The Small Things of Life and Death: An Exploration of Value and Meaning in the Material Culture of Nazi Camps

Gilly Carr^{1,2}

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Abstract The theft of mundane items of material culture from the ground of Auschwitz-Birkenau in 2015 by English schoolboys raises a number of questions about the value of similar items at this and other Nazi camps. This paper explores questions of value, interpretation, and the categorization of objects from such camps, before examining the case study of Lager Wick, a forced labor camp in Jersey. Here, the value of such objects was perceived locally according to criteria very different to those which are commonly applied by archaeologists and people who work in the sphere of heritage and Holocaust education.

Keywords Sacred objects · Value · Nazi camps · Lager Wick · Jersey

Introduction

In June 2015 two teenage English schoolboys from Cambridge, on a school trip to Auschwitz, picked up a few fragmentary objects from the ground to take home as souvenirs: a couple of buttons, some pieces of glass, and a rusty hair clipper. The boys were promptly arrested by guards, were later fined, and faced a trial (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-cambridgeshire-35194290>). The maximum sentence for appropriating objects of special cultural significance from Auschwitz is ten years in prison. This theft follows that of the *Arbeit Macht Frei* sign from the same camp in 2009 and also of that from Dachau in 2014, indicating the particular allure of items from these notorious places.

✉ Gilly Carr
gcc20@cam.ac.uk

¹ Institute of Continuing Education, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK

² St Catharine's College, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RL, UK

Triggered by these examples of theft, and the implied equality of value of buttons, fragments of glass, and an item of grooming, something to which I will return several times in the course of this paper, I explore here issues of value and meaning in relation to small finds from Nazi camps. I will be asking whether all items discovered by archaeologists at these sites are of equal intrinsic value, or whether a notional hierarchy exists among objects and between camps. If all items are of equal value, then why might the penalty for theft from camps differ between countries? Theft from archaeological sites removes or destroys context, knowledge, and cultural heritage. Is theft of objects from a major death camp intrinsically worse than theft from a small labor camp and, if so, why? Put another way, do identical buttons from a prisoner's uniform in two different camps have different values (as heritage, a data source, a souvenir, or in monetary terms, etc.), and who decides these things? Does meaning and value of such items exist in the eye of the beholder, or is it decided by archaeologists and museum professionals who might interpret such items and decide whether they are meaningful or important enough to put on display?

Such questions, and others like them, are highly pertinent to those of us who excavate Nazi camps, and are discussed equally on site and at conferences. They dictate which items are bagged up for further analysis, or alternatively reburied or thrown away and deemed not worth keeping. This often depends on the policy of the country concerned, the landowners, the heritage organization or museum storing the finds, the archaeologists involved, or even the amount of storage space available for the excavation finds.

The purpose of this paper is not necessarily to provide definitive answers to these difficult questions, but to bring such questions – often more practical than philosophical – together in one place to facilitate examination and discussion and to provide an overview of the issues that concern archaeologists who excavate Nazi camps. The content of this paper was prompted and informed by three years of excavation at the forced labor camp of Lager Wick in Jersey, and the questions which faced the excavation team during periods of fieldwork.

In this paper I discuss, primarily, issues of value and categorization, and I propose a categorization for objects from camps. I also yoke the examination of ecofacts to that of artifacts, exploring the value such objects can have for visitors to camps. In the last section of the paper, I present a personal, confessional account of the problems I faced in the field when considering the small finds from Lager Wick. As possibly the least well-known camp discussed in this volume, I explore some of the ethical dilemmas I faced at this site, likely to be common to most (if not all) camp sites, and consider the influence of the attitudes and wishes of site owners, something not always considered in academic literature on this subject.

Exploring Value

What value do objects from Nazi camps possess and how do they acquire it? Who assigns value to them, and do these spheres of value change through time according to owner or audience? The biographical approach is an insightful one to apply to this type of material culture. Kopytoff (1986), who proposed the concept of the biography of objects, argued that they are capable of accumulating histories so that their present

significance (and, thus, value) derives from the persons and events to which they are connected. We, as archaeologists, value artifacts from Nazi camps because of their link to the victims and survivors of the Holocaust, and to the Holocaust itself.

The concept of the object biography is not without its problems; Hahn and Weiss (2013:7-8) observe that pinpointing the moment of “birth” and “death” are difficult, especially for archaeologists who deal with objects which enter an extended stasis (or period of burial). They suggest instead the concept of the (non-linear) object “itinerary,” which allows for periods of inertness, moments of transformation, and a mobile existence which, importantly for my discussion here, takes into account changes in value.

Let us consider a 70-year period in time of the biography or itinerary of a tin food bowl in a concentration camp as our example (Fig. 1), observing how its sphere of value differs at each stage for different audiences and owners. We know that such an object could make the difference between life and death to the camp inmate, and was worth trading a ration of bread to acquire (noting, as did Appadurai [1986:3], that economic exchange in itself creates value).

At the end of the war, and perhaps after the death or release of the camp inmate, the food bowl may have lain abandoned as detritus, unvalued, in the camp grounds and gradually have become incorporated in the archaeological record. If the inmate

Fig. 1 Change in value over time of a Nazi camp food bowl during part of its itinerary or biography

survived, then they may have deliberately left behind the food bowl. Nicholas Saunders (2009:39) has noted that the significance of the material culture of modern conflict comes from their “visceral associations and metonymical nature – their power to recall via memory and imagination the circumstances of their production” – and, indeed, the circumstances of their use. A liberated inmate may have not wanted to be reminded of this and the abandonment might have been deliberate.

Claudia Koonz (1994) has written about how the memory of the concentration camps has moved between “memory and oblivion” over time in Germany, between periods when people wanted to forget and to remember, which has impacted memorialization and who was memorialized at different times in different parts of Germany. Had our food bowl been recovered from the ground during the first two decades after the war, at a time when people ignored camps as places of memory, then in all likelihood the bowl might have been thrown back on the ground, or perhaps kept for an alternative utilitarian function, but probably not valued as an artifact of the Holocaust.

