

Article

A Case for Buried Culture: From an *Unknown Known* to a *Known Unknown*

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Abstract: This paper makes a case for Buried Culture—humanly modified packages of sediments and artifacts. Specifically, it argues that Buried Culture amounts to an a-social, literally posthuman, cultural being. The argument proceeds through three main steps. Firstly, drawing on the prototypical example of landfills, it demonstrates that while ontically solid, Buried Culture is epistemically vacuous. Secondly, placing it between sedimentology and archaeology, a diagnosis is offered: The epistemic vehicles at our disposal either acknowledge Buried Culture’s existence as a proper being or appreciate its cultural qualities, but not both. Thirdly, an aesthetically oriented approach is proposed, adopting the analytical reasoning of the art critic as a means to straddle this gap. To illustrate this, a small-scale case study is presented, concerned with an early 20th-century landfill near Tel Aviv, Israel.

Keywords: waste; landfill; aesthetics; archaeology; sedimentology; epistemology



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1. Introduction

This paper makes a case for Buried Culture as a proper object of scholarly inquiry, arguing that it constitutes a poorly understood and literally posthuman mode of cultural being. Empirically, Buried Culture pertains to all manners of humanly modified packages of sediments and artifacts below the surface, encompassing unexcavated archaeological deposits and what geologists call *anthrosoils* [1]. In terms of scale (both temporal and spatial), Buried Culture is one of humanity’s most outstanding ‘projects,’ albeit inadvertently. It began nearly three million years ago with the first tools to be produced and continues uninterrupted, and with growing vigor, to this day, as it amasses into ever-larger depositional bodies. By all odds, it will continue to persist, form, and transform long after humanity ceases to occupy the planet, constituting our ultimate legacy for the future. Indeed, nowadays, as humanity amounts to a global force, so Buried Culture is found to cover enormous ground. So much so that Edgeworth proposed considering it under the label ‘archaeosphere’ [2] (borrowed from [3]), suggesting that it reached a breadth comparable and related to those of other spheres that envelope the planet, most notably the lithosphere, the hydrosphere, the atmosphere, and the biosphere [4].

Crucially, Buried Culture is deceptively familiar. We think we know it because it crops up: when plowing a field, cutting a trench, mining for resources, and conducting archaeological excavations; we think we know it because we produce it: burying the dead in cemeteries, disposing of waste in landfills, laying foundations, depositing time capsules in carefully chosen locations; we think we know it because at least two disciplines—archaeology and sedimentology—systematically engage it. I will try to demonstrate, however, that none of these modes of knowing truly capture Buried Culture. In fact, I will show that, presently, the term mainly indicates a conceptual lacuna, amounting to an *unknown known*. By this, I mean that it is familiarized via practice and operational modes of reasoning but remains unstated and opaque in terms of explicit discursive formulation, constituting a sort of scholarly subconscious [5]. Buried Culture is known in the sense that it is serviceable and put to work in various ways—by the farmer that fertilizes soils in order to maximize yields, the construction worker that lays foundation deposits to support a

road, or the archaeologist that digs in search of the human past. It is unknown in the sense that it is not explicitly articulated as a proper object of discursive knowledge.

This combination of practical familiarity and conceptual vacuity has been the subject of much deliberation. Among others, these include Foucault's first sense of subjugated knowledge ('historical contents that have been buried or masked in functional coherences or formal systematizations') [6] (p. 7), Polanyi's notion of tacit knowledge [7], Bourdieu's *habitus* [8], and Latour's black box [9]. In this capacity, the paper operates on familiar terrain, which it tries to harness to promote something more specific: the transformation of Buried Culture from an *unknown known* into a *known unknown*, from a poorly conceived given to an explicit object of inquiry.

Thus, the present paper tries to demonstrate that (1) Buried Culture is a real thing, (2) it is misunderstood, and (3) it can and should be constituted as a proper object of research. In this vein, the paper begins by demonstrating that Buried Culture is an *unknown known*. It does so by drawing on landfills—a widespread and familiar cultural construct—showing that existing concepts are regularly deflected off their surface, leaving the large voluminous bodies themselves unaccounted for. It is against this background that Buried Culture's constitution as an a-social and posthuman entity is substantiated. Next, a diagnosis for this conceptual lacuna is offered, suggesting that Buried Culture occupies the epistemic space between the objects constituted by archaeology and sedimentology. On these grounds, I suggest that aesthetic nomenclature—specifically formal analysis—can serve as a preliminary conceptual vehicle for the exploration and appreciation of Buried Culture. Finally, an empirical demonstration is offered by way of a case study of an early 20th-century landfill near Tel Aviv, Israel. The paper concludes with a brief discussion that seeks to expound on the proposed conceptual transformation in terms of an axiological trade-off and a shift in priorities.

