaliths, stones reused
	1400–1750	later Medieval and early Modern Period	<i>'historization' of megaliths</i>
Old Age	1750–1830	Romantic Period	appreciated by poets, painters, travellers
	1830–1990	Modernity	work by antiquarians and archaeologists, protection
	present	Post-Modernity	<i>preservation, presentation</i>

**FIGURE 3** My own attempt (Holtorf, 1998: Table 1) at an overview of the 'long' life histories of megalithic monuments in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern (Germany)

and technology studies, by scholars such as Igor Kopytoff (1986), Marilyn Strathern (1988) and Bruno Latour (1987). They were hoping to achieve something rather different, namely a better understanding of the various interconnections between the lives of things and the lives of people (Thomas, 1996; Tilley, 1996; Shanks, 1998). As Michael Shanks argued (1998), this required a radical rethinking of the old-established opposition of people and things, and gave new currency to the old post-processual battle cry that material culture is active and meaningfully constituted. Detailed case studies were prepared by Christopher Tilley (1996: chapter 6) and Julian Thomas (1996: chapter 6; see Figure 2). They demonstrated, using the example of Neolithic artefacts, how things in circulation helped to define and redefine relationships between people; how persons can form parts of things, and things form parts of persons:

'I touch an object with my hand and am simultaneously touched by it' (Tilley, 1999: 324).

In contrast to Schiffer's attempt to *infer from* the life histories of things the various contexts of their subsequent deposition, Tilley and Thomas wanted to *learn about* the meanings and social roles of things from their various depositional contexts (Thomas, 1996: 162; Tilley, 1996: 273).<sup>2</sup>

Interestingly, the life history studies I have referred to so far share the assumption that the life of a thing started at the time of its manufacture and ended at the time of its deposition in the ground. Discarded things are of course subjected to all sorts of natural processes, but their lives are over: they become rubbish, ruins, mummies. However, in an alternative perspective, the life histories of things do not end with deposition but continue until the present-day: activities such as discovery, recovery, analysis, interpretation, archiving and exhibiting are taken to be processes in the lives of things too. Although some examples of such 'long' life histories relate to prehistoric monuments – I think of the work of Richard Bradley (e.g. 1993: chapter 6) – and even to entire landscapes, others followed the changing fortunes of various kinds of artefacts.<sup>3</sup> In my own work on the life histories of megaliths (Holtorf, 1998, 2000–1) I came to the conclusion that whatever we do *with*, and *to*, these monuments today is simply our own contribution to their lives (Figure 3). Like others before us, we 'happen' to ancient monuments or indeed other things, making sense of them and reinterpreting them as we like (see also Shanks, 1998: 25).

The problem with this position is that it was perhaps not radical enough. Although there was some acknowledgement that the past is constructed rather than discovered, the material essence of the thing itself remained unchallenged. We may be able to interpret and 'construct' the meaning of a thing in any way we like, but we are seemingly unable to construct the thing 'itself'. The possibility that the material properties, or identity, of a thing are being renegotiated in different social circumstances has not normally been allowed (but see Shanks, 1998). This was mainly due to the life history metaphor itself. Like human bodies, things that had once been 'born' appeared to have to live as what they happened to be until they died. They may have been seen in different ways along the way, but their material identity was deemed to remain unchangeable and continuous all along: a pot was a pot was a pot. This is particularly problematic for 'long' life histories that explicitly incorporate the present, but the 'short' varieties are faced with the same difficulty, since it is usually assumed that the things being studied today share their very materiality with the things that were once embedded in complex networks of people and things and other meanings. From that viewpoint, it is a realistic task for the relevant specialists to study the

material properties of a thing in order to find out *what it is*, for example pot sherds. And then others can go further and think about *what it meant* in a given historical context.