If excavated today, 70 years after the Holocaust and at a time when its memory is revered, the same battered tin bowl, while worth little for its scrap metal value in financial terms, is today recognized as holding historical value for archaeological research. For example, the presence and interpretation of artifacts of internment gain their value from the role they play “in the understanding, negotiation, compliance and defiance of expected and proscribed roles within the site” (McAtackney 2014:101). Theune (2010:7-8) puts this similarly, noting that camp objects can “stand for the powerlessness and humiliation of the people imprisoned but sometimes also for their self-assertion.” Objects from camps can also “provide intimate portraits of individual lives and of the construction of personal and social identity” (Cochran and Beaudry 2006:192). Taking a more general view, Sturdy Colls (2012) argues that surviving archaeological remains as a whole have the potential to reveal new insights about the Holocaust.

If the food bowl was instead sold on Ebay by an unscrupulous metal detectorist who looted the camp at night, it would acquire a financial value equivalent to whatever those logged on that week were prepared to pay for it (another example of how value can change over time). Looting denudes a site of its overall cultural heritage value; as part of an assemblage, the food bowl coupled with the combined artifacts from the camp will be valued as part of the cultural significance of heritage site itself. This is not entirely unrelated to the commercial value of an object as the illegal trade in antiquities (and the damage it does to heritage) demonstrates. Such a trade includes Nazi militaria, as I have recently argued (Carr 2016), although this trade is not (yet) illegal. The theft of the signs at Dachau and Auschwitz show that objects from camps have a clear market value; somebody was prepared to pay to have these signs stolen to order.

The removal of cultural heritage from a site affects not just that site, but its contribution to the knowledge of all humankind. When the sign was removed from Auschwitz it elicited cries of anguish and disgust from beyond Poland. While a representative of the museum of Auschwitz-Birkenau said that the removal of the sign was a “desecration,” Yad Vashem in Israel described it as an “act of war” (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/8420053.stm>). The UK’s Holocaust Educational Trust’s chief executive reacted to the later theft by the British school boys as “absolutely shocking” and showing a “gross disregard to the memory of the Holocaust” (Espinoza 2015). The boys themselves were apparently not aware that the items had “special cultural significance” (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-cambridgeshire-35194290>).

Clearly, objects from concentration camps have the power to elicit strong emotional reactions from those who have a vested interest in showing understanding of their value. Whether tourists – even those on study trips – feel the same emotions seems debateable.

To return to the unscrupulous looter, interested only in financial value, a brief scan of Ebay at the time of writing (August 2016) reveals a pair of hair clippers (not dissimilar to those picked up by the English schoolboys), and advertized as similar to those used in Auschwitz, for sale for £45. Also on Ebay is a piece of a French flag for \$285, taken by an American soldier from a prisoner in Dachau. It would be naïve to imagine that other items of camp material culture are not removed illegally from camps for sale online, perhaps on a lower-profile site than Ebay, or to private customers. We might also observe that items from the grounds of POW camps are often freely and openly for sale on Ebay, such as a gaming counter and dice from *Stalag Luft III* currently going for £25. We might note that *Stalag Luft III*, also in Poland, is a preeminent camp in the popular imagination because of the film *The Great Escape*. Yet is there the same taboo on removing items from POW camps, and is their value comparable?

This focus on objects is not to suggest that the physical place or site or objects are the “full story” of what the heritage of a Nazi camp comprises; Laurajane Smith (2006:44) argues that heritage is also “what goes on” at a site, the “cultural process that engages with acts of remembering that work to create ways to understand and engage with the present.” Excavation is just one of the cultural processes that comprise heritage – and, I argue, has the potential to add to the meaning and thus cultural significance and value of a site.

Rescuing the food bowl from the grip of Ebay, let us imagine that the original owner of the bowl was identified by the archaeologist, enabling it to be claimed by the family. The bowl may be imbued (for them) with the personhood of the deceased, and might become a family heirloom, valued for its ability to represent or mediate the life history of the person in a similar way that Janet Hoskins (1998) found that objects could do for the Kodi of Indonesia.

Annette Weiner (1985:210) also explains this through her work on inalienable objects, which are perceived to “belong in an inherent way to their original owners ... [they] are imbued with affective qualities that are expressions of the value an object has when it is kept by its owners and inherited within the same family or descent group ... The primary value of inalienability, however, is expressed through the power these objects have to define who one is in a historical sense. The object acts as a vehicle for bringing past time into the present.” Archaeologically speaking, Tilley et al. (2006:2) also remind us that “persons cannot be understood apart from things ... persons make things and things make persons.” Webmoor and Whitmore (2008:59) have gone a step further, stating that “we are mingled with the things of the world in such a way that we are *ontologically indivisible*” (emphasis in original). This perspective enables us to see the food bowl with the same eyes as the surviving family of a deceased victim of the Holocaust.

If the owner of the food bowl was not identified and the bowl passed instead to a museum by the archaeologist, it would be valued for its pedagogical role in telling the story of the Holocaust to visitors. Cornelius Holtorf (2010) has argued that heritage today is not so much (or not only) about education, but about storytelling in the present, and a food bowl is a good way to do that.

But is all material culture from Nazi camps is of equal value? Does it matter what is displayed in a museum? In the introduction to this paper I asked whether there might be a notional hierarchy, in theory or in practice, in the value of objects

from Auschwitz or other major extermination camps compared to smaller and lesser known camps. We might argue that the large, higher-profile camps are listed (and protected) as heritage sites, unlike some of the smaller camps, indicating that they are “valued” more highly by society. The central reason for this is, undoubtedly, the systematic and industrial scale of killing of people at extermination camps, leaving only objects to speak for the lives of former inmates and to provide evidence of Nazi crimes. And yet people suffered and died in labor, prison, and internment camps as well, and objects from these camps are able to speak just as eloquently about life before or during the camp experience.