2. Buried Culture as an *Unknown Known*: Landfills and Epistemic Limits

In this section, I make two claims about Buried Culture: (1) that it consists in being socially inaccessible and outside the purview of the human sphere, and (2) that the conceptual vehicles at our disposal are unable to carry us across the threshold. Landfills—designated sites for waste disposal through burial—are particularly suitable for this precisely because they are purposefully constructed instances of Buried Culture and are, therefore, socially significant and clearly 'known.' Accordingly, I will try to demonstrate here that the landfill as a (*known*) social being does not encompass the landfill as an instance of (presently *unknown*) Buried Culture, although both indicate the same physical entity.

Let us begin with the commonplace conception of landfills as physical bodies produced for and by the disposal of artifacts and artificial substances, collectively designated 'waste,' 'refuse,' 'rubbish,' and other terms of this sort [10,11]. Technically, disposal of waste in landfills is done by burial, producing a distinct sedimentary body while physically distancing its contents from the living human sphere. Thus, waste makes landfills. But 'waste' also denotes a highly contingent condition [12]. Whether articulated in monetary [13], ideological [14], aesthetic, psychological [15], hygienic [16], functional, or any other sense, 'waste' is a (usually negative) valuation of a being, an entity, or a substance; it is not a being as such. Moreover, it is an inherently unstable and transitory valuation: a social construct that we set up in order to tear down [17]. Its function is to recognize potentially disruptive or hazardous entities, setting in motion the effort to get rid of them, often by way of simple physical exclusion. Thus, the biological organism pushes them out in the form of excrement, and the town does so in the form of landfills [18,19]. Crucially, however, once excluded from the valuing context (whether an organism's body or a social setting), the valuation no longer applies [20]. Thus, while produced from waste, landfills do not—and (logically) cannot—consist of waste.

Indeed, the social sphere has its limits, and landfilling is a purposeful mechanism for placing objects and substances beyond them. Specifically, the limits of concern here are marked by the Earth's surface, and the principal mechanism that carries objects beyond

them is burial. As Gibson observed, we engage the world and the objects that populate it via the mediation of surfaces [21]. We do not have access to an entity's interior but only to the qualities manifest on or through their outer frame, their surface [22]. Thus, to bury an object is to consign it to the subsurface, locating it beyond our senses and outside the sphere of social operations. The effectiveness of this procedure is readily illustrated in cemeteries, the idea of buried treasure, and the surprise of accidental archaeological discoveries [23]. Thus, landfilling is a remarkably straightforward and simple method to undo waste. If you bury it, you de-socialize it, and if you de-socialize it, it is no longer waste—it is literally posthuman.

However, it is undeniable that Western society widely conceives landfills as ultimate embodiments of waste [11,24,25]. This, I would like to suggest, is due to a subtle but significant shift of focus from the deposited and de-socialized objects and substances to the massive body they produce collectively. Landfills do not purposefully destroy the rejected materials brought to them (e.g., incineration), and they do not strive to transform them into something of value (e.g., recycling [26]). Instead, they seek to contain, keeping unwanted matter in check, assuring it does not spill over and flow back into the social system that rejected it [27]. In this capacity, their status as modern embodiments of waste is entirely justified. By drawing matter out of circulation and retaining it in designated facilities, landfills destroy waste at the level of specifiable objects. However, in doing so, the waste valuation (that is stripped from the more-or-less specifiable entities deposited) is transferred to the emergent collective body. Landfills are, thus, 'waste' generalized, abstracted, and institutionalized.

