Every Sherd is Sacred

Compulsive Hoarding in Archaeology
Archaeological compulsive hoarding

• BDA-Archäologiezentrum Kartause Mauerbach
  — includes central finds storage unit of BDA
    • construction (refurbishment) started 2002/3
  — available storage space filled completely by 2011
    • c. 1 Million objects (estimate, no actual record available)
  — Level of accessioning and analysis:
    • catalogued: all finds boxes, hardly any individual objects
    • analysed academically: hardly, probably less than 5%
  — 2012 revision of preservation of some restored finds:
    • „It quickly became apparent that already restored iron objects partly had been severely damaged.“ (Marius 2011, 32)
Mostly inaccessible ‘overflow’ finds storage in former exhibition rooms, Museum für Vor- und Frühgeschichte, Schloss Charlottenburg, Berlin (2013)
Compulsive hoarding disorder

• A pathological mental disorder
  (American Psychiatric Association 2013)
  – Inability or unwillingness to discard things
    • leading to high usage (cluttering) of space,
    • frequently cause of suffering or encumbrance
  – often combined with
    • health and safety risks
    • economic pressure or strain
    • disruption of social functionality

• typical self-justification for ‘hoarding’
  – hoarded objects contain important data
  – which will be useful and needed in future

→ is archaeology suffering from a mental disorder?
Compulsive hoarding disorder

- c. 2-5% of adult population affected
- Often first manifests in childhood
- **Symptoms increase with age**
  - more time to collect sizeable hoards
  - symptom-moderating relatives and friends are lost
- inheritable or **acquired by social learning**
  - strongly **correlated with family history** (of disorder)

An academic field can’t have a mental disorder, ...  
...but...
Childhood: Moriz Hoernes (1852-1917)

- Founder of 'Vienna School'
  - 1892 Habilitation: 'prehistory if mankind'
  - 1899 awarded personal Chair
  - 1911 promoted to established Chair

- Foundations of his 'method'
  - primacy of culture groups in explanation
    → classical 'culture historical' approach
    - strongly influenced by Vienna School of Ethnography (founded by W. Schmidt 1895)
  - logical positivism epistemological basis
    - primacy of data
      - observation and description as main tasks
    - inductive reasoning
      - as 'proof positive' for 'true' statements
    - explicit rejection of 'generalisations' as 'unscientific'

Portrait of Moriz Hoernes, currently displayed in the library of the Vienna department of prehistoric and historical archaeology ad start of the 'ancestral gallery' of the department
Family: the 'Vienna School'

• „...the highly hierarchised system of science (including archaeology) in Germany ... and other countries affects the knowledge produced ... High in the hierarchy are scholars who have knowledge ... Their knowledge is positivistic, they are convinced that science (archaeology) uncovers the truth about the past. ... Positivistic truth is singular and absolute, objective and irrefutable. ... Moreover, this group is also equipped with ... means of evaluation (repression) of those who try to infiltrate it.

Thus, what is the prescription for a successful academic career? The answer seems very easy indeed: ... Accept the theoretical foundations, the tools and scientific procedures as used by your masters because they ... will be positively evaluated... In this way the masters clone themselves (at least as far as archaeological procedures are concerned).“

(Rączkowski 2011, 206)
Core tenets of positivism

- Precondition for scientific discovery is **Verification** (of knowledge / statements)
  - by means of 'proof positive'
- Proofs are based on the 'primacy of data':
  - they are based on the **observation of 'evidence'**
  - and its explication in **descriptive sentences** (of its essential features)
  - a **DS correct in form and content is considered 'true'**
Core tenets of positivism

• e.g. $DS_1$: ’This swan is white’
Core tenets of positivism

• General 'truth' is discovered by induction:
  – DS_1 – DS_n: 'This swan is white'
  → synthetic general statement: 'All swans are white'

• Problem: only works with 'full induction':
  – based on all (true) observations
    • leading to the 'usual' archaeological 'requirement' of
      'complete assessment of sources'

• or else, there is the risk of:
  – Induction of DS_1 – DS_n: 'This swan is white'
  → verified GS: 'All swans are white'
Core tenets of positivism

- e.g. \( DS_{n+1}: \text{This swan is black} \)
Why hoard archaeology?

• a **positivist archaeology** requires
  
  – the **completeness of 'true' observations**,  
  
  • to ensure repeatability of 'true' observations and  
  
  • allow to conduct 'new' observations of existing data  
  
  – since this is a necessary requirement for 'true' inductive conclusions  
  
  • and thus for 'true' archaeological discoveries  

• It necessarily follows from these premises
  
  1. that **all archaeological data** (= 'our things') must be **preserved** (and thus kept) **forever**  
  
  – and equally necessarily from this  
  
  2. industrial-scale **hoarding of archaeology**
Compulsive hoarding in archaeology

• is not a mental, but a social disorder
• an acquired behaviour of (mis-)assigning value
• following directly and necessarily from the positivist premises of early archaeology,
• transmitted 'thoughtlessly‘ (Rączkowski 2011, 205-10) by repetitive, unreflected practice

Out of the mouth of babes (at least for the 'Vienna School'):

„Hoernes was the leading and trend-setting prehistorian of his times in Austria. His method was continued and refined by Oswald Menghin, Richard Pittoni and Herwig Friesinger “ (Anonymus 2006)
Possible solutions?

→ serious need for discussion of selection and de-accessioning strategies
  – criteria for accessioning and de-accessioning
  – need for national (or transnational?) collection policies?
  – how to dispose of surplus?
    • trash?
    • re-bury?
    • sell?

• Or else, (non-strategic) selection will be imposed on us
  – by funding
  – or nature
Thank you for your attention

- References