This article takes a different perspective, for I argue that the material identities of things are much more contingent. Consider the following anomalies:

1. Material identities of things can change quickly and without warning, right in front of our eyes – think of a magician's show: how can we be fooled so easily? But also: how can we be so certain that what we are watching are indeed mere tricks?
2. Widely known material identities of things can begin or end by a few people saying and arguing so and (virtually) all others at some point deciding to agree with them – think of the demise of the four humours of the human body during the 19th century and the emergence and establishment of electrons and black holes in the 20th century. A good archaeological example is the fairly sudden transformation of thunderbolts into stone axes during the late 17th century (Jensen, 2000).
3. Two or more very different material identities may inhabit the same thing – think of fakes and replicas that can have very different effects in different circumstances and for different people (Holtorf and Schadla-Hall, 1999).

A study of the life history of things must therefore not assume anything about *what they are*, but try to understand *how they come to be* ancient artefacts or whatever else. I am arguing for an investigation of the life histories of things as they unfold in the present and extend both into the past and the future. Arguably, this is to study formation processes of the archaeological record in front of our eyes. But it also means to accept that material culture is meaningfully constituted – in the present.

## **OBSERVING THE LIVES OF THINGS: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH**

No life before the moment of discovery can be assumed: any assertions about the origins and, if you will, earlier 'lives' of a thing are the outcome of various processes in its present life. However, I do not mean to imply that the thing did not *exist* previously. The point is rather that this is of no great concern, since *all* the thing's properties and characteristics, including its material identity and age, are ascribed to the thing some time after the moment of its discovery. They are not gradually revealed but slowly assembled (Shanks, 1998). I argue that all ancient sites and artefacts did not have much of a life, as it were, before they were discovered in their present context. All our knowledge, whether certain



or speculative, about their past lives are in fact outcomes of their present lives. Of course, things may mean, and be, different things to different people – they can have parallel lives in various present contexts, with varying moments of ‘discovery’.

Crucially, this does not imply that a thing’s properties and characteristics are completely arbitrary but that they are determined by various factors effective in their present lives. An archaeologist, for example, is constrained in his or her assessment not only by the limits of his own knowledge and experience, but also by available techniques and by the dominant norms and values of academic discourse.

To study such present life stories and associated contexts requires an ethnographic approach, which (a) is much more detailed and therefore smaller in scope than the life history approaches previously mentioned, and (b) employs direct observation and interview as its main methodologies. One of the most important characteristics of the ‘ethnographic’ method is that the observer maintains an independence from both normative prescriptions of how things ought to function (e.g. Orton et al., 1993) and from the insiders’ own perceptions of what they are doing. A similar ethnographic approach relating to the sciences has long been applied by sociologists of science. One of the most influential, so-called ‘laboratory studies’ is Karin Knorr-Cetina’s study of *The Manufacture of Knowledge* (1981, see also 1983). My own approach is something like a laboratory study in the field.

What is to be gained from such research? The greatest benefit is to find out more about what it actually is that archaeologists are doing when they ‘study the past’. How do they transform certain things into archaeological evidence? (See also Edgeworth, 1990.) How do they learn what kind of artefacts they are dealing with? And how do they actually get to know their ancientness, i.e. the fact that they are of ancient and not recent age? Contrary to what one might expect, my research results demonstrate that the answers to none of these questions is ‘by careful study and analysis’. It will emerge instead that split-second decisions based on established routines and old habits, partly carried out by non-specialists, account for most of the answers.

I will be focusing on a thing that was quickly to become a ‘pot sherd’. It began its life on 4 July 2000, at 11.01 am to be precise. It was ‘born’ right on top of Monte Polizzo, where Erica Grijalva helped it emerge out of the ground. There were no complications.

## WHAT IS AN ARTEFACT?

As everybody knows, on an excavation not everything is kept: ‘most of what an archaeologist uncovers ends up in fact on the spoil heap’ (Johnson, 2001: 76). (One day at Monte Polizzo I kept a bag for things

we did not usually keep.) So what made Erica discover and keep this thing?<sup>4</sup> – just for a minute ignoring the fact that I was hovering over Erica and taking pictures of the ‘thing’ in front of her, then squatting nearby and observing the proceedings. Julian Thomas said (1996: 62) that ‘in order to “do archaeology” we have to recognise certain things as representing evidence. Archaeological analysis is consequently a specific form of “clearing” which enables entities to be recognised in a very specific kind of way’ (see also Edgeworth, 1990).