The institutionalization of waste by landfills is very much one of packaging and labeling. Whatever the landfill contains is regarded as waste (or refuse, filth, the abject), not because of certain inherent qualities but because of its location inside a facility labeled 'landfill.' Like cans of preservatives on a supermarket shelf, announcing their contents via labels attached to their surface (pickles, peas, tomatoes concentrate, etc.), the landfill wraps its contents in a case and designates them 'waste.' We do not have to open the can to know what is inside; the label does all the work, and there is probably no better way to preserve (and produce) social value than to build a box and inscribe the appropriate caption onto its side. As long as the box remains closed, the designation will remain unchallenged and stable. Thus, the multitude of objects and substances deposited in landfills becomes socially de-constituted [20]. Buried below the surface, they are entirely disengaged from the valuing and designating social sphere. Socially speaking, they do not exist as individual and discrete entities but only as an undifferentiated composite, collectively known as a landfill.

Insofar as landfills constitute 'waste,' it is of a kind that is different from the contingent sort that served to create them in the first place (i.e., the sort defined above as potentially hazardous or disruptive). Indeed, they do not only constitute another kind of 'waste,' but also one that defies the contingent concept's operative significance. Whereas 'waste' in the contingent sense consists in active and purposeful engagement, the institutionalized 'waste' consists in abstraction, disengagement, and withdrawal—blackboxing. One must be cautious, therefore, not to confuse them. Either way, whether blackboxed or contingent—and this is the crucial point here—the concepts at our disposal, by which landfills are rendered *known*, afford an understanding that is only skin deep. They cannot cross the limits of the social sphere into the realm of Buried Culture.

Another strategy widely employed when confronted with a landfill's contents, whether through archaeological excavations, infrastructure work, or other forms of sedimentaryurbation, is to fall back on more specific subsets that speak for particular social categories: bags, bottles, plates, food scraps, newspapers, cans, etc. [18,28]. However, for our concerns, this fall-back fails on two accounts. First, it runs up against the same problems as 'waste.' Although not nearly as ephemeral, designations like those listed above are socially contingent. They pertain to the value, meaning, or function of a particular object within the living human environment, formulated in economic, purposeful, political, or other terms. Accordingly, once the object lands outside the borders of the social milieu, these

designations cease to apply: as the physical object with its various tangible properties is deposited in the landfill, its social designation as ‘knife,’ or ‘battery,’ or ‘dice’ dissolves into non-existence. Second, these social designations are not only ignorant of the a-social and posthuman conditions of burial but also ignore the condition of waste that was responsible for their disposal in the first place.

Thus, it seems that whatever social and conceptual venues are available to us, they persistently fail to capture the landfill as an instance of Buried Culture (i.e., a physical subsurface, posthuman cultural being): our concepts and reasoning are incompatible with it. They are incompatible because, as an instance of Buried Culture, the landfill consists in its a-sociality—being divorced from people, institutions, and the incessant circulations of resources and values [23]—while the concepts we bring to bear on it are inherently social. Consequently, when we apply these notions to Buried Culture, our sight is inevitably deflected, mistaking the *known known* (i.e., the socially constituted landfill) for the *unknown known* (i.e., the posthuman instance of Buried Culture), either confusing the frame for the object (the label for the substance) or a reconstructed past for the tangible present.

Presently, therefore, Buried Culture designates a blind area in our field of vision that cannot be treated with the epistemic vehicles at hand—others must be devised. For this purpose, let us consult the professions most experienced with Buried Culture—archaeology and sedimentology—to attempt a more precise definition of the conceptual problem we face.

3. Between Archaeology and Sedimentology

Although neither sedimentology nor archaeology shows much concern for Buried Culture per se, the very fact that they engage with it in a systematic and sustained manner suggests that they grasp something fundamental about it [29]. How, then, do these fields conceive Buried Culture? For sedimentology, Buried Culture is primarily a type of depositional entity that consists in being in the ground, a member of a larger class of sediments, alongside dunes, marls, and river deposits. For archaeology, on the other hand, Buried Culture is firstly an extension of human society: a sedimented, stabilized, and solidified output of people’s behavior [30–32] (pp. 166–172), differing from other circumstances of material culture by degree, not by kind, e.g., [33–35]. Thus, each understands Buried Culture by subsuming it under a broader frame of reference. It is a particular sort of geological formation for the sedimentologist, while, for the archaeologist, it is an extension of a social entity.

