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## Remarks on the expert meeting »Bulk Finds – Bulks of Finds« in Mauerbach Charterhouse

### Abstract

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The article summarises a meeting devoted to archaeological bulk finds in Austria that took place in 2014 in the seat of the Federal Monuments Authority in Mauerbach. The issues discussed included storage and study of the finds as well as the prospective selection thereof.

**Keywords:** archaeological bulk finds, archaeological finds in Austria, storage of archaeological finds

The intensification of archaeological monuments preservation in Austria in recent decades has led to a considerable increase in archaeological excavations throughout the country (Hofer 2015b). This is accompanied by an enormous increase in the number of the discovered objects. Together with excavation documentation, these eventually conserved finds are the only surviving evidence of the destroyed archaeological monuments.

The dramatic increase in the amount of finds is, of course, first and foremost, due to the improved preservation of monuments and the resulting increase in archaeological activities. In 2013 alone, around 670 projects took place in Austria (Hebert, Hofer 2013, 11).

The substantial amount of finds and, above all, the unimaginable extent of knowledge that can potentially be gained from studying them, were only possible thanks to the development and growing refinement of archaeological methods over the last 50 years. Not only have the experts developed and gained access to new sources of information in the field of dendrochronology and material analysis, but also novel methodological approaches to the processing of various assemblages of finds were introduced. This is most clearly shown by the

increasingly scientific way of handling ceramic, glass or metal finds.

Ultimately, research methods development – an essentially positive phenomenon – has twofold consequences for archaeology. While it opened up important perspectives and can bring new findings, it also led to an enormous increase in the amount of time and materials needed for handling large assemblages of finds, thus making it extremely laborious to the point of it being very difficult or even impossible.

In the face of growing financial and human resources shortage, archaeological heritage management (and archaeology as a whole) is confronted with the pressing need (Brather, Krause 2013) for adequate and, most of all, feasible handling methods of bulk finds, still mostly financed by public funds or funds accumulated due to legal obligations. Moreover state-run heritage preservation activities are continuously questioned and criticised to the point where calls to >pre-select< relevant sites and artefacts found therein, or eliminate or neglect >irrelevant< objects are put forth.

The objective of the expert meeting held on 21 August 2014 in the Mauerbach Archaeology Centre (Lower Austria) was to bring together archaeologists

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**Fig. 1. Glimpse into the archaeological storage of the Federal Monuments Authority Austria in Mauerbach Charterhouse (by Christoph Blesl, Federal Monuments Authority Austria)**

from various institutions to exchange practical experiences in handling of bulks of finds, and to discuss possible strategies for the future (Hofer 2015a) (Fig. 1). The meeting focused primarily on multiple ways of obtaining new scientific findings rather than on presentation of the findings themselves. Question of finds selection, analysing and quantifying materials, collecting and documenting the finds, automating and digitalising finds recording process, as well as time and resources management were among the highlights of the discussion.

Another focal point of the meeting was the scientific significance of “bulk finds assemblages”: what specific questions can be answered mostly or exclusively by the handling of larger assemblages? What are the advantages and disadvantages of handling the smaller ones? Can any meaningful conclusions be drawn beyond the mere collection of voluminous data? (Fig. 2).

An immense interdisciplinary interest in the topic was manifested not only by the number of speeches, but also by the high engagement, at times even emotional involvement, into the discussion that concluded the meeting. At this point we would like to wholeheartedly thank Gabriele Scharrer-Liška for recording contributions to the discussion.

It was interesting to observe that the discourse that has been going on for decades about an alleged “antagonism” between scientific research and preventive excavations has evidently shifted from the critique of the excavation methods to questioning the meaningfulness of “excavating for storage” (see Daniela Kern’s paper in Hofer 2015b). Therefore it has to be mentioned that the Federal Monuments Authority Austria published around 40 monographs on materials from the field of Austrian archaeological monuments conservation in

the last 15 years; in addition, numerous contributions are published in the annual report *Fundberichte aus Österreich* as well as examination papers from relevant specialist institutes at Austrian universities. Not everything >gets lost unseen in a storage<. Ultimately, the general opinion was that the material basis in Austrian archaeology was still far too small for the scientists to forego the finds from >untargeted< preventive excavations (as it has been discussed in the Netherlands: see Hauke Jöns’ paper in Hofer 2015b). Also, the idea of a >pre-selection< of already known movable and immovable finds or even categories thereof (in the sense of release for undocumented disposal or destruction) was completely rejected. The questions whether every single find should be granted the same amount of attention at the stage of scientific analysis and if the initial recording – often laborious – can be sped up were intensively discussed (see Alice Kaltenberger’s paper in Hofer 2015b as a proponent of a possibly exhaustive handling). At this point, a call for introducing generally accepted terminology and typology for various categories of finds was repeatedly voiced; a number of similar attempts were undertaken for ceramics in the past (Gaisbauer *et al.* 2010). Generally, a sentiment for uniform guidelines, the use of which would, of course, be voluntary, was present. In the coming years the department for archaeology of the Federal Monuments Authority Austria shall grant more attention to this issue. Furthermore, broad opening of already existing or yet to be created databases was discussed, with the issues of the re-use conditions and, most of all, data maintenance in the spotlight. A recurrent demand was also put forth to formulate clear research questions before the study of finds begins that would enable appropriately targeted, and

hence resource-efficient, workflow. In particular, the question of documentation of the research workload that should later be published for the sake of estimating the cost of the future projects (see the paper by Andreas Heege in Hofer 2015b).

The intensity of the discussions at the Archaeology Centre in Mauerbach showed, at least in the eyes of the authors, that there is a broad consensus among the scientific community with regard to the scientific significance of the bulk finds as an archaeological source of knowledge; appropriate scientific methods to access them were already presented in a variety of ways. The most disputed questions were related to the work invested into handling and processing a find, whereby the opposing sides are, generally speaking, proponents of processing of all single finds on the one hand, and proponents of a selective approach on the other. However, even this antagonism can be traced back mainly to the unanimously voiced resources scarcity, as the proponents of the latter approach admit that »if they only could«, they would also collect all materials without



**Fig. 2.** Wien-Nußdorf, Kahlenberger Straße Nr. 26, 19th/20th century assemblage of ceramic finds, plant covers (by Petra Laubenstein, Federal Monuments Authority Austria)

exceptions. All in all, the underlying problem in the research evaluation of the “bulks of finds” is, unsurprisingly, the provision of sufficient human and financial resources for development-led archaeological projects. Indisputably, this is going to be one of the greatest challenges for archaeological research and heritage management in the coming decades.

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