

Drowning in garbage: Garbage, community, and archaeology

Leila Papoli-Yazdi

Researcher, School of Arts and Communication, Malmö University

One of the most horrifying images of our modern civilisation is of the communities whose subsistence is based on gathering and eating garbage. This growing subsistence has not developed in the short term, but it dates back at least to the 1960s, when consumption accelerated and gradually changed the face of the planet.

Archaeologically speaking, the transformation of the nature of the waste from natural ones to single-use items and particularly industrial polymers (plastic), is changing the types and forms of artefacts to more durable but contaminating ones which can be found everywhere on a global scale.

The discipline of archaeology did not remain silent about all these transformations. It advanced its methodologies to study the mounds of garbage and the behaviour of consumers in the 1970s and introduced garbology. Garbology is mainly based on researching and documenting landfills and households' waste. But in the last 50 years, waste production has developed faster than the advancement in this field. It is one of the principal reasons why archaeology is still far from considering garbage communities, subsistence related to garbage, and rapid changes to the nature of artefacts on the list of discipline's topics.

In this presentation, I present new topics that can potentially be studied and analysed by applying garbology. To do so, I will also give objective examples from the garbological studies I have conducted in Sweden and other countries.