If we wish to argue that a food bowl from one camp should, in theory at least, hold the same value no matter where it is found, we find that this is not the case in practice. Every country or province has different rules about what should be done with excavated material. While every single uncovered item in an excavated Nazi camp in one country must be kept, there are other places where unidentifiable, “unimportant,” or overly fragmented items can be reburied – or even thrown away. Where it is against the law in one place to remove objects from the ground, at the site of another camp, people may not be breaking the law when plundering using metal detectors. This variation in regional, national, and international law undermines the suggestion that similar items found at different Nazi camps should have the same potential value. The major concentration camps in Poland, Germany, and Austria have become such sacred sites in European consciousness that the material culture from these places has also taken on a “sacred” status in a way that is simply not the case at lesser-known sites – apart from for those for whom the site holds a personal link.

Take, for example, the objects recovered from concentration camps on display at the Imperial War Museum (IWM) in London (Fig. 2) and the US Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) in Washington DC. Both display items such as spoons, forks, buttons, and mugs recovered or excavated from Chelmno death camp in occupied Poland. These items are covered in rust; they are fragmentary; they are dirty, broken,

Fig. 2 “Sacred” objects from Chelmno death camp, IWM. Copyright Gilly Carr

bent, and decayed. There is no doubting their authenticity and they are displayed in seemingly the same condition as when they came out of the ground, save for a bit of soil removal. They are no different to the fragments removed from Auschwitz by the schoolboys. There are those such as Cornelius Holtorf (2008:126) who argue that it can be shown empirically that visitors to museums experience aura and authenticity to the same extent, whether or not they are looking at copies of objects – as long as they do not believe them to be copies. Holtorf argues that aura and authenticity are not essences of the objects, but human constructs in particular contexts. Sharon Macdonald (1997:170), too, in her study of a heritage center in the Scottish Isle of Skye, found that the provenance did not particularly matter when it came to authenticity; “what matters is that they convey the right kind of picture ... authenticity lies not in the aura of the artefacts, but in the ‘story’ which gets told.” This simply cannot hold true for us; the display of copies of excavated Nazi camp objects would be neither acceptable nor desirable, not least because of the problems of Holocaust denial. The use of original, “sacred” items is everything. As Marcel Wouters (2009:283, 287) –who curated the exhibition at the Dutch national monument of SS concentration camp Vucht– argues, “old things emanate a historical sensation.” They “carry the force and mysticism of authenticity,” and this is important for messages we wish to make about Holocaust and political education.

It is probable that both the IWM and USHMM sought out objects from a high-profile camp that visitors were likely to have heard of; this would have lent the display more potency, more meaning, more resonance with visitors, and more overall caché. Such a display would have been perceived to have “worked” better than one that showed objects from an unknown camp. In this sense, objects from the high-profile camps are deemed more important in turn, and are imbued with more value than those from unknown camps. That value perception is only legitimated, reinforced, and heightened by the display of these objects by experts at high-profile museums in a form of “Authorised Heritage Discourse” (Smith 2006:29–31) for artifacts from high-profile Nazi camps.

Why might the role of a high profile camp influence the perceived value of an item? Sometimes such places hold a higher place in our psyche because of the role of various nations in the liberation of those camps. Bergen-Belsen, for example, might be more important or better known to the British, whereas Buchenwald might be more meaningful to Americans. And yet Auschwitz-Birkenau arguably holds a higher place than both of these because of its role in International Holocaust Memorial Day (IHMD). January 27, the date of the liberation of Auschwitz, was chosen as the date for IHMD by the United Nations in 2005 (<https://www.un.org/en/holocaustremembrance/docs/res607.shtml>); this date is also followed by most European countries, but with exceptions / additions for a few such as Austria, who holds their ceremony on May 5, the day that Mauthausen (the only concentration camp in Austria) was liberated, and France, whose HMD is on July 16, the date of the Vel’ d’Hiv round-up.

Let us try the same argument applied to prehistoric artifacts. Are objects from “famous” sites worth more than those from lesser known sites? Should a piece of Iron Age pottery from Danebury, a pre-eminent hill fort site in Wiltshire, southern England (and in every undergraduate archaeology syllabus), be worth more than a very similar fragment from a small settlement elsewhere in the country? The truth is that objects from sites recognized as nationally important are more likely to be shown in national

museums, sought after for use in exhibitions, and perhaps even subconsciously or consciously “valued” (in heritage terms) more highly and illustrated in books on the period. But these sites have often achieved their status because of the early date at which they were excavated, or because of the fame of the excavator, or because they were excavated before the lower-profile places, or even because they were excavated more extensively than others since. While not all of these caveats are necessarily applicable to Nazi camps, we must recognize the sometimes contingent, accidental, or subjective reasons that can elevate the perception of some sites - and their material culture – to a higher level than others in the minds of archaeologists (especially in the early years of a new sub-field within the discipline), as these are among the factors that influence people who work in this area.

Thus far we have considered multiple spheres of value over time. A hierarchy of value might beckon, but value is subjective and in the eye of the beholder. All of these systems of value, and others besides, make up the mosaic of meaning held within a single object.

Exploring Categorization

Having discussed some of the different ways in which objects excavated from Nazi camps might be valued by different groups of people, I will now shift focus from excavated material culture as a single generic category to excavated objects as a range of different categories. As Adrian Myers (2011:77-78) reminds us, concentration camps (such as Auschwitz-Birkenau) were places of both “deprivation and abundance,” and where “a complex interaction between people and material culture persisted”; it is this interaction that categorization explores.

As archaeologists, part of our role is the analysis of such items, which means moving beyond leaving items respectfully on the ground where we find them. Categorization is the first step of analysis, as this helps us to identify the function of the area of the camp that we are excavating. There will always be objects which defy categorization because of their fragmentary or unidentifiable nature; but the objective of categorizing that which can be recognized is also an exercise in attributing meaning to objects.

Categorization itself can be a fraught process, and the primary reason for this is due to dating. Not only are some items unstratified, but others separated by many years can sometimes be found within the same stratigraphic layer. Sometimes the stratigraphy does not exist at all. Do the objects that one excavates (or finds lying on the ground) definitively belong to the camp, or do they date to the pre- or post-war era? As some Nazi camps were turned into camps for collaborators and quislings after the war (such as at Frøslev in Denmark, which became Faarhus camp after the war, or *SS Strafgefangenenlager* Falstad in Norway, which became Innherad forced labor camp), to which period do excavated items date? Some camps (such as Falstad) were used for schools or other purposes before the war (e.g., Jasinski 2015:34–35); others had long periods of multiple uses over time after the war. The precise dating of an object can be extremely difficult for items such as, for example, metal bowls, spoons, jewellery, combs, or a myriad of other things. It hardly needs pointing out that a food bowl from the war period of a Nazi camp holds a very different meaning (and, indeed, value) from a food bowl of a collaborator, a school boy, or simply from an inhabitant of a nearby

village who has decided to treat the camp ruins as a rubbish dump, or has left a bowl behind after a picnic.

