Something Ends, Something Begins: 
Refuse and Reuse in Islamic Archaeology

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Introduction: A fearful threshold

“Something ends, something begins” is a recurrent proverb in the lips of characters of the fantasy novels of *The Witcher* series, by Andrzej Sapkowski. It is often pronounced by Elves, creatures painfully aware of reaching the end of their historical age and whose reactions range between violent rebellion and resigned acceptance. Whatever their fate, the Elves of the novels are marked by the understanding that their world is ending and something else is beginning. In the end of the series, the reader learns that the Elves are not the only characters who are trapped in that fearful threshold between an end and a beginning.

Archaeologists are often found in a similar situation when facing the complex task of looking at the past from the present. The threshold between these two stages, if not fearful, is problematic, but not always addressed directly. When thinking about the past, scholars are often tempted to place themselves directly there, in the place of the Other, so that they can assess phenomena from their perspective. However, archaeologists live in the present, here, as Us, and can only look at the past from our point of view (cf. Moreland 2012, 37–74, for a perspective focused on the European Middle Ages). Ignoring the threshold between past and present can only lead to biased and often pernicious visions of history. And yet the threshold needs to be crossed if we are going to do archaeology. The question of how lies at the core of archaeological theory. In the history of the discipline, different models (or paradigms) have been proposed to do this, from the cultural-historical views of the first half of the 20th century to subsequent developments of processual and postprocessual theories, reaching to the most recent stances of New Materialism and Posthumanism. Paradoxically, the success of these paradigms may have been detrimental to the consideration of the fearful threshold by many archaeologists. After all, paradigms bring with themselves the reassurance of tested theories and methods.

For over a century, advances in the discipline of archaeology have contributed to the development of standardized approaches to material remains of past societies. Excavations, surveys, studies of materials like pottery, metal, bones or seeds can be addressed systematically, in line
with the most recent advances in methods and theory. There is something very comforting about this, because it allows scholars from different areas to exchange ideas and comparisons more effectively. However, scholars are also at risk of becoming too comfortable in their own fields, and of entrenching themselves so deeply in established areas, methods and theories that they become insensitive to the challenge of the fearful threshold.

The transition between refuse and reuse is another manifestation of this threshold, where the past-of-the-past and the future-of-the-past meet. This is the reason why a focus on this becomes very useful to shake archaeologists from the illusion of stability and force them to reckon with the fundamental challenge of the discipline. And this is particularly important in Islamic archaeology.

**Islamic archaeology and the threshold**

Islamic archaeology has traditionally remained mostly isolated from developments in archaeological theory, with recent, important exceptions in attempts to configure a disciplinary profile (e.g. Insoll 1999; Millwright 2011; Walker et al. 2021). In contrast, scholarship in the field is strongly rooted in their regional areas of study. It would be fair to say that the development of Islamic archaeology, almost since its inception, has been the application of established theories and methods to the study of particular regions of the Islamic world. In other words, people did Islamic archaeology, but there were no Islamic archaeologists until a few decades ago.

Nowadays there is certainly an Islamic archaeology and there is a community of practitioners, but there are still problems to define precisely what the object of study encompasses. There is an abundance of studies in different regions of the Islamic world that should allow for comparative work. However, a focus on the dimension of the “Islamic” brings the risk to diffuse the nuances of the different regions. As an Islamic archaeologist, I have found myself in the difficult position of trying to extract general conclusions of comparative studies without falling in stereotypes.

This places the discipline in a very peculiar position. Entrenched in their own regional fields, and with a lack of a theoretical tradition of their own, Islamic archaeologists search for a way to characterize the field “Islamic” in general, while at the same time being able to map nuances and topology of its different regions and histories.

A look into the fearful threshold between refuse and reuse offers a good opportunity to review a topic that has very relevant implications for the discipline. The papers in this JIA Special Issue look at it from different theoretical standpoints, and with different interests in mind, and yet they reach similar and complementary conclusions. This suggests that there is a potential to explore convergent attitudes to the threshold between the past-of-the-past and the future-of-the-past across the Islamic world. Whether these convergences are “universal” (i.e. beyond the “Islamic”) or pan-Islamic is an important question, but in any case the phenomena under study here are worth mapping and contrasted against the diffusion of other features of the “Islamic” itself.

**The volume**

This *JIA* Special Issue was inspired by the webinar *Garbage, Recycling and Living With Rubble*, organized by Bethany Walker as part of the MA Programme in Islamic Archaeology of the University of Bonn (Germany) in the Winter Term of 2020/2021. The papers were selected among the respondents to a call of the JIA between March and December 2021.
The first two papers consider refuse and reuse of urban contexts. The analysis of ceramics plays an important role in both works, although we are well beyond studies focused solely on typologies and chronologies. The first of them is Miguel Jiménez Puertas’s text, which I have had the pleasure of translating into English in collaboration with Ana Mateos Orozco (herself a promising young scholar in ceramic studies). This article was originally published in Spanish ten years ago in the journal *Debates en Arqueología Medieval* (Jiménez Puertas 2012), but remains a fresh example of the potential of ceramic studies to look into the fearful threshold, and for that reason I requested to include it in the present volume. Jiménez Puertas’ work is based on a combination of well-established theories of processual archaeologists (mainly M. Schiffer and C. Orton), applied with intelligence to an assemblage of early Islamic refuse pit in Madinat Ilbīrah (Granada, Spain). The results are insightful and inspiring, and show how approaching archaeological remains as refuse of everyday activities can bring unexpected glimpses of daily life in past Islamic societies. The relevance of this article is not so much in the application of particular methods of analysis (as innovative as those were and remain in Islamic archaeology), but in Jiménez Puertas’ adaptation of those methods to the research of a particular region, opening new possibilities and questions.