In the Monte Polizzo project diggers routinely keep artefacts, bones, and a variety of scientific samples, for example for pollen, charcoal and macrofossil analysis. Such categories are highly contingent. They are adopted by projects because of particular research interests, old habits, established conventions or historical accidents, not because they are necessarily the best possible way to categorize things archaeologists come across (Conolly, 2000; Lucas, 2001: chapter 3). The categories used are subject to change at any time, and they could be very different. Ian Hodder figured (1997: 695) that ‘If the object categories on which archaeological research is founded can be seen to be the product of the conventional lenses used in analysis, the door is opened for constructing “new” objects of study which partition the object-world in different and multi-scalar ways. “Objects” such as “burning”, or “decoration”, or “rubbish” cut across the lower-level domains based on conventional artefact categories.’ The project Erica was working for did not have any such far-reaching ambitions, although it did (and does) introduce a range of innovative methodologies to Sicilian archaeology.

At the moment the thing was found, Erica had to make the crucial decision as to whether or not that thing was valuable evidence, i.e. an artefact, a bone, a useful sample, or something else worth keeping. This is a routine decision which diggers like Erica make hundreds of times every day. But what is worth keeping anyway? In 1958, Lewis Binford provoked James Griffin when he decided to keep and catalogue large amounts of fire-cracked rock as well as coke bottle tops and nails (Binford, 1972: 128). But value is not only linked to classification. Very small things are often not deemed worth classifying and worth keeping in the same way that others are – which is why on many excavations not all earth is routinely being sieved and why size does matter (Hodder, 1999: 15–17; Orton et al., 1993: 47).

Based on a superficial resemblance to other ‘pot sherds’, Erica recognized the thing as a pot sherd and deemed it worth keeping. Erica then carefully cleaned away the dirt around it and gradually revealed more and more of what she still believed was a sherd. My watch showed 11.25 am. Often, the initial identification will be revised when more of the object is revealed, or when it is first touched, or when it snaps, or when it is carefully cleaned between the fingers, or when the trench



**FIGURE 4** Erica Grijalva is cleaning around the sherd, 4 July 2000, 11.09. *Photograph: CH.*

supervisor is consulted. In the space of a split-second, a 'sherd' may thus become 'dirt', or a 'stone' a 'bone', or a 'root' a 'single find'. Clearly this, if anything, is interpretation at the trowel's edge (Figure 4; Hodder, 1997, 1999: chapter 5). Later, people may change their minds. Some classifications can later be undone, for example when a sherd is recovered from among the bones, but others are irreversible, for example when a 'sherd' is later discovered on the dirt heap (with the original location unknown).

At 11.43 Erica placed the sherd into the pottery bowl on the side of the trench she was working in. It carried a label stating

MP 2000  
Acropolis  
July 4, 2000  
Trench 17651  
East Bulk

8

Later the content of the bowl was transferred into a plastic bag, which was labelled and then carried down the mountain to the car parking place, from where it got a ride directly to the dig house in the nearby town of Salemi. At 15.43 on that same afternoon, Erica began washing 'her' sherds. This gave her a chance to review whether all items in the pottery bag were indeed pot sherds. Any things that she no longer felt were appropriately classified would now have been removed from the bag. A 'bone' would have been removed and put into the bones bag, while a 'pebble' in the bag would in practice probably have been thrown into the bushes behind the table where much of the washing took place. Again, people may later change their views or admit mistakes or others

may disagree with their classifications, but probably more often than we would like, facts are created that cannot be undone.