Without definitive knowledge about dating objects separated by only a few years (or even months), categorizing the function or use of a camp room or building can be difficult. If refuse from a nearby settlement was dumped in the overgrown ruins of a camp after the end of the war, then such items can seriously mislead future archaeologists, as can be seen in the discussions of Lager Wick forced labor camp below.

Nonetheless, if we take objects at face value, and assuming their wartime provenance to be secure, we can begin to categorize excavated material in a number of different ways, such as by function or by owner (after all, does the uniform button of a prisoner and a guard have the same resonance, meaning, and value?). A proposed categorization of material culture from Nazi camps is provided below:

Category 1: Objects of identity (1a: prisoners; 1b: guards).

Objects in this category relate to the individual person; they can often be personalized, distinctive, or even unique, such that they could be recognized by the owner. Examples include jewellery and camp-made trench art as recognized by Nicholas Saunders (2003:11). As they are distinct to the owner, they can be perceived by archaeologists - and surviving family members - as being a part of or an extension of the owner. This is what anthropologist Alfred Gell (1998:104) refers to as “distributed personhood,” whereby the objects or “exuviae” of the person “do not stand metonymically” for the person; “they are physically detached fragments” of the person’s “‘distributed personhood’ – that is, personhood distributed ... beyond the body boundary.” Given that items belonging to guards also exist in this category, Category 1 is divided into 1a and 1b.

Category 2: Objects of the body (2a: prisoners; 2b: guards).

Such objects in this category are non-personalized possessions which are intimately associated with the body. Among these we might include buttons from clothing, items of clothing and footwear, toiletries, shaving equipment, combs, and items of grooming. Like items from Category 1, Category 2 is divided into items belonging to prisoners and guards.

Category 3: Objects of daily life and survival (3a: prisoners; 3b: guards).

Within this category we can include medicinal objects (including prostheses), and eating and drinking equipment (noting that meal dishes with initials on them also belong to Category 1). Category 3 items are not personalized, but made the difference between life and death (for prisoners) if they were not administered or if they were lost or not provided. We are reminded here of the words of De Cunzio (2006:167), that “material culture is used to accomplish or thwart institutional goals” (i.e., the goal of the death of prisoners). In this category we might also include scavenged items that were of value in trading, especially if that trading resulted in an extra slice of bread. Primo Levi (1987 [1958]:91), for example, talked of the manufacture of crude spoons by prisoners working in Buna, which could be exchanged for a bread ration. Household

objects, such as the “candle sticks, flower pots ... cooking ware and storage vessels” found at Sachsenhausen (Theune 2010:7) can also be ascribed to this category. Category 3 can be sub-divided to take into account items belonging to camp guards, for whom these objects were more about daily life than survival.

Category 4: Objects of repression, violence, and power (overseers and guards only).

This category includes predominantly weapons, bullets, and other objects of violence, repression, and brutality. However, it also takes into account the more subtle tools of repression and power enacted through camp administration. Thus, within this category we include (no doubt rare and fragmentary) office equipment such as typewriters, telephones, and even staples and paperclips; items which might have been used in record keeping to register prisoners and their fate.

Category 5: Objects of world of the camp.

Objects in this category include parts of the camp infrastructure such as barbed wire, glass from barrack windows, tiles, padlocks, and window frames. They also include work tools used by prisoners; Primo Levi (1987 [1958]:89-92) discussed this trade – “the network of thefts and counter-thefts” – of objects which could be smuggled into the camp by Auschwitz prisoners who worked in the rubber factory of Buna, and which could be exchanged for bread or soup.

Category 6: Unidentified or fragmentary objects.

This final category of objects speaks for itself and usually comprises bits of rusty iron and small pieces of glass or ceramic, nothing large or diagnostic enough for identification or categorization. It is often items in this category which are at risk of reburial or disposal after the excavation if it takes place under laws or jurisdictions which allow or expect this.

This attempt at categorization aspires to be comprehensive and aims to take a more “collective” and interpretational approach to data rather than simply categorizing by individual object. It should be perceived as a second stage following the primary database which lists individual objects. The system of categorization starts with the individual, their identity, and their body, and works outwards to include the world of the camp around them. The prisoner – or rather their surviving objects or “distributed personhood” - is placed at the center of such a categorization. Because of the discomfort in placing objects belonging to persecutors and persecuted in the same category, Categories 1, 2 and 3 have been sub-divided, although it is not always possible to know who owned what.

There are, however, difficulties in the implementation of this categorization because there are overlapping categories. A toothbrush, for example, fits into three categories. It can be an “object of identity” (if personalized); it is an obvious “object of the body,” used for grooming / hygiene. But it could also be an object of survival in a place lacking any dental care. Where might we place something such as dentures? Are they part of the “distributed personhood” (Category 1), an object (quite literally) of the body (Category 2), or an object of life and death (Category 3) - for is it not more difficult to

consume stale bread without teeth? Some objects are composite items, for example the Auschwitz mug that was recently found to contain a false bottom which hid jewellery (Sherwood 2016). While the jewellery fits into Category 1, the mug is a Category 3 item; however, as it was personalized and made unique by the addition of a false bottom, it could also be fitted into Category 1. We should, perhaps, more properly see Categories 1 to 5 as nested spheres of activity, reflecting ambiguity, interconnectedness, and the multiple ways of seeing every item excavated from Nazi camps. This categorization also has a spatial dimension, where different areas of the camp are more likely to predominate in certain categories, thus hinting at interpretation or function of that camp building.

