A tough choice? Suggestions for dealing with finds from the contemporary past

Summary

The excavation of the recent past, especially the sites of former prison camps, still presents a challenge to field archaeologists and state archaeological authorities. Even the finds recovered from these excavations pose a problem. The quantity of material found, which consists to a great extent of mass-produced objects, raises the question as to whether it is necessary to retain every item, as is common practice with older objects, or if, in certain cases, an appropriate selection should be made. This question is also pertinent regarding the decreasing amount of space available for the long-term storage of finds. This paper discusses the following points: what makes an object an archaeological find? Is there a legal basis for selection and what are the associated problems? What relevance could artifacts from contemporary historical contexts have in public and academic discourse? What are the selection criteria and the pros and cons of sampling? Finally, this paper argues that objects from contemporary historical contexts should be treated with the same care which is taken for granted when dealing with artifacts from older periods. A selection can be useful but must be carefully thought through and well documented to minimize a possible loss of information.

Zusammenfassung

zu behandeln, die bei „älteren“ Grabungen selbstverständlich ist und folgert, dass eine Auswahl sinnvoll sein kann, jedoch gut durchdacht und dokumentiert sein sollte, um keinen Informationsverlust zu riskieren.

Introduction

The excavation of the recent past, especially the sites of former prison camps, still presents a challenge to field archaeologists and state archaeological authorities. From my personal experience and from conversations with colleagues, it is clear that the finds recovered from these excavations often pose a problem. The large quantities of material sometimes found raise the question of whether or not it is necessary to retain every single item, as is common practice with older objects, or whether, in certain cases, an appropriate selection be made. The finds are, to a great extent, objects of mass production and their preservation value could and should be scrutinized. This is especially relevant with regard to the limited number of personnel available for the management of archaeological archives and the decreasing amount of space available for the long-term storage of finds. However, mass production alone is not an adequate reason to assign less value to these objects than to older ones. In this paper the following questions will be addressed: what relevance could finds from contemporary historical contexts have in public and academic discourse? Must a choice be made and, if so, what are the difficulties associated with this decision? Furthermore, some suggestions about the practical selection of finds and the criteria which should be considered will be proposed, followed by a discussion of the problems which emerge.

The legal basis

In order to decide whether it is necessary, or even useful, to carry out a selection of the objects excavated from contemporary historical contexts, we first have to determine what makes an object an archaeological find or, more specifically, a find of archeological relevance (in this paper, the term “contemporary” refers to the field of archaeological research dealing with the 20th and 21st century and focuses here on places of repression).

Following the consultation of various excavation guidelines and heritage protection laws, restricted in this case to those published by the German federal states, it quickly becomes apparent that it is not easy to provide an exact definition of the term “archaeological find”. In general, the term “find” remains vague, even when it is directly referred to, and a strict definition does not take place. The “find” is subsumed under other terms, such as “movable monument”, “cultural monument” and “immovable monument”, or described as the remains and traces of the same. Further definitions, such as “movable archaeological evidence”, “tangible assets” and “aggregates of things”, in part or in entirety, are used and often clarified in the following legal text.

For the purpose of this paper, the heritage protection law of the State of Brandenburg will be used as an example. According to this law, finds are items, majorities of items, parts or traces of items of what can be assumed to be monuments in the meaning of section 2 clause 1. Section 2 clause 1 states in turn that monuments are items, majorities of items or parts of items whose preservation is of public interest by reason of their historical, scientific, technical, artistic, architectural or ethnological importance. So an object becomes a find of archaeological relevance and is therefore worthy of preservation due to its historical, scientific, technical, artistic, architectural or ethnological significance and the resulting public interest. This definition is probably sufficient for finds recovered during the excavation of, for example, a Bronze Age cemetery. The archaeological relevance of these objects is a result of their age and the associated rarity. In addition, rare objects, especially those dating to periods with no or very few written sources, are often consid-

ered to be of higher value as a source of information, and therefore of greater historic or scientific significance. For this reason they need to be preserved and protected (Oebbecke 1995, 57–58).