Moreover, there are types of pottery that dissolve in water, and there are types of decoration that suffer from scrubbing, and there are countless little bits and pieces that break off and are thrown out with the water, while other pieces are mixed up during the subsequent drying process in the sun. I remember from my very first excavation in 1986 how a tiny strange thing which my trench supervisor had just identified as the fragment of a bronze fibula a short time later simply disappeared out of my hand, and was never found again. What this means is that a pot is a bone is a piece of dirt is nothing left. At the end of the process of cleaning, inspecting and drying the sherd under investigation was still in the bag, which was good news for my project.

What I have established so far is that the thing, which Erica discovered in the morning on Monte Polizzo, had by the same evening become a clean and dry sherd of pottery in a plastic bag which also contained a number of other sherds found on the same day in the same context. All this was mostly due to Erica Grijalva, an undergraduate student in Mechanical Engineering from Stanford University, California.

Knowing something as a pot sherd is to know a lot already:

This is a material which is familiar to us, and from the moment when it is turned up by the trowel the way in which we understand it is already constrained by a range of prejudices and understandings. We know certain things about how pottery is made, what it can be used for, and the conditions under which people can routinely make use of pots. Before we begin, these will inevitably colour the way in which we will interpret the artefact. When the artefact is recovered, it is already a part of a world. (Thomas, 1996: 63)

But the really crucial moment in the life of the sherd lay still ahead.

## HOW DOES AN ARTEFACT BECOME ANCIENT?

Artefacts found on an excavation can be of very different ages – from a few months (or even contemporaneous with the archaeologists) to many millennia. Diggers are usually encouraged to keep and record all artefacts, although most of them would in practice not look twice at rusty nails or beer bottles that are ‘obviously’ of no great antiquity and therefore not ‘worth’ keeping (but remember Binford!).<sup>5</sup> Things that derive from the archaeological excavation itself, such as bent nails, small ends of string, or food remains are quickly discarded, too. All such things are often not considered to be finds but ‘rubbish’. As a result, the most recent phases of occupation of archaeological sites tend to be systematically undervalued. This raises the question on what grounds diggers are able to identify relatively quickly that one artefact is ‘ancient’ (which I take

to mean from before a possible local person's own memory, i.e. older than 50–80 years), and another one is mere recent rubbish. This is not a trivial question, considering that the digger is not able to apply any kind of sophisticated dating method on site. Instead he or she will glance at the object, maybe remove some dirt that is stuck to it, look again, and usually make a decision after these few moments.

Based on my observations at various excavations I have taken part in (and not applying specifically to Monte Polizzo), diggers come to their decisions about the age of an artefact in a negative way: if it isn't clearly recent, it must be old. Recent artefacts are identified and subsequently discarded if they

1. are positively identified by the digger as belonging to the project (from personal memory),
2. resemble artefacts known to be recent AND come from layers that are likely to be recent (e.g. surface, infills from top layers and so on),
3. are considered as recent by consulted authorities on site (e.g. trench supervisor).

In case of doubt, the object is likely to be kept and treated 'as if ancient', until it can be re-evaluated after washing, possibly consulting further authorities.

The point of this brief discussion is not to complain about any possible misidentifications. It is more interesting to note that by the time a find reaches the finds laboratory and its team, the antiquity of that find has not yet been positively established. The same was true for the 'sherd' I was following (and which by now had become known as 'Cornelius' sherd').<sup>6</sup> Erica of course had never had any doubts about the fact that this was an 'ancient sherd' – just like all the others that she and the other diggers had been recovering for the past few weeks. My own decision to follow this particular thing also relied on my judgment that it was an ancient artefact that would go through the normal process of finds analysis, or I would not have selected it. We could of course both have been proven wrong. For example by a thermoluminescence date for the sherd. But in practice such direct dating methods are not often employed in archaeological projects, and usually restricted to a few carefully selected individual pieces. Instead, finds from Monte Polizzo were usually dated by Emma Blake and her team in the project's finds laboratory. How did they do it?