Exploring Ecofacts as Material Culture

While archaeologists may focus upon discovery and recovery of artifacts of all kinds from their excavation of Nazi camps, those whose family members passed through or died in such places can sometimes have a different focus. The author recently travelled to Zöschen forced labor camp in Germany during the production of a BBC documentary with a woman (Patricia F) whose father (Joseph T) was in the camp in April 1945. I observed what was probably not uncommon behavior. Both Patricia, and her son traveling with her (Mark F), collected some soil and small objects from the ground. Such items comprised tiny bits of broken masonry (specifically, bits which looked “old” or interesting, but which may not necessarily have come from the wartime period of the camp, and which may have fitted into Category 6 above at best), but also snail shells, seed cases, and other “worthless” fragments. They had also done this at earlier stops on the journey, such as at Nazi prisons and cemeteries where political prisoners from their homeland were buried, and at a train station at Kašnice in the Czech Republic (Fig. 3), where the body of Joseph T was removed from the cattle truck in which he was traveling, prior to his relocation to a nearby mass grave. His body was later exhumed and placed in a nearby communal plot in a cemetery in the village of Pšov.

Fig. 3 “Bonding objects” from Kašnice, Czech Republic. Copyright Gilly Carr

These collected “samples” were not objects that any archaeologist or museum curator would value, interpret, curate, or collect for display. Nonetheless, had they been removed from Auschwitz, both mother and son might have been arrested. And yet quite what an archaeologist might have *done* with a snail shell and some crumbling masonry from the still-extant camp (except avoid putting them in the finds tray in the first place) is hard to say.

Patricia F had grown up never knowing her father, because he had been deported when she was a few months old. Her mother, Eileen T, had died without knowing where her husband was buried and without having a grave to visit. Our trip was the first time that any relative had known about or visited the communal plot where the body of Joseph T lay, and it had been an extremely emotional journey. On the way back to the UK I asked Patricia and Mark about the samples they had collected. Why had they collected them and what did they plan to do with them? After an initial pause, both gave similar answers. Mark said that he would give the small objects to his teenage children, who had not come on the journey. He planned to put the soil around a special plant, in memory of the grandfather he had never known. Patricia, on the other hand, was going to scatter the soil and fragments in the places where she had scattered some of her mother’s ashes; places where her parents had been happy together before her father’s deportation. She had also brought some of her mother’s ashes on the trip, to scatter on her father’s resting place.

These plans reveal the ecofacts and soil samples to be more than simple “souvenirs.” They are, like objects in Category 1, for Patricia and Mark but perhaps not for archaeologists, further examples of Gell’s “distributed personhood.” For them, the soil of the ground that Joseph may have walked on, looked at, or been co-present with, acted for them as a part of him. It did not necessarily matter whether he had seen or touched these particular samples. This was not discussed; I felt that questioning it would question the authenticity of (and thus devalue) their samples. In the absence of a grave or a body in their native island of Jersey, their sample represented something by which to remember Joseph. More than a souvenir, their objects acted as a *pars pro toto* - to all intents and purpose, a small representative or part of the whole of Joseph himself. This was further emphasized by Patricia’s plans to treat the collected soil as one might treat cremated bone.

The planned distribution of the bits of masonry or snail shell also reveals that these objects function as “memory objects” - something from and of their great-grandfather for Mark’s children to remember or, more accurately, “know” him by. While these children could never “remember” a person they had never met, these ecofacts and bits of masonry were collected to aid knowledge about Joseph, bound up and imbued, as they were, with the emotions and experiences of the pilgrimage across Germany and the Czech Republic in search of Joseph’s body. Those bits of ecofacts and camp masonry held new memories for Mark and Patricia. As Patricia said to me, travelling in her father’s footsteps had helped her to feel as if she “knew” her father for the first time in her life. It had, she said, created a bond. By bringing back samples from the trip, Patricia and Mark were bringing back evidence of that bond, and the very elements that contributed to that bond. They were, in a real sense, endeavoring to extend that bond to the next generation. Thus, what may be termed a “memory object” for one generation can be what we might term a “bonding object” for the next: an object that acts to create bonds between the living and the dead; specifically, between generations who will never meet. In making it a criminal offence to remove objects from the ground in

Auschwitz, the authorities are thus criminalizing the collection of (among other things) “bonding objects.” In this sense we can see that they are barring one avenue by which the living relatives of those who perished in the camp are seeking to make bonds with their dead ancestors.

Who is to say that the schoolboys mentioned at the start of this paper were not also moved to collect their samples with the aim of them functioning as bonding objects, making a connection between themselves and dead “strangers” who they felt they were coming to know through the educational trip with their school to Auschwitz? Or were they, like souvenir hunters in First World War battlefields, collecting tangible memories and evidence of their experience with which to impress friends or tell anecdotes to those who had not been to Auschwitz, and thus to garner respect and kudos?

Many Holocaust and Second World War museums and memorials across the world include, as part of their display, soil samples from concentration camps (Fig. 4). By bringing these to the cities and towns where surviving families live or where members of the public can learn about the dead of the Holocaust, this “sacred soil” is equivalent to the “grave of the unknown soldier” of the First World War. The soil, which may (and sometimes deliberately does) contain ashes of the dead, represents all victims from those camps. The receptacle of Nazi camp soil has become a *sine qua non* for Holocaust museums and – like the schoolboy collectors – garners respect, awe, and kudos for the possession of such.

Having considered thus far some general archaeological problems, theoretical questions, possible categorizations, and potential interpretations of excavated material culture from Nazi camps, it is time to turn to a case study in which to ground some of these ideas. The remainder of this article will focus on perhaps the lowest-profile of the Nazi camps considered in this volume: Lager Wick, a forced labor camp in the Channel Island of Jersey, where the author directed excavations for three seasons, from 2014 to 2016 inclusive (Carr [forthcoming](#)).