It is not usually necessary, according to the heritage protection law in Brandenburg, to decide which finds should be retained from the excavation of a prehistoric site, although the excavation guidelines published by the Association of State Archaeologists in the Federal Republic of Germany allow exceptions to be made in extreme cases (e.g. large quantities of similar material found at pottery workshops, slag heaps and storage sites for raw materials (Verband der Landesarchäologen in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland 2006, 22, 26, 29, 30). However, in the case of our fictional Bronze Age cemetery and in accordance with the definition above, every movable object made or used by humans within the excavated area could be an archaeological find and should be handed over to the State Office for Monument Conservation for long-term storage. In addition, the excavation guidelines in Brandenburg state that it is necessary to prove that the assemblage of finds recovered from a site is complete.2

As a general rule, it seems that a selection of the finds recovered from prehistoric and protohistoric sites in Brandenburg is not required. So why should different standards be applied to finds from later periods and how can this difference in practice be justified? The simple answer is, that objects from the contemporary past do not derive their historical or scientific significance, and the associated public interest, automatically from their age (this also partly applies to the medieval and modern periods). The finds are usually neither rare nor are they the only source material available. As a consequence, additional reasons need to be presented in order to establish their archaeological relevance, which in turn justifies their legal protection and preservation. After all, not every Coca-Cola can from the 1960s is a matter of public interest. However, this does not mean that these finds have no archaeological relevance at all. Their relevance just stems from different criteria.

The relevance of contemporary objects

Value as an historical source

So how can archaeological finds from contemporary contexts generate the public interest required by the heritage protection law in Brandenburg? The primary argument can be found in the state of the source material itself. Because there is a characteristic lack of written, pictorial and oral evidence in totalitarian and terrorist systems caused by political repression. This lack of sources is, at first, a result of the perpetrators’ sense of guilt and the consequent reluctance to document their own conduct, or to subsequently destroy incriminating evidence. Secondly, it is a result of their lack of interest in documenting the everyday life of the for example arrested people. In addition, the lack of sources results from the priorities and lack of opportunity of those arrested to document their situation. Consequently, finds from these contexts can provide information which is not, or only poorly, documented in historical sources and could therefore be of historical and scientific importance (Oebbecke 1995, 58–59).

Value as a museological and pedagogical resource

In German contemporary archaeology, the research is currently mainly focused on the sites of former prison camps. But these places are not only a subject of research – issues of preservation and communication are increasingly important, too (Kunow 2014, 69). Which is the second argument in favor of the public interest in contemporary archaeological finds. Because these artifacts are the material legacy of distressing and far-reaching historical events they accordingly possess a value as display objects and pedagogical tools which should not be underestimated. And so they can play an important complementary role in educational work, if used appropriately. The preser-

vation and communication of historical knowledge in order to keep memory alive and make remembrance possible are, in this context, the responsibility of both, the concentration camp memorial sites and the heritage management organizations (Kunow 1996, 323–324).

**Value as a legal and biographical evidence**

The third argument is the possible legal- and biographical relevance of finds excavated at places of injustice. The legal and historical investigation of these places has rarely been completed and excavations at sites such as prison camps can still provide information which has a direct impact on the present. Generally speaking, the younger the site, the greater the possible impact. On the one hand, mass-produced objects can be used to evaluate the history and legacy of business and industry under National Socialism. Information about which companies made use of forced labor, which can be provided by archaeological finds, and the way in which these companies deal with their responsibility today are still important to public opinion. In this case, finds can literally be a piece of evidence. On the other hand, there is a much smaller group of “personalized” objects marked with names or identification numbers which are almost exclusively found in contemporary historical contexts. If it is possible to identify the original owner, these objects can be very important to the survivors and help to process or find closure with their past and they can help descendants to clarify a relative’s fate as well, by for example identifying places of burial. In contrast to much older artefacts, a direct biographical connection to the present day can exist and this is a new responsibility of which archeologists must be aware.

So, it seems that the public interest required by the heritage protection law in Brandenburg or other German federal states can be claimed for finds from the contemporary past. It results from their possible value as an historical source, a museological and pedagogical resource, and as objects of both legal and biographical relevance.