Importantly, however, for sedimentology, Buried Culture constitutes a break. It is a new type of sediment that contains otherwise foreign materials and structures, marking a divergence from the familiar mechanisms of deposition and soil formation. Deeper yet, Buried Culture pushes sedimentology to trace and incorporate a distinction between nature and culture, physically embodied by Boundary A—the plane of contact between humanly modified deposits (i.e., Buried Culture) and natural ones (Figure 1) [36]. One does not have to equate this distinction with the idealized Nature/Culture divide to acknowledge that it sets sedimentology up against remarkably deep-seated conceptual structures. After all, it is a natural science that must now incorporate substances and patterns that, in principle, do not belong [1,4,37–39].

Nothing of the sort, however, can be said for archaeology. Archaeology has always placed itself on the cultural side of things, and its engagement with Buried Culture goes back to its antiquarian beginnings [40,41]. Insofar as archaeologists distinguish Buried Culture from other parts of their empirical field (e.g., surface scatters, ruins, collections), it is on circumstantial and technical grounds pertaining to matters of engagement (e.g., excavation, survey) and the perceived quality of the data produced. The same background theories apply throughout [42], establishing a continuous range where Buried Culture constitutes a variant of other conditions and processes such as ruination, neglect, and discard [28,43–47].

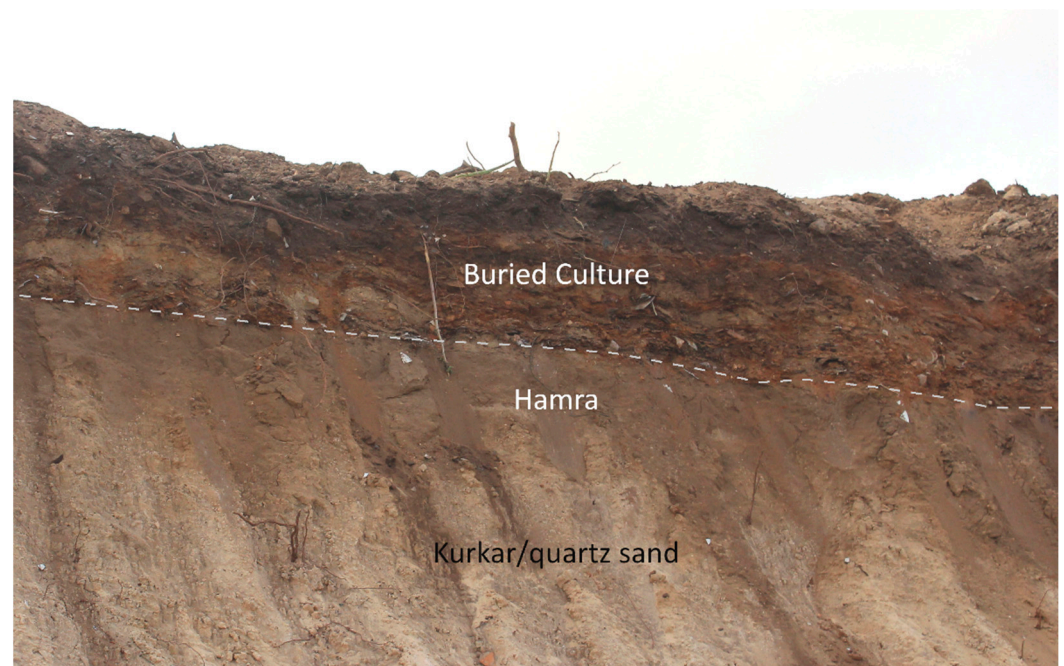


Figure 1. The western wall of a deep mechanical trench cut through the early 20th-century landfill at Mikve Israel near Tel Aviv, Israel. Note the sharp distinction between the Buried Culture deposits of the landfill above and the natural deposits of Hamra and sand below.

Thus, sedimentology recognizes Buried Culture as an empirically distinct being, while archaeology does not. However, as noted, sedimentology approaches Buried Culture as a natural science. The conceptual and analytical means at its disposal include elemental analyses, grain size distributions, and numerous presuppositions about mechanical, chemical, and biological processes. Consequently, sedimentology is unable to capture the added value we call ‘culture’ because, as a natural science, it is bound with the circulations of energy and matter. Archaeology does not do better in this respect, but for different reasons: it is blind to Buried Culture’s very existence as something distinct, not to mention its inability to capture the peculiarities of buried circumstances. Indeed, in practice, it is a field dedicated to reversing the seemingly deleterious qualities of burial, whether by evoking formation processes that can be traced back to a social point of origin [42] or by developing classificatory systems that sort the elements according to their social value, function, or both (e.g., bowl, sickle blade, grinding stone) [48,49].