## THE MOMENT OF TRUTH

The moment of truth came one day after the discovery of the sherd, on 5 July 2000 at 13.43, to be precise. The plastic bag with 'my' sherd in it had at that point been opened by Emma Blake, and the contents spread



**FIGURE 5** The pot sherd in the finds laboratory, 5 July 2000. *Photograph: CH*

out on a table (Figure 5). With a small team of helpers, one of her main tasks was to go through all the bags of pottery and enter the information they contained into the project's database. This database would become the primary and most important source of information for later post-excavation analysis. Whatever Emma listed here, would to a large extent determine the information that the project could ever get out of that thing. To paraphrase Douglas Adams, it would be the answer to the question of the meaning of the thing in the universe. Emma came to the conclusion that the answer was 'F 24' – confirming a hunch she had had at 10.55 when she first saw the sherd while putting all the dry sherds in the cassette into the plastic bag (see below). When I asked her, Emma defined F 24 to me as a 'generic, coarse ware, pithos/storage-vessel, grey-red-brown-orange colours, grey core, handmade, undecorated, grog as primary inclusion, a couple of centimetres thick' (Figure 6).

This identification was made in the space of about one second after picking up the sherd and looking at it. Emma clearly had a lot of experience, and a lot of intuition. My sherd was neither the first nor the only fabric F24 she had come across; this was one of the most common fabrics on site and not usually one that was difficult to identify. Hence Emma did not consider it a potentially controversial decision. She did not see a need to consult others in the room for their opinion, but I really do not

Fabric Code	Common Name	Type sherd(s) context	Thickness range (mm)	Color: concave	Color: convex	Color: core	Hardness	Feel	Inclusions: % Frequency
F24		see 440, 446	3.5-3.7	5YR 6.5/1; 5YR 7/1; 5YR 6.5/1; 5YR 6.5/1	5YR 6.5/1; 5YR 7/1; 5YR 6.5/1; 5YR 6.5/1	5YR 6.5/1; 5YR 7/1; 5YR 6.5/1; 5YR 6.5/1	soft	rough	0%
Inclusions: max size (mm)	Inclusion type 1	Inclusion type 2	Inclusion type 3	Inclusion type 4	Method of manufacture	Surface treatment	Similar fabrics	Attribution	Notes
	grit					smooth, sometimes white slip covers	F21		fabric of some results. Red, buff, fine-grained surface. Buff/white-grained, F21 is a fine version of this fabric.

FIGURE 6 Fabric F24 as described in the Monte Polizzo Project’s finds database. Courtesy of Emma Blake

think that her classification as F24 could seriously be questioned by anyone. Having said that, it is well known among pottery specialists that the association of pot sherds with a particular fabric type depends partly on the psychology of the person who is associating (Orton et al., 1993: 73).

To complete the process of analysis, the F24 sherds were weighed, returned to their bag, and the bag was marked ‘undiagnostic’. Undiagnostic sherds are those sherds that are effectively not deemed worth being looked at again in any detail (cf. note 6!). By now it was 13.58 and after quarter of an hour of fame the sherd was basically over and done with. What followed was entry of the data on the recording sheet into the computer, and then the bag being stored in a cassette and moved around . . . and moved around again . . . for over a week (see below) . . . until it was moved again, then being transported on 13 July, at 9.58 to be precise, to the local museum where it was carried through the gate at 10.15, and up the stairs, and finally found its final resting place in a large store room – where it is probably still today at the time of writing, almost a year later (Figure 7).

All this may sound pretty mundane and unsurprising. But what had effectively happened is that a thing found in the ground on 4 July 2000 had been authenticated, identified and dated by an archaeological project. When it entered the museum’s store room, at 10.16 on 13 July 2000, the thing had become a fragment of a large storage vessel of the Iron Age settlement on top of Monte Polizzo. This transformation was due to specific archaeological formation processes, featuring Erica Grijalva who placed the thing into the right bowls and bags so that it became established as a pot sherd, and Emma Blake who saw quickly that this sherd was of the fabric F24. Also important was, of course, that the sherd was meaningfully constituted inasmuch as Erica was working in a particular excavation trench on a particular site, that Emma knew about the origin of the sherd when she made her judgment, and that the



cassettes in the museum were clearly labelled as coming from the Monte Polizzo archaeological project.