**Selection problems**

So why do we still have to consider which finds to retain? It is because the public interest argument outlined above cannot be applied to every single object as, for example, the age / rarity argument applies to artifacts from the prehistoric period. And this is the crux of the matter, because it could be argued that it is necessary to prove the public interest value of each find in order to justify the further investment of resources, such as long-term storage in the archives of the state heritage management authorities (Oebbecke 1995, 57–58). We must bear in mind that these institutions have an obligation to account for their work and expenditure to the public (Verband der Landesarchäologen in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland 2001, 4–5). Taking this argument into consideration, we would probably have to answer the question whether a selection ought to be made with yes.

This is not a new problem, because selection processes take place on every excavation. Some are decided, in accordance with excavation guidelines, in advance, while others are more or less unintentional. The second set of choices is influenced by various factors, such as prior knowledge, experience, and conscious or unconscious personal preference. Although archeologists attempt to be objective, artifacts which are familiar (or unfamiliar) or which are of personal interest sometimes receive more attention. For example, a Mesolithic specialist would probably set different priorities for the excavation of a post-medieval village than a post-medieval specialist, and vice versa. The current state of research also affects the selection process. Before medieval archaeology became established, sherds of glazed pottery were often not recovered. Practical considerations, such as the excavation budget and the amount of time and number of staff available, are equally important. During a rescue excavation, small pottery sherds with no identifiable characteristics
are unlikely to be recovered. A selection will always be made but it should be a conscious decision and adequately documented so that is apparent to subsequent researchers who might otherwise reach wrong conclusions (Sommer 2014, 239–243).

**Diversity**

When it comes to artifacts from the recent past, the objects are often similar or almost identical to the things which we use every day and that is why it is too easy to assume that the decision as to whether an object is relevant and should be retained is straightforward and quick to make. Several new problems arise: the first is the lack of widespread knowledge about the material culture of contemporary archaeology within the archaeological community. For a “typical” archaeologist, contemporary archaeology was not part of their university education and relatively few archaeologists have excavated and/or researched sites from this period. This is not surprising because contemporary archaeology is a quite young field of research and the situation will improve in the long term. Meanwhile, we must be aware of this knowledge gap and, if in doubt, seek expertise and support from other disciplines because “detailed knowledge of objects, common in prehistoric and other archaeologies is difficult to acquire and to impart. The variability and functional diversity of the 20th century material world has simply become too great” (author’s translation of Bernbeck / Pollock 2013, 5).

To give a practical example, a large rubbish pit containing over five and a half tons of material was discovered during building work in the grounds of the Museum and Memorial Site at Sachsenhausen in the year 2000. The excavated finds were an assemblage of objects from the Nazi concentration camp, the subsequent NKVD special camp and the GDR period which followed. These finds illustrate the wide range of material that can be recovered and included fragments of structural elements, electrical components, plumbing and sanitation items, pharmaceutical containers and medical devices, hygiene products, “household goods” in the broadest sense, toys, clothing and military items. It is virtually impossible for a single person to deal effectively with such a quantity and variety of material and possess sufficient specialist knowledge in such a diversity of fields, ranging from international military insignia to the possible uses of various medicines (see Müller 2010).

**Identification**

The second problem is, that the identification and classification of these objects, especially the factory-made items, is not that simple. There are no typologies, and few archaeological data sets or specialist publications, available for the researcher to consult. In fact, it would be inappropriate, or indeed futile, to create an artificial classification, as is common practice with artifacts from the prehistoric period, because the objects, in their original form, already have a name and a designated function. These cannot be determined without extensive and time-consuming research, which does not always result in success. Be that as it may, without a precise name and specific function it is almost impossible to establish the historical value of an object or to compare it with similar finds from other assemblages.