There is, thus, a yawning gap between archaeology’s and sedimentology’s grasp of Buried Culture. Presently, we can acknowledge its distinction as either a well-defined empirical being or as a cultural entity, but not both. This predicament defines the problem and challenge that Buried Culture presents us with and that now we must try to overcome: How are we to conceive Buried Culture as a being that is both ontologically distinct and cultural?

4. A Way Forward: Aesthetics and Formal Analysis

The account above places Buried Culture at an impasse: however approached, it remains out of reach. We are unable to conceive it as simultaneously cultural and empirically distinct, and we fail to wrap our heads around the posthuman mode of culture it presents us with—a mode of cultural being that consists in being completely divorced from the human sphere. However, by no means is it farther removed and less accessible compared to subatomic particles, or radio waves, or black holes, or so many other objects of scientific research. Scientists study and engage numerous objects that are otherwise remote and inaccessible, and they do so by constructing appropriate devices, implementing carefully designed experiments, and mobilizing suitable concepts [50–53]. By the same token, it

stands to reason that what we need in order to study Buried Culture is an ensemble of appropriate empirical and conceptual devices.

Empirically, recourse to sedimentology and archaeology leaves us in good hands. After all, these are the two fields that purposefully and systematically engage the subsurface and, thus, offer the most experienced and knowledgeable ‘toolkits.’ It is conceptually, however, where we clearly come up short. The deflection of our gaze off a landfill’s surface and the gap between archaeology and sedimentology demonstrate this much. We require terms with which to think of Buried Culture. More specifically, we need concepts to capture the essential qualities of Buried Culture and carry them over into a stable analytical setting. These requirements, I would like to suggest, can be answered with aesthetics, particularly the formal analysis of art.

4.1. *The Case for Aesthetics*

The suitability of aesthetics and formal analysis for our purposes rests in two capacities:

1. A capacity to direct a culturally invested gaze at corporeal features of Buried Culture (e.g., form, composition, texture);
2. An ability to deliver these features—with appropriate adjustments—for analysis without compromising our object’s (i.e., Buried Culture) integrity.

Moreover, much like Buried Culture consists in being divorced from social values, kinetics, and reasoning, so does formal analysis distance itself from considerations external to a work of art—social, historical, biographical, etc.—in favor of internal ones. It, thus, sets a barrier between its object of analysis and the human sphere from which this object derives (and to which it is returned), asserting a conceptual divide equivalent to the split produced by the Earth’s surface for society and Buried Culture.

The link between aesthetics and Buried Culture goes deeper. Recently, drawing on Rancière, González-Ruibal pointed out that archaeology and modern art share the same aesthetic regime, one that consists in chaotic juxtapositions. However, while artists produce these juxtapositions through collage, montage, and fragmentation, archaeologists find them in the field, an observation that also holds for students of Buried Culture [43] (pp. 91–97). This aesthetic regime, I would like to suggest, communicates the a-social, posthuman condition of Buried Culture, mediated by the intractable confusion of things indiscriminately mixed together: cultural and natural agencies, functional and dysfunctional tools, movable artifacts and immovable features, medical waste and construction debris; everything and anything can partake in it. Consider the item in Figure 2. It comprises three parts: a fragmented brick, dentures, and a base of a tin can. Separately, they are readily identifiable, but fused, they produce a strange, somewhat monstrous, new being. We can work the parts, but the composite whole that emerges from their amalgamation is beyond us. Buried Culture is this same thing writ large. It is an amalgam that flies in the face of functioning social distinctions and order [14,54–56] (ch. 1).

Hence, aesthetics seems to offer a nomenclature and reasoning well-suited to conceptually reverberate key features of Buried Culture. In this capacity, it proposes that the student of Buried Culture adopts the stance of an art critic, a person trained to appreciate objects for their structure, composition, and texture [57].

4.2. *Towards an Application of Aesthetics to Buried Culture*

Two elements of formal analysis are commonly distinguished: (1) defining the fundamental components of which a work is made (e.g., color, lines, textures), and (2) determining how these elements are organized to produce certain effects and patterns [58] (chs. 2–6) [59] (chs. 4–5). In a similar vein, the application of formal analysis to instances of Buried Culture will necessitate a definition of its constitutive components and an articulation of the relations among them to capture patterns and configurations they support and produce.