Something similar can be said of the second paper, written by Itamar Taxel and Joel Roskin. They focus on the phenomenon of plot-and-berms agroecosystems in the Caesarea/Qaysāriyya region of Israel. The role of domestic refuse here is fundamental, as it was a basic element of stabilization and fertilization of the system. A careful analysis of the plots shows the link of the refuse documented there with the waste dumps of the nearby Islamic town of Qaysāriyya, and the dates suggest that the system was created and maintained between the late 10th and the 12th centuries. This is a remarkable result, because historical sources suggest that this period in the Levant is marked by social restlessness and settlement abandonment, as the authors note. Yet Taxel and Roskin achieve something else beyond this conclusion, as relevant as it is for the region. In highlighting the affordances of the urban waste of Qaysāriyya for the creation of the plot-and-berm systems, they provide an excellent picture of the principle of reuse, and one that contrasts nicely with the previous paper.

The next two papers in this collection feature case studies of reuse of architectural *spolia* with clear political intentionality. Peter Brown’s work traces a feasible biography of the “Cup of the Pharaoh,” a large basin used in the congregational mosque of Samarra, through the study of similar basins documented in archaeological and written sources. In his analysis, the “Cup” was most probably a *labrum*, a Roman basin, possibly from a bathhouse in Egypt and transported to Samarra along with other *spolia* to be used in the princely project. The Pharaonic connection, if spurious, is significant, as Brown illustrates with abundant examples of other basins used in the works of early Islamic dynasties. The repurposing of *spolia* for the creation of waterworks was clearly a mark of prestige and connection to the past, and therefore a solid foundation for dynastic legitimation. Interestingly, Brown closes his series of examples with a mention to Amirid contemporary creations made in Cordoba on the models of past stone basins, therefore opening the floor for the next paper in this volume.

Carmen González Gutiérrez’s text continues the discussion on *spolia*, with a focus on buildings, and in particular in mosques in al-Andalus. She distinguishes, following the work of R. Brilliant and D. Kinney (2011), between *spolia in se*, that is, the reuse of materials, and *spolia in re*, the shaping of new architectural elements through “quotation and reproduction” (2011, 2). González Gutiérrez’s work documents exhaustively the use of *spolia in se* as a form of dynastical
legitimation by the Umayyads in both sides of the Mediterranean. The reused elements would be placed in highly visible positions, marking spaces of authority and centrality. The association between spolia and authority became so relevant that it came to inspire the principle of spolia in re, of imitation of styles, when the Umayyad dynasty of al-Andalus was in a position to create its own architectonical vocabulary. The study of González Gutiérrez presents an original point of view in placing this innovation in the early years of the Caliphal period, in the design of the capitals of the congregational mosque of Madīnat al-Zahrāʾ (b. 944–945).

The volume at this point remains a bit unbalanced. With two papers looking at refuse and reuse of everyday urban communities and other two considering the reuse of spolia as a source of legitimation, a reader could be left with the impression that leaning on the past is only a prerogative of town-dwellers or ruling dynasties. Nothing further than the truth, as the final paper of this volume, by Katrina Lillios, comes to show. Lillios follows the line opened by Okasha El-Daly (2005) in Egypt to analyse popular engagement with pre-Islamic monuments in al-Andalus. Focusing on megaliths, she tries to bridge an over 2000-year gap between prehistory (6000–2500 BCE) and the Islamic period in Iberia (711–1492), with a specific focus on archaeological evidence to bring clarity about the attitudes of non-elite Andalusis. The results of her exploration show clear patterns of activities in the megaliths during the Islamic period, ranging from simple frequentation to the installation of marabouts and even cemeteries. The “afterlives” of these megaliths make them Islamic sites, Lillios concludes brilliantly, beyond their origin in a remote past. Therefore, this is a form of Islamization of the past, distinct and no less relevant than the one performed by the ruling dynasties in their consolidation of power.

The five papers of this volume, therefore, offer an interesting overview of theories, methods and approaches to the topics of refuse and reuse that allow the reader to consider the activities under study as hinges between the past and the present-future of the Islamic communities that performed them. They directly confront the fearful threshold and succeed in offering suggestive interpretations for the scenarios that they find. More importantly, they show that there is a multiplicity of ways in which Islamic communities looked at their past and managed their relationship with it. Refuse, coming from the immediate past, could be discarded immediately, but could also be stored for years until the time came to reuse it as manure in agricultural systems or infill for pits and buildings. Materials from old buildings (sometimes still standing) could become cheap bulk resources, but they could equally be displayed in new buildings as a way to establish connections between power dynasties across time (and even from the pre-Islamic past). At some point, this connection was so strong that the past was enacted through the imitation of old styles in new architectural elements commissioned by rulers. But it is important to note that the past was not only a source of legitimation for the elites: the use of megaliths as spaces loaded with symbolism shows that Islamic communities valued them as a support of their own rituals and practices.

Is there something in common to these attitudes towards the past across all variety of Islamic communities in history? It would not be impossible, given that the commonality of Islam is based on a shared sense of history, in spite of clashes and contradictions between different branches and areas (cf. Ahmed 2016). The question of how to articulate all these different visions of the past in the complexity of Islamic societies is an open one, and should inspire scholars to expand the range of these studies and continue with the comparison in the future.
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