**Date**

The third problem is to accurately date the finds. Historical sources usually provide an exact sequence for events in the 20th century. To locate finds within this chronology, and thus establish their context and historical value, they must be precisely dated. In the example of the rubbish pit, the three phases (as the concentration camp, the special camp and the GDR period) were separated by a maximum of five years and it was very difficult to assign the majority of these finds to a particular phase. Some objects, especially those which were industrially produced, were marked with a manufacturing date. These, however, provide only a terminus post quem and give no indication of the duration of use. Dating becomes even more difficult if the form and function of
an object are the only available information. Even in the 20th century, distinct changes in shape and style rarely occur often enough to allow a dating accuracy of a few years. Besides, even if they do, complex and time-consuming research is necessary to determine, for example, how long a certain type of radio valve was in use or in which year the design of specific sort of cream jar was changed.

**Context**

Fourthly, it is also often difficult to prove that the finds recovered are relevant to and associated with the site under investigation, which is less of a problem on prehistoric excavations. Generally speaking, the archaeological relevance of prehistoric finds is determined by their stratigraphic position and distinguishing characteristics. The precise date, be it Bronze Age, Iron Age or medieval, is initially unimportant. But the situation is quite different on sites from the recent past: there is rarely any stratigraphy, with most features located directly beneath the modern ground surface, and the finds mostly lack distinguishing characteristics, as explained above. Furthermore, material on the sites of former prison camps was often reused and the sites themselves were disturbed and transformed by subsequent activity. The subsequent use of the sites also introduced objects that do not substantially differ from those which one would expect to find in features from a prison camp. For example, it is relatively hard to decide whether a rubbish pit found within the area of a former prison camp was used while the camp was in operation or was created by local residents only a few years after the camp was closed.

The problems listed above, which might be faced when dealing with finds from the contemporary past, illustrate the difficulties involved in making a sound decision about the public interest value of a single object. In other words, does the find provide information which could expand or complement the existing sources, does it raise new questions and research issues, and is it a potential display object or even a piece of evidence? A decision should not only be based on personal experience, extensive research and dialogue with fellow researchers, but also on intensive communication with specialists in other fields, such as history, ethnology and sociology; architectural, cultural and military history; the history of design, and medicine. Non-academic expertise is also vital and includes everyone from eyewitnesses and survivors, the staff of memorial sites and manufacturing companies to electricians, plumbers and local historians. In short, the widest range of expertise possible.

Taking all of these aspects into consideration, it should now be clear that the selection of finds from contemporary historical contexts involves an enormous amount of time and effort. For this reason, the cost (in terms of time and personnel) needs to be weighed up against the benefit (in terms of saving long-term storage space), especially in the case of rescue excavations. That’s why it is difficult to give a definitive answer to the question of whether or not a selection should actually be made. In theory, according to the heritage protection law, a selection is possible. Yet, with the effort involved and the risk of losing valuable information, it remains unclear whether and to what extent it would be sensible in practice.

**Possible selection criteria**

Despite these doubts, I will try to examine the practicalities of selection, using a “typical” assemblage from the excavation of a prison camp site as example. Is it possible to identify some preliminary selection criteria for the historical, evidential or display value and which problems need be considered? Because there is a wide gap between what is practically applicable on short-term rescue excavations and long-term research projects, this are only suggestions and cannot be generally valid. In light of the problems outlined in the previous section, it seems advisable to make a final selection of finds
as late as possible in the excavation process, especially if large quantities of material are involved. In this way, it would be possible to sort the finds and attain a broad overview, which is strongly recommended before a selection is made. During the excavation, finds should be examined for possible indicators of their historical, evidential and display value.

**Industrial markings**

The first things to look for are industrial markings, such as company names and logos, seals and emblems, pottery marks and other symbols of any kind, as well as lettering, for example the tables of contents on food and pharmaceutical packaging. These can provide important information about the manufacturers and suppliers involved in the camps; the camp facilities; the supplies and equipment available to the prisoners and guards; humanitarian aid (Red Cross parcels) and even details about the prisoners, such as countries of origin. It would be ideal to retain every marked item for quantitative evaluation but, if this is not possible, selection could be limited to the best-preserved item, if there are identical markings on objects of the same kind.