### THE BOTTOM LINE

The bottom line of this article is that the lives of artefacts in the present are not half as exciting as those they had in the past. And yet, those past lives are the direct outcome of their present lives. Only with a secure identity as an artefact and its ancient-ness being established can archaeologists ever hope to involve a thing in any kind of plausible relationships with people of a past period.

As I hope I have shown, these crucial properties of things are not in every case verified through detailed analysis and careful evaluation of the results by an expert in the field who is able to recognize things for *what they are* and therefore *what they were*. Instead, most decisions appear to be made in an ad hoc kind of way and important evaluations emerge as the by-product of unquestioned routine processes. Remember that when Emma was determining the fabric of the sherd, she effectively also verified its ancient-ness. Such classifications and verifications are contextually specific constructions which bear the mark of the situational contingency by which they are generated.

It was the aim of scientific laboratory studies to study these processes in action (Knorr-Cetina, 1981: 5). 'The result, to summarize it in one sentence, was that nothing extraordinary and nothing "scientific" was happening inside the sacred walls of these temples' (Latour, 1983: 141). This is no less valid in the case of an archaeological excavation. Hopefully this article has demonstrated that an ethnographic life history



**FIGURE 7** The sherd in a labelled plastic bag in a labelled cassette in a store room of the *Museo Civico* in Salemi, 13 July 2000, 10.16.  
*Photograph: CH*



approach to things can yield interesting insights about the profane practices at work in an excavation project.

The results, I suggest, have more general implications for our understanding of the way we classify and interpret material culture, because scientific practice is not categorically different from anything that is engaged in other (non-scientific) practices (Thomas, 1996: 63). They illustrate in some detail how 'momentary, fluid and flexible' our classifications and interpretations often are (Hodder, 1997). The material identities ascribed to things are not their essential properties but the result of relationships of people and things: their very materiality is potentially multiple and has a history (Thomas, 1996: 70–82; Shanks, 1998).

I do not think that this insight has any grand consequences for the way we should or should not do archaeology in the future. It is more the other way around: the way we will do archaeology in the future may have consequences for our insights about the characteristics of material culture and the practices surrounding its interpretation.

### Acknowledgements

When writing this article I was inspired, as so often before, by the thinking of Michael Shanks. He also initially invited me to take part in the Monte Polizzo project in 1999 (see his account of the project in Pearson and Shanks, 2001: 28–32). I returned in 2000 due to support from the University of Oslo and the University of Cambridge. I am most grateful to Christopher Prescott and Catherine Hills for rescuing my project when it looked like I was stranded. In Sicily, my research was greatly helped by Christopher Prescott, Ian Morris, Emma Blake, Trinity Jackman, and all the students who happily agreed to being observed and photographed while handling 'my' sherd, especially Erica Grijalva, Becca Horrell, Hannah Dahlberg, and Chris Sevara. Very helpful critical comments on earlier drafts of this article were made by Nicky Boivin and especially by Ian Morris (although I did not always follow their advice!). Ian Morris also supplied the Binford reference and gave permission to cite from an unpublished report. Emma Blake supplied Figure 5. I am grateful to them all!