Fig. 4 Soil from concentration camps, Hall of Remembrance, USHMM. Copyright Jonathan Bartlett

Exploring Lager Wick

Lager Wick was a forced labour camp in use between 1942 and 1944, one of fourteen *Organisation Todt* forced and slave labor camps in the island. Like the inhabitants of other camps in the German-occupied Channel Islands, the foreign work force was brought to the islands to build the Atlantic Wall. The men of Lager Wick comprised Spanish Republicans, Frenchmen, and French North Africans (Algerians or Moroccans), according to eyewitnesses. One of the frustrating things about this camp is that no original archival information, such as a plan of the layout, has ever been uncovered. While there exists interviews with former forced and slave laborers from other camps in the island, there are no testimonies from former inmates of this camp. All that survives are aerial photographs, eyewitness testimonies from members of the public who used to live near the camp, and, now, the archaeological record. The chief eyewitness was Michael Ginns, a teenager who lived in the parish, and who was deported to a civilian internment camp in the autumn of 1942. He became, later in life, a local historian who wrote about the German occupation and the Atlantic Wall.

Our knowledge about Lager Wick is thus quite limited compared to other Nazi camps. Potential knowledge about the archaeological record has also been constrained by the landowners. The land is actually owned by the Crown, but it is managed by tenants. As the land is now a nature reserve for breeding birds – a wilderness that has not been built upon since the war, but has, in recent years, been actively managed – the tenants have been reluctant to allow any archaeological work for fear that it would disturb the birds and the ecology of the site. Excavation of a small part of the camp has thus been permitted only within a thin corridor alongside the main road running past the camp. The area of the camp is so overgrown with trees, bushes, and tangled undergrowth that geophysical survey and excavation further into the body of the camp would simply not have been feasible.

Lager Wick opened in February 1942 and housed laborers who worked in a nearby granite quarry. A stone-crushing plant still exists near the camp, although it has now been converted into flats. Sand was gathered from nearby Grouville Bay and was used in most concrete fortifications erected during the occupation (Ginns 2006:39–40).

Aerial photos (APs) show us that the layout of the camp evolved during the course of the German occupation. By April 1943 the camp, which was around 200 x 200 m in size, comprised seven barracks (with the addition of a small hut – a possible guard house near the entrance), arranged on four sides around what was probably a parade ground but disguised as an ornamental garden with a central flower bed. This was, no doubt, intended to prevent identification from the air. A further four barracks extended the camp along the road in an L-shape. Over time, various buildings of the camp were removed, enlarged, or added, and by October 1943 the camp was enclosed by barbed wire. By April 1944, three of the barrack huts of the L-shaped extension had burned down, an event recorded by a local diarist (Sinell, entry for April 13, 1944:179), and the number of barracks around the parade ground had decreased to five. Michael Ginns tells us that Lager Wick was abandoned by D-Day, six weeks later, after which the local inhabitants (and probably the occupiers) dismantled it for firewood during the last harsh winter of the war. By October 1944, the APs show that all wooden buildings had been removed, leaving only bare earth for the most part, a few concrete footings and hut stilts, and what appears to be significant holes left around the perimeter of the camp (the

L-shaped extension included) after the removal of barbed - wire posts. The final photo dating from February 1945 is not greatly changed, although it shows a gentle fading of the footprint of the former camp.

After the war, and on his return from the internment camp, Michael Ginns was able to observe that the camp grounds and neighboring common land were reused for grazing cows in 1945 and 1946. The land also reverted to nature quickly. APs have identified an area just outside the camp which had been created by peat cuttings before the war and was used during the war as the camp rubbish dump. After the liberation of the island, local people used the area as their parish rubbish dump. While the camp was not the focus for this, there was great potential for post-war contamination in our area of excavation.

In 1968, the land was cleared of rubbish and foliage and by 1973 the site was recognized as being of “particular natural history interest.” The land reverted once again to a wilderness before becoming managed from 1994 (Anthony 2001:31–33), and a Site of Special Interest (SSI) from 2009 as a marshland and important wetland site for breeding birds. Despite this, some land disturbance was caused by the addition of drain pipes in 2010/11 and so it was unknown before excavation to what extent the archaeological remains of the camp had been disturbed.

There are three post-war photographs in existence of the camp. The first, taken in 1970, shows a group of Spanish former forced laborers, who stayed in Jersey after the war, posing by the camp. They were on a pilgrimage to mark the 25th anniversary of their liberation. This photograph shows that the site of the camp looked much the same then as now; in other words, completely overgrown. Two other photographs, taken in the early 1990s, show the presence of the concrete entrance posts of the camp (which were revealed during the first season of excavation, when the ivy which covered them was removed) and another ruined concrete structure comprising three walls, which was identified by Ginns (2006:77) as the “remains of the latrine block.”

The aims of the excavation were three-fold: first, I wanted to see what survived archaeologically, after 70 years, of a camp comprising wooden barrack huts, which was in existence for only two years. Secondly, I wanted to learn what I could about the everyday life of prisoners in the camp through their material culture. Thirdly, I wanted to see what the architecture of confinement coupled with the small finds and their context could tell us about the relationship between prisoners and overseers and the perception of the latter towards the former. As the purpose of each barrack hut of the camp could only be guessed at from a blurred AP, coupled with local rumor that the cookhouse was one of the barracks which burned down in 1944, we could not know in advance whether the buildings available to us for excavation were those which we might have chosen for ourselves.

Exploring the Material Culture of Lager Wick: A Personal Account

The excavation yielded positive results in all categories. Yet the objects found during the dig, their interpretation, treatment, curation, and their fate, raised many questions for me, and ultimately prompted this special issue of the IJHA. Broadly speaking, three issues emerged from the excavation, which I will explore with reference to excavated material. The first concerned the identification and treatment of unstratified objects, which may or may not have come from the wartime period of the camp; the second

involved the identification and treatment of objects which were, without doubt, from the camp. Thirdly and finally, the way in which I was asked to treat or select parts of camp infrastructure raised concerns, especially in the light of the arrest of the school-boys who visited Auschwitz, and the argument made earlier in this paper that, in theory at least, all items from Nazi camps should have similar value.

As noted, the predominant source of difficulty throughout the excavation of Lager Wick, with the greatest potential to invalidate any answers to my research questions, was the proximity of the old parish rubbish dump to the site of the camp. Although the dump was no longer in use, old habits clearly died hard, as local people were not averse to throwing empty bottles and cans onto the site as we discovered each morning. This meant that, as we dug, the central question was always whether the objects, fragments, or bits of masonry that we were finding dated to the camp or whether they were post-war rubbish.