**Items associated with prisoners**

The second criterion includes all items which may be associated with the prisoners. These objects are of great value as an historical source, for display and pedagogical purposes, and are also important pieces of evidence. There are usually groups of similar objects which, once identified, can be deliberately picked out. These include simple cutlery and crockery; personal hygiene items such as toothbrushes, combs and razors; articles of clothing and shoes; storage utensils such as boxes, cans or cigarette cases; items of jewelry and personal accessories; badges, insignia and identification marks; but also pipe fragments and toys.

Special attention is needed to identify items which are not easily recognizable as personal belongings at first glance, for example reused or recycled objects. The slightest sign of alteration may indicate reuse or reutilization. Handmade objects can also be difficult to identify immediately. They were mostly items which were necessary for survival, such as articles of personal hygiene, clothing, cutlery and crockery (Fig.1), but also include small receptacles; charms, trinkets, decorations and various small objects created for distraction and amusement (Fig.2). These two types of artifacts, made of wood, glass, plastic and metal waste, may now seem small and insignificant but those who made or possessed them risked severe punishment and death. Reutilized and handmade objects often elicit an emotional response from the observer and make the fate of the individual behind the artifact seem

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*Fig. 1. Examples of handmade objects essential for survival (spoon, bowl, comb and knife) from the Nazi concentration camp and the subsequent NKVD special camp at Sachsenhausen (above left, below right, photographs by A.-K. Müller), the POW camp M Stalag III B at Eisenhüttenstadt (above right, photograph by A. Drieschner/B. Schulz) and the POW and forced labor camp Stalag III A at Frankenfelde (below left, photograph by A.-K. Müller).*

more tangible. They demonstrate not only the ingenuity of the prisoners, who lacked even the most basic objects necessary for survival, but also the desire to maintain some sort of normality and preserve individual identity. These objects tell stories and so are of exceptional historical, museological and pedagogical worth.

Another indication that an object was the personal possession of a prisoner are handmade marks. These take a variety of forms and can be easily overlooked, especially on uncleaned finds. In the majority of cases, they consist of scratched, engraved or painted initials and names, as well as combinations of numbers and / or letters (probably block or identification numbers). It can be assumed that these markings had primarily the practical function of identifying invaluable personal property (Fig. 3). However, in the context of prison camps, where it was intended to destroy people’s identities by taking away their names, the act of recording a name can also be seen as an attempt to preserve personal identity. On some of the objects which were essential for survival, such as cutlery and crockery, names were crossed out and replaced by new ones. This can be considered as evidence of barter, a high
mortality rate and the “inheritance” of important items. The type of marks, be it hastily improvised scratches or an ornate engraving, reveals something about the priorities of the owner. Aside from the marking of property, the decoration of the few personal belongings also seems to have mattered. Elaborate engravings of different names in a similar hand on objects from a single prison camp indicate the existence of a specialized service, offered by prisoners with the necessary tools and skills in exchange for other goods and services. Sometimes these personal markings, in the rare form of short phrases or verses or even small images, allow insight into beliefs, hopes and memories of the prisoners, as well as their fears and the harsh reality of their everyday lives (Fig. 4).

**Items associated with the camp staff, specific camp areas or activities**

The third criterion for recovery and selection includes all objects which may be related to the camp staff and to specific areas or activities within the camp. This is a broad category that includes articles used by the camp guards and administrative personnel, items involved in the supply of food and pharmaceuticals, and objects associated with structural remains such as accommodation and administrative buildings, sanitary and medical facilities, wash-houses, workshops, external and internal fence systems, etc., which are all valuable sources of information (Fig. 5).

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Fig. 4. Examples of objects with inscriptions or images: a small plain glass ornament with inscription “EN SOUVENIR DE MA CAPTIVITÉ EN ALLEMAGNE” from the POW camp M Stalag III B at Eisenhüttenstadt (above left, photograph by A. Drieschner/B. Schulz); a small box with an image of a fish and the fishermen’s traditional greeting “Petri Heil”, and a small box with an image of the prison camp from the NKVD special camp at Sachsenhausen (middle, photographs by A.-K. Müller); a canister showing a heart pierced by arrows and a box decorated with flowers, a flag and an inscription “363 REIB[?]TO FANTERIA COMP. CANNONI” from the POW and forced labor camp Stalag III A at Frankenfelde (above right and below left, photographs by A.-K. Müller) and a metal cup with an image of a tank from the Nazi concentration camp and the subsequent NKVD special camp at Sachsenhausen (below right, photograph by A.-K. Müller).