### Notes

1. Other works influenced by Schiffer's life history approach include Lillios (1999) and Walker and Lucero (2000), while Zedeño (1997) has transferred the same general ideas to landscape history which she studied in terms of 'territory formation'. A broadly similar approach on the European continent falls within the realm of archaeological 'source criticism' and is exemplified in Mildener's study of the lives of prehistoric stone axes and other artefacts (1969).
2. A broadly similar approach was adopted by Bradley (1990), Langdon (2001), Jones (2002: chapters 5–7), Strassburg (1998), and Tilley (1999).
3. Further 'long' life histories relating to monuments were published by Chippindale (1994), Gillings and Pollard (1999), and Karlsson (2001). Nico Roymans studied the life of an entire landscape (1995), while John Edwards

applied a similar approach to the city of Córdoba (2001). For examples relating to artefacts see Rawson (1993) and Burström (1996).

4. For further discussion of the question how a digger like Erica recognized this thing as a thing and not no-thing see Heidegger (1962), Edgeworth (1990), and Thomas (1996: 64–70).
5. Ian Morris states that at Monte Polizzo ‘we have a large and steadily growing collection of beer bottle fragments, barbed wire, shotgun cartridges, and coins dating from the 1970s and 1980s from building A1. The only modern artefact we threw away was a late 1990s pornographic magazine in a very unpleasant state of preservation’ (pers. comm).
6. The Stanford students later awarded me *The Sherd Appreciation Award* for ‘seeing beauty in something so dirty, so broken, so common, so ugly and so coarse’!

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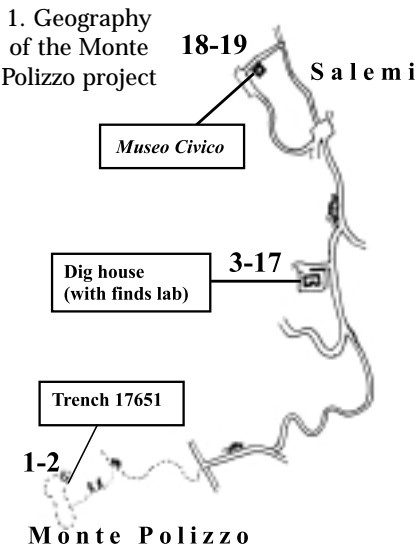
APPENDIX  
THE LIFE OF A POT SHERD

DISCOVERY 2000

4 July	11.01	Erica Grijalva first spots the sherd in Layer 8 of Trench 17651, outside the wall of the building. <b>(Location 1)</b>
	11.03	To celebrate 4 July the diggers in the area (who are all from Stanford) are singing the US National Anthem.
	11.09	The sherd is now 4 cm out of the ground. The cleaning of the neighbourhood progresses.
	11.18–11.24	I am being interviewed about my sherd biography by Ashish Avikunthak for his film project ‘ <i>Rummaging for the Past. Excavating Sicily, Digging Bombay.</i> ’
	11.43	The sherd is now completely revealed, removed from the ground, and placed in a labelled bowl nearby. <b>(Location 2)</b>

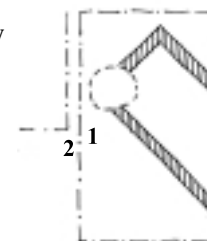
WASHING/DRYING

14.20	To wind up the day, the diggers start writing labels for plastic bags in which they place the finds.
14.23	Kristen Lansdale puts the sherd into the plastic bag . . .
14.25	. . . fixes the label she wrote on the bag, before . . .
14.26	. . . she puts the labelled bag back into the bowl.
14.31	The bag goes into Becca Horrell’s backpack.
14.38	Becca leaves the Acropolis area (with the backpack on her back).