Issues of value and interpretation were at stake. While Lager Wick was not reused after the war, its contents (like those of the concrete bunkers that litter the Channel Islands) were likely to have been mined for reusable objects and raw materials, and some objects that we found in the camp may have been dropped, re-deposited, or deliberately dumped within the ruins of the camp during this process. It was also a common pursuit after the war for local people to visit and even eat picnics (and leave behind bottles) inside areas which had previously been forbidden to them and marked off with barbed wire.

One of the areas targeted for excavation was the extant section of the ruined “latrine block,” where any finds were submerged (annually) ever more deeply in leaf litter, mud, and water. Lager Wick was built on a marsh and still floods every year, leaving behind a layer of sediment which covers and somewhat protects any newly uncovered parts of the structure. I had wanted to leave uncovered the newly revealed and extant surviving concrete parts of the camp to facilitate the listing process by Jersey Heritage, but the landowners were not supportive of listing and did not want anyone on their land. I had imagined that the perceived heritage value of the site would have been increased by making visible the structures, but visits to the site of the camp at different times of the year showed me how quickly nature undid the hard work of the excavation team.

As the “latrine block” had already been identified by Michael Ginns, I took for granted the discovery, during the second season, of finds which included a toothpaste tube, a toothbrush, a soap dish, comb and hairbrush, a mirror, and medicine bottles, although I wondered whether this area had been used by overseers, prisoners, or both. While the finds were not especially numerous, those that were present merely validated the interpretation of the structure. As we excavated further, we discovered that the latrine was a three-room building. The first room contained a drainage channel running through the center (possibly for a communal shower, I imagined), and an area where the concrete had been ripped away but which could have contained a large basin. The second room we thought was a changing room, and the third room (with the three standing walls) was interpreted as the latrine itself.

It was not until the third season of excavation that we managed to fully excavate the third room, and were surprised to find that there were no drainage points or signs of plumbing at all. This building was probably not a washroom / latrine complex, but a kitchen, food preparation and (potato?) storage area (Ivar Schute, pers. comm.). This was quite a disappointment as it seemed a much more prosaic interpretation. It also meant that the medicine bottles and toilet articles of which I had been so proud and

pleased to find, were, at best, re-deposited from elsewhere in the camp but, at worst, probably represented post-war deposition. Their value (to me) vanished in an instant. These were no longer “sacred” items (if ever they were), belonging to Categories 2 and 3 above. I should have probably thrown them away – not that I could bring myself to do so. But they taught me a harsh lesson about making assumptions based on prior (and unproven) assumptions, and about making (perhaps hasty) interpretations based on the most predominant artifact type present.

A further item in the latrine block / food store was a weathered and moss-covered boot (Fig. 5). But the boot worried me. Apart from the question of what an old boot was doing in a kitchen / food storage area, who did it belong to? If it belonged to a former forced laborer, then the boot should be removed from the site, preserved, and perhaps kept as a rather nice star item in any exhibition. If it belonged to an overseer, then – similarly – it should be preserved and perhaps displayed. But if it was a post-war item then I should simply throw it away, because heritage rules in Jersey expect the excavator to make “common sense” judgements about what to keep, what to throw away and what to rebury (Robert Waterhouse, pers. comm.). I was in a quandary about what to do. The boot would have taken up quite a lot of room in the finds box, and I knew that the conservator at Jersey Heritage was very busy working on the Iron Age coin hoard which had recently been found on the island and would possibly not welcome preserving an old boot; not everyone takes the same romantic view as I do about excavated material culture. In any case, such preservation might have been in vain as I could not guarantee the age of the item. In the end I took the decision to leave the boot lying on the site, alerting Jersey Heritage to its presence. I photographed it and listed it on the finds database in case anyone wanted to retrieve it, but it played on my conscience. I had passed the buck and knew that the boot was more open to theft or deterioration now that it was uncovered. I had probably kept the medicine bottles and toilet items but left the boot behind based not only on considerations of size, but also because of images in my mind of how nice the former would have looked in a museum display.

In this same structure I had also found a lot of both window glass and asbestos, parts of the camp infrastructure. The asbestos had to be reburied immediately for safety reasons, but I was rather pleased to find sizeable examples from Category 5. The

Fig. 5 Boot from Lager Wick. Copyright Gilly Carr

environmental officer was a periodic visitor to the dig; he was in charge of the management of the site and wanted to make sure that we were respecting the wildlife and not encroaching further into the site than we were allowed. He instructed me to take the window glass (and all of the many glass bottles, dating from various periods over the last 70 years) to the island's glass recycling depot. It could be dangerous for the wildlife, he explained. I could do little but muse on the incongruity of getting in trouble in Jersey if I did not dispose of camp window glass versus the two schoolboys getting in even more serious trouble if they removed the smallest fragment of window glass from Auschwitz. In the end I retained small piece of glass, reburied the majority in a memorable spot, and left behind on site for recycling the large collection of more modern bottles and large sheets of broken glass. Given the short length of the dig and the need to keep on good terms with the landowners, there was little choice (despite my subversive actions) but to do as instructed and to leave behind on site, after the excavation, separate piles of glass, barbed wire, and large lumps of concrete – all camp infrastructure – for the environmental officer to dispose of as he saw fit.

During the excavation I was restricted as to the size and location of trenches that I was allowed to dig. Trenches 1–4 comprised small test pits of 1×1 m, but the largest trench, Trench 5, of 3×3 m, targeted one of the three barrack blocks which burned down in 1944. We were gratified to find ample traces of burning, including globules of solidified molten glass from windows and bottles (Fig. 6), and traces of charcoal and burned materials. It soon became clear that this barrack block was unlikely to have been used by the forced laborers, as finds included (among other things) the button of an OT overseer's uniform, a fire-damaged broken mug with an eagle and swastika on the base, a pair of cufflinks, some glass with an etched oak leaf design, a broken schnapps glass, wine bottle glass, a corroded lead eagle, and a large padlock. I recognised the eagle only because a member of the public had visited the dig in the first season with an almost identical uncorroded version which he found through metal detecting another nearby labor camp in the island. Metal detecting is disallowed on listed heritage sites in Jersey but permissible elsewhere if the landowner gives permission (Robert Waterhouse, pers. comm.). As no labor camp in the island has yet been listed, it is easy to see how such sites could be easily looted and damaged before archaeological

Fig. 6 Solidified molten glass from Lager Wick. Copyright Gilly Carr

fieldwork has had a chance to begin. Jersey's camps are certainly not alone in Europe in lacking heritage status, management, or preservation systems (e.g., Jasinski and Stenvik 2010), and this has worrying repercussions.