**Abb. 4. Objekte mit Inschriften oder Bildern: Glasscheibe mit Aufschrift „EN SOUVENIR DE MA CAPTIVITÉ EN ALLEMAGNE“ aus dem Kriegsgefangenenlager M Stalag III B in Eisenhüttenstadt (o. l., Foto A. Drieschner/ B. Schulz); Dose mit Fisch und der Gravur „Petri Heil“ sowie Dose mit Darstellung einer Lagersilhouette aus dem Speziallager Sachsenhausen (Mitte, Fotos A.-K. Müller); ein von Pfeilen durchbohrtes Herz auf Kanister und Dose verziert mit Blumen, Flagge und der Inschrift „363 REIB[?]TO FANTERIA COMP. CANNONI“ aus dem Kriegsgefangenen- und Zwangsarbeiterlager Stalag III A in Frankenfelde (o. r., u. l., Fotos A.-K. Müller); eine Tasse mit Panzerdarstellung aus dem Konzentrations- und Speziallager Sachsenhausen (u. r., Foto A.-K. Müller).**

Fig. 5. Telephone handset, whistle, inkwell and typewriter (possibly used by guards and administrative personnel) from the POW and forced labor camp Stalag III A at Frankenfelde (above left and right), the Nazi concentration camp and the subsequent NKVD special camp at Sachsenhausen (below left and right, all photographs by A.-K. Müller).

**Abb. 5. Telefonhörer, Pfeife, Tintenfass und Schreibmaschine (wahrscheinlich vom Lagerpersonal genutzt) aus dem Kriegsgefangenen- und Zwangsarbeiterlager Stalag III A in Frankenfelde (o. l., o. r.) und dem Konzentrations- und Speziallager Sachsenhausen (u. l., u. r., alle Fotos A.-K. Müller).**
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Items which are unique or rare

A fourth criterion to be recommended is the retention of objects which appear to be unique, or that only occur in very low numbers, or seem at first glance unusual in the context in which they are found (Fig. 6). As with the category above, it is difficult to give anything more than a generalized definition. Sometimes it is just important to keep one’s eyes open and rely on intuition – a certain degree of luck is almost always involved. More often than not, it is the unique or unusual items which can raise new questions or tell different stories.

Items which have a material or monetary value

The fifth and last criterion, which is listed here only for the sake of completeness, is the material or monetary value of an object. Precious items, such as coins and jewelry, should obviously be retained.

Objects which do not meet the criteria

During most excavations of former prison camps or similar sites, large quantities of material will be recovered that do not meet any of the above criteria. These are mainly mass-produced objects with no distinguishing characteristics and building materials which are not associated with any structures. Examples include nails; metal struts; plumbing pipe fragments; timber; sanitary porcelain; fragments of window glass, brick and tile; sherds of glass and ceramic containers and electrical debris, such as cables and wires. It would be a difficult problem to transfer all of this material into long-term storage. So does it all need to be kept?

According to the guidelines published by the Association of State Archaeologists in the Federal Republic of Germany, finds from archaeological excavations are a source material and must therefore be preserved and permanently stored so that they are available for future research which will address new issues using methods and techniques which are currently unknown (Verband der Landesarchäologen in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland 2001, 7). Certainly, not every cable, radio valve, porcelain sherd or scrap of metal is of historical or scientific significance. Yet it is very difficult, particularly with objects of this kind, to assess to what extent they provide additional information about the equipment and supply of a camp, or the dating and interpretation of finds or structures, without time-consuming research and the involvement of specialists. Will a lack of data hinder future research if it is not...
collected now? It makes no sense to completely refrain from long-term storage simply on the grounds of decreasing capacity, but it is also unreasonable to retain every single object just on the assumption they may prove to be of value in the future. A compromise between a possible loss of information and the available storage space is unavoidable. If it is decided to make a selection, the main objective must be to ensure a representative sample of all the excavated finds. The selection process must be conscious and well-documented, so that the choices and decisions made are obvious to subsequent researchers.