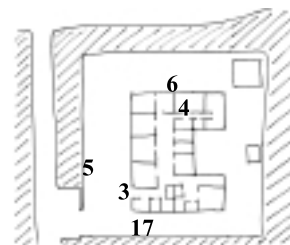


- 14.41–14.52 On the way down, Becca and the other diggers from the Acropolis area visit the excavations at House 1.
- 15.02 Becca reaches the car parking area and gets into a car.
- 15.10 Becca arrives at the dig house in Salemi.
- 15.11 Becca enters the dig house (**Location 3**) and places the bags which were in her backpack on a pile of bags outside the 'finds laboratory'. (**Location 4**)
- 15.36 Erica takes the bag (together with 'her' other bags from the day) from the finds lab to the big table outside the house. (**Location 5**)
- 15.43 Erica begins to wash the sherds in the bag.
- 15.53–15.56 The sherd is clean and placed on a cassette to dry.
- 16.45 Washing ends.
- 16.50 The cassette with the sherd is placed on the terrace outside the finds lab to dry further. (**Location 6** – see sketch 4)
- 22.00 (*circa*) The cassette is moved into the finds lab for the night. (**Location 7**)
- 5 July 08.14 The cassette is moved into the terrace again, to dry further. (**Location 8**)

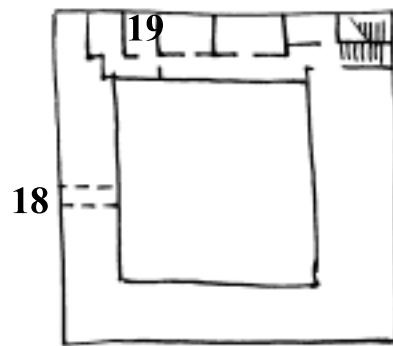
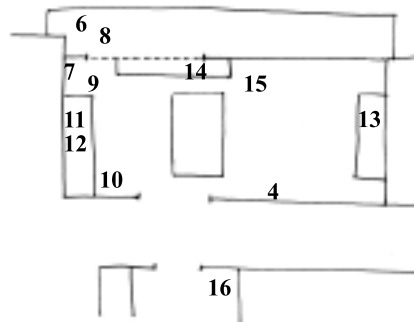
2. Trench  
17651 (now  
known as  
N106)



3. Salemi, dig house



## 4. The finds laboratory



## CLASSIFICATION

- 10.52 The sherds are dry and the cassette is moved back into the finds lab. **(Location 9)**
- 10.55 Emma Blake packs the sherds from the cassette back into the plastic bag and puts it in line for sorting (she calls the sherd spontaneously 'F24'). **(Location 10)**
- 13.35 Emma begins sorting the contents of the bag according to fabric types . . . **(Location 11)**
- 13.43 . . . which is now completed. The sherd is with others of the fabric type 'F24'.
- 13.46 Emma begins filling in the recording sheet. I take the photograph reproduced in Figure 5.
- 13.55 Emma weighs all the F24 sherds together, before they are returned to the bag.
- 13.58 The bag is marked as 'undiagnostic'. (I leave a note about my study of the sherd in the bag, asking anyone who does anything with the content of the bag, to contact me by email or snail mail.)
- 14.19 The bag is placed on a pile of bags marked as 'sorted: awaiting data entry'. **(Location 12)**
- 14.54 Data entry in the computer begins. **(Location 13)**
- 15.03 Data entry ends and the bag is placed in a cassette labelled 'Acropolis Trench 17651'. **(Location 14)**

5. Salemi, Museo Civico

## ARCHIVING

7 July	14.00 ( <i>circa</i> )	Laura Lee opens the bag in order to search for Roman pottery to show to Francesco, a visiting pottery expert, and then puts it in a different place in the cassette.
	15.54	The cassette gets moved around while Trinity is looking for a particular sherd to show to Francesco. <b>(Location 15)</b>
8 July	morning	The cassette is being moved around again.
12 July	13.03	The cassette is moved into 'Baldur's Office', ready for transport to the Museum. <b>(Location 16)</b>
13 July	09.58	Hannah Dahlberg carries the cassette outside the dig house and into a waiting car. <b>(Location 17 – see sketch 3)</b>
	10.02	The car leaves.
	10.07	The car arrives at the local Museum in Salemi. <b>(Location 18)</b>
	10.15	Chris Sevara carries the cassette from the car through the yard and up the stairs into the storage room of the local Museum where . . .
	10.16	. . . the cassette arrives and is put down together with a large number of other cassettes from Monte Polizzo. <b>(Location 19)</b>