The items found in Trench 5 at Lager Wick indicated that we had located the mess hut of the overseers. This fitted local oral testimony that the fire had started in the cookhouse, as it made sense for the mess hut to be next to this building so that food would not have grown cold while being conveyed to the overseers. Indeed, we had found briquettes (lumps of compressed coal dust used in stoves) in the early stages of excavating the next door barrack. This only served to recall the fact that material culture from Nazi camps is also of value in supplementing, contradicting or supporting the historical record or oral testimony. It can also reveal information that cannot be derived from historical accounts, as Sturdy Colls (2012:96) reminds us. In this case, archaeology had revealed the function of the barrack block that had no source of information available about it other than the archaeological.

Because the local press thought that the eagle and swastika on the base of the fragmentary "Nazi mug" was clearly the most exciting thing to emerge from the dig, local TV and radio crews came to visit us and the excavation made the front page of the local newspaper. Although the Channel Islands have a long reputation of being interested in the German occupiers at the expense of the victims of Nazi persecution in the island (e.g., Carr 2014:147), I was disappointed that this element of the first forced labor camp ever to be excavated in the Channel Islands was once again highlighted at the expense of discussions of the daily life of the forced laborers. I could already see, with a sigh, the preferred star item in the museum exhibition. While I had also found two large caches of shells (limpets and periwinkles) in the newly recognized food storage room (their presence suddenly making more sense now that the building was now no longer a latrine), nobody was interested in pointing a camera in their direction, even though they were a testimony to the growing starvation of all in the Channel Islands as the occupation continued.

This personal and honest account of the excavation of Lager Wick reveals the real influences and conscious and unconscious biases which can sometimes be at play at a site imbued with emotions, preconceived ideas, and local understandings of occupation. Interpretations were influenced by prior assumptions (although later corrected) of the function of buildings; artifact retention was influenced by multiple interpretations of objects based on a lack of secure dating or provenance, and also by local environmental considerations. And the perceptions of the relative importance of objects were influenced by local occupation narratives. Without local guidelines dictating what should be retained, the team was left to discuss the best solutions on the spot. It seemed that the best response at the time was often to retain objects when in doubt (especially if they were small) or to leave them on site for later retrieval if necessary, although this was not an ideal situation. Pragmatic considerations rather than best practice was followed, but lacking published European guidelines for best practice toward the material culture of Nazi camps, I had nothing to use in any potential negotiations with landowners or Jersey Heritage.

Exploring the Material Culture of Nazi Camps: Concluding Thoughts

This paper has drawn attention to the common problems encountered by archaeologists who excavate Nazi camps. Perceptions of value of the many different types of material

culture will continue to be in the eye of the beholder. But the unspoken assumption of the “sacredness” of the material culture of Auschwitz (no matter how mundane those small finds may be) and other high profile camps, coupled as they are, quite rightly, with legislation in place to protect against and prosecute theft, raises questions about the implied value of items from other Nazi camps. While this paper proposes that, in theory, all items from all camps should be considered of equal value, not least because of their meaning in terms of the human cost, war crimes, and crimes against humanity involved, this position is not easily sustainable in practice. Neither is it easily defensible in conversations about museum exhibition displays. Pragmatic considerations – as well as local opinions – will always have to be taken on board. Even at Auschwitz, where so much material is available, excavated small finds - “sacred” objects (as I have termed them here) can get lost, as a recent news item revealed. Forty-eight cardboard boxes containing 16,000 items from a 1967 excavation at the camp turned up in a recent search in a building belonging to the Polish Academy of Science (Mansfield 2016).

In this paper I have also proposed a categorization for the material culture found at Nazi camps which allows us to center the prisoner within the world of the camp and in our analyses; it also gives an awareness of the hand of the persecutor as well as the persecuted. This categorization may also be useful for non-excavated items from Nazi camps, such as objects taken home by survivors. These may have later functioned as “testimonial objects,” carrying memory traces from the past (Hirsch 2006), and allowing possessors to speak about the unspeakable. They may also have been “transitional objects,” in Parkin’s (1999:317–318) sense, belonging to people such as the deported, whose private mementoes “take the place of interpersonal relations as a depository of sentiment and cultural knowledge” acting as “ancestral memorials encoding continuity between and across generations,” after family and friends have died.

I have also proposed a new way of perceiving some types of material culture, namely to suggest that certain objects can be seen as “bonding objects,” and to understand the need for retention of these items by (mostly) family members in these terms.

Where secure stratification is not present, my own experience has led me to be wary of accepting at face value identification of camp building function based on material culture, especially when post-war contamination is an issue (as it was at Lager Wick). However, in the absence of other information, such items are all we often have and are the most important indication available as to the function of buildings within a camp.

I also call for the production of best practice guidelines about the retention (or not) and value of various types of objects found at Nazi camps. While many countries have strict guidelines in place regarding what should be kept and what should be discarded or reburied, this may not always be wholly relevant or useful for twentieth - century sites such as these. Yet other places have no guidelines at all, and the archaeologist who is compelled to fall back on “common sense” and the vote of the excavation team may find later that the wrong decision was taken. Even more worrying, archaeologists may find themselves having to go along with the wishes of local landowners, environmental officers, or even local heritage employees who have very different areas of expertise and ideas about what constitutes an important artifact worthy of retention, preservation, or even display. With no Europe-wide professional guidelines in place for Nazi camps to back up the protestations of the archaeological team, the small things of life and death from Nazi camps may find themselves discarded or, once again, being covered in soil.

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