So how could this approach be applied in practice? The first step towards an appropriate selection might be to group the excavated material into two categories: “standardized” and “non-standardized”. Standardized objects are those which are well enough preserved to be identified and can be assigned to a specific type. These include items such as nails, screws, metal struts, roof tiles, technical and sanitary porcelain, electrical items or common crockery. If there is variety within these types (e.g. different sizes and shapes of nail, or nails made of different materials), subtypes could be introduced. The objects of each type would then be described, measured and counted, and only the most well-preserved example would be retained – the intention is not to create a typology but to save space in long-term storage. Objects intended for display could be excepted from this rule. In accordance with the above-mentioned criteria, unusual or modified objects (e.g. intentionally bent nails) should also be retained.

Non-standardized objects are too fragmented to be identified and cannot be assigned to a specific type. Instead, they could be divided into different categories of material (e.g. glass, porcelain and iron) and the weight of each category would then be recorded. If possible, they should also be separated into subcategories (e.g. window glass, safety glass and bottle glass). A sample from each category would then be retained for long-term storage. Fragments of a recognized type (e.g. sherds of a make or design of cup of which a complete example exists) would not need to be described but could also be recorded by weight under the appropriate type. This would make it possible to determine the “minimum number of objects”. It is quite likely, that such detailed sorting would be beyond the scope of a regular rescue-excavation, but it could reduce the loss of information to a tolerable degree, especially if large amounts of material are involved. However, if it is decided in favor of selection, the main objective must be, to ensure a representative sample of all the excavated finds and the selection-process has to be well-documented, so that it is obvious to subsequent researchers.

After the selection

A database should be created after the finds have been sorted, or during the sorting process if time is available. As a minimum, this should contain stratigraphic information (i.e. from which feature the finds originate) and a classification of the objects according to material and type. The range of materials humans use has grown considerably since the prehistoric and medieval periods, and the conventional material categories (e.g. flint, bronze and iron) are not adequate for contemporary historical objects. Materials such as different plastics, metal alloys and types of rubber must be identified and differentiated from each other. Composite objects pose an additional problem: as mundane as it may seem, it is necessary to decide to which category a light bulb, for example, belongs. Furthermore, some of the objects found on the sites of former prison camps were not used in their normal context or for their usual purpose (as outlined above) and this must be kept in mind by describing and evaluating the material.

There are two more steps in the recording process which often seem to be neglected but are essential, especially when dealing with finds with a potential
evidential value from a context of injustice. The first is to ensure that all legible industrial markings and traces of the actions of individuals are recorded and, if necessary, forwarded to the relevant authorities. It would be ideal to produce a complete digital archive of this important information. If this is not possible, it should at least be recorded in the database that an object has an industrial stamp or handmade markings, or was reutilized or handmade. This data would then be easily available for later research or display purposes. Any information which may allow “personalization” of an object, such as identification numbers and legible names must, in any case, be recorded. Under pressure of time, this could be restricted to the recording of rare or unusual names because these are more likely to be identified with a definite individual. This information, especially identification numbers and names, should be made available to the survivors and to the relatives of the victims of concentration, forced labor, prisoner of war and NKVD special camps. To achieve this, the data must be passed on to the relevant authorities and, to ensure that this occurs in the future, the process should be made obligatory and, if necessary, written into the guidelines of the state archaeological authorities. This obligation would include both the recording of “personalizable” information and the duty to notify the state archaeological authorities of the existence of such information. They would, in turn, have to decide who is responsible for forwarding the data to the appropriate organization and, on a case-to-case basis, what the appropriate organization is (e.g. a camp memorial site, the International Tracing Service or the Red Cross Tracing). It is necessary to develop an effective strategy for the future, which will make this information quickly and easily accessible without putting too much of a burden on individual archaeologists or the state archaeological authorities. This can only be achieved through in-depth communication with camp memorial sites, the tracing services, victims’ associations and other organizations. Furthermore, in this context, it will be also necessary to discuss the possible return of items since, at least according to the heritage protection law in Brandenburg, “movable cultural assets” (i.e. finds) can only be considered as state property if their owner cannot be identified. 3