Figure 2. A hybrid artifact.

Having said this, however, it is evident that the circumstances of Buried Culture are unlike those of art and that the analytical procedures used for the latter cannot be applied to the former without accommodation. Thus, for example, in the visual arts and in painting, most of all, color is among the most foundational constitutive elements. However, it is utterly irrelevant for Buried Culture because the circumstances of burial implicate the absence of light, of which color is a function. One might ask, therefore, what feature of Buried Culture is as foundational and necessary as color is for painting. This feature is probably substance, the various types of minerals, rocks, and artificially fabricated materials assembled in a given subsurface formation. Thus, whereas, in painting, we may speak of the artist's palette and the range of colors used, in cases of Buried Culture, we may speak of the range of substances constituting them. Perhaps, one could even speak of substance schemes similar to the monochromatic, analogous, and complementary color schemes discussed for paintings.

Lines, real or implied, are another constituent element in art. They mark boundaries, convey direction and motion, and define shapes. In circumstances of Buried Culture (and elsewhere), all lines are implied lines by way of interfaces and orientations. Thus, for example, we may speak of planes of contact between layers of sediment and features, or we may note fine laminations or 'strings' of objects within an enclosing matrix. All of these are not unlike lines on canvas—they too convey direction and delineate boundaries. Importantly, these planes and lines are as varied in settings of Buried Culture as they are in art: they may be horizontal, vertical, or diagonal; they may be sharp and clear or vague; they may be straight, curved, sinuous, or rugged. Similarly, as in art, the shapes observed can be divided into geometric and organic forms. Geometric shapes are regular, approximating known named forms such as the cylinder or the cube, while organic shapes are irregular or amorphous. The former is commonly attributed to artificial features (e.g., pits and walls), while the latter is associated with sedimentological units.

Once accommodations of this sort are in place, we may begin to construct an aesthetic understanding of Buried Culture. One can explore, for instance, a particular case for patterns of distinction, contrast, and directionality; one can ask it questions about matters of focus and emphasis, figure and ground. One can also analyze an instance of Buried Culture for interplays of unity and variety or explore it for rhythmic patterns and orderly structures.

However, while one analyzes a work of art through direct observation, the analysis of Buried Culture necessarily proceeds through the mitigation of various geophysical devices (remote sensing, paleomagnetism, resistivity, etc.) or via purposeful de-construction. Moreover, while the analysis of art usually encompasses the object in its entirety, the

analysis of Buried Culture will usually make its way through sampling (i.e., excavation). Thus, not only do the elements of Buried Culture differ from those of art, but they are also discerned and defined by different means, primarily those provided by archaeology and sedimentology: excavation, stratigraphy, and typology, to mention but a few [60,61]. In this vein, it is appropriate to say that the study of Buried Culture hinges on our capacity to put an aesthetic spin on archaeological and sedimentological methods.

5. A Case Study: Mikve Israel Landfill

Having established Buried Culture as an aesthetic being and set up formal analysis as a means to comprehend it, it is now time to put these claims to work, if only in a preliminary fashion. For this purpose, a small case study is presented, concerning an early 20th-century waste dump located at the western margins of the Mikve Israel Agricultural School, on the outskirts of the larger Dan Metropolitan area, Israel (Figure 3). The site in question was one of several locations in the school's territory that served, during the British Mandate (1918–1948), to dispose of municipal waste from nearby Tel Aviv [62]. It covered approximately 12 acres and was formed over a decade and a half, spanning the late 1930s and early 1950s, constituting a ring of cultural deposits around a naturally occurring hillock. Initially, waste from Tel Aviv was deposited along the hill's north-western face, then up its northern and north-western faces, and lastly, during the early 1950s, along its southern face (Balslev, 2019, personal communication).



Figure 3. Aerial photograph and location of Mikve Israel Landfill.