The second important step which is often neglected during and after the recording process is closely linked to the first: finds that may be of significant historical, evidential and display value, such as handmade and reutilized objects or those marked with industrial stamps, deliberate scratches, engravings, identification numbers or names, must be conserved as soon as possible. Professional cleaning is needed, for example, to make names fully legible or even visible at all, and conservation treatment is necessary to stop further deterioration and the complete loss of such information. Although the finds are of a relatively young age and many are made of modern materials, their fragility should not be underestimated. Depending on the environment, even materials such as iron, enamel, aluminum and low-quality metal alloys can corrode rapidly, and it is exactly these materials which were most frequently marked, engraved or used to produce items such as crockery, cutlery and combs.

How to save time?

It is obvious that the selection and processing of finds, the necessary additional research and the forwarding of information would require a great deal of time and effort. So where, if possible, could time be saved? Let us stay with the example from Brandenburg: the amount of time and financial resources allocated for post-excavation work are approximately a quarter or a third of those planned for an excavation. It could be thought necessary to alter this to a ratio of one to one to meet the requirements of sites which produce large quantities of finds. It might also be feasible to economize and increase efficiency during the excavation so that more finds processing and analysis could take place on site. Would it be possible to save fieldwork time by limiting the

3 BbgDSchG 2004, chapter 2 section 12 clause 1 (see footnote 1).
recording of features and structures which require little or no interpretation? For example, are detailed descriptions, section and plan drawings of a well-preserved built structure absolutely necessary if it is identifiable on historical plans and aerial photographs? In such cases, recording could be limited to a minimum planning of features and high-quality photographic documentation. A well-founded selection would also significantly reduce the number of finds and therefore the financial and personnel costs in the long term, because fewer finds take up less time to catalogue and less space in overcrowded archives.

But what should happen to the discarded objects? Can they simply be thrown away? If so, where should they be disposed of and who carries the cost? Former prison camps are emotionally and politically charged sites. This also applies to many of the objects found within them. Would the disposal of these items be acceptable to the survivors, the relatives of victims, and to the general public? This must be carefully thought through. But the material remaining after selection does not only consist of metal waste or unidentifiable ceramic sherds. Depending on the state of preservation, these “leftovers” would include a number of items which are almost identical to, or slightly less well-preserved than, the objects retained for research and curation. They could be easily employed for pedagogical purposes by local museums, memorial-sites, schools or non-profit-organizations. As they are no longer legally considered to be “movable cultural assets”, there are no restrictions on their use and so they can be handled by visitors or put on display at unsupervised locations.

Conclusion

The potential of objects recovered from contemporary historical sites, as described in this paper, shows that these items deserve the same careful treatment that is normally applied to artifacts from older periods. This presents us with various new problems which must be understood, considered, and discussed. These range from the practical difficulties during an excavation to the theoretical pros and cons of the selection process. The example from the State of Brandenburg demonstrates that the selection of finds is legally possible but not easy. The value of the material in general cannot be doubted but cannot be assumed for every single object. This distinction is difficult to make and requires, apart from experience, extensive research and an interdisciplinary approach, both money and, especially, time. A careful balance must be made between the available resources, the knowledge that could be gained, and the possible museological and pedagogical benefits—there is no general solution. Decisions will have to be made on a case-by-case basis and some uncertainty will always remain. Contemporary archaeology is a relatively new field of research and is still in a learning process where doubts and uncertainties are allowed. It is essential that these issues are openly addressed. Only an active dialogue between all of the groups involved—field archaeologists, state archaeological authorities, university archaeology departments, camp memorial sites and museums—will help to provide answers to open questions, and find creative and meaningful solutions to unsolved problems. This paper is intended to stimulate that discourse.

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