A small 2×2 m trench was manually excavated in its northern sector, exposing a 1.8 m deep sequence of cultural deposits (Area A). In section, a range of colors is immediately apparent: brown, red, orange, yellow, grey, black, and various combinations thereof. These color variations are mainly a function of the fine-grain matrix of the layers, attributable to both naturally occurring sediments—quartz sand and reddish-brown loam—and culturally derived ones—ash and rust. Notwithstanding the highly variegated nature of this sequence, it collapses into three major stratigraphic units (Figure 4). The lowest unit (Unit III), approximately 0.8 m thick, superimposes the natural compact *hamra* soil and is characterized by reddish color, apparently due to high rust content. Above it is Unit II,

marked by high ash content that gives it a dark grey shade, and it, too, is approximately 0.8 m thick. Finally, Unit I constitutes a 0.25–0.4 m thick ‘topsoil layer.’ This unit differs from the units below primarily in texture: it is relatively fine-grained and less brittle. Each unit is readily subdivided further into smaller depositional components, demonstrating a much more variegated pattern.

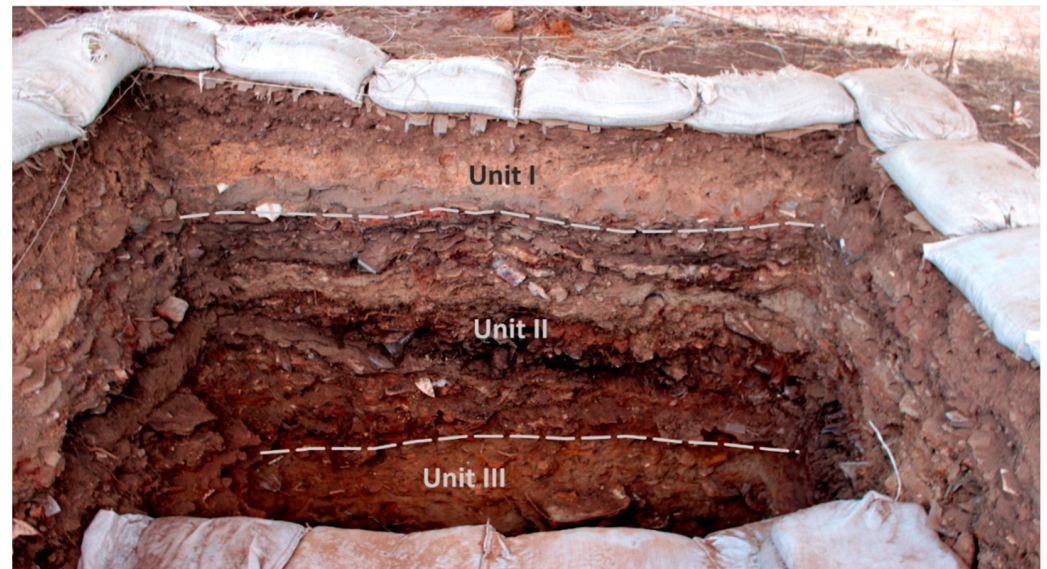


Figure 4. The excavation trench’s southeast section. Note variations in color and texture.

Excavation retrieved a substantial quantity of artifacts, fabricated materials, and humanly modified objects: tableware (cups, mugs, plates, bowls), ink wells, glass bottles, batteries, textiles, fruit seed, pen nibs, dentures, windowpanes, wire, shoes, bricks, bones, shells, roof tiles, toys, lightbulbs, ampules, beads, and many more. The range is practically inexhaustible. Significantly, even if we offered a full list of items, we would still fall short, for a great many of them are hardly recognizable due to fragmentation, corrosion, decay, and other sorts of entropic processes. This hodgepodge is the aesthetic regime of chaotic juxtapositions in which the landfill consists (Figure 5). This heterogeneous jumble also marks the threshold that social reasoning and socio-logics cannot cross, but aesthetics presumably can.

Below, two analyses are presented, attempting to cross the threshold into the domain of Buried Culture (Table 1). They do so by harnessing the vocabulary of formal analysis and applying it to the artifactual component retrieved from the landfill. Both analyses draw on the same elementary classification of substance types—glass, metal, stone (including construction debris), ceramics, bones, and botanical elements—and both analyses trace these substances along the stratigraphic column. However, while one analysis focuses on the feature of density, the second pertains to the question of composition. Density is about the variation in the quantity of artifactual content, articulated in terms of mass per volume. Composition, on the other hand, asks about the varying admixtures of ingredients, articulated in terms of ratio. Both analyses pertain to matters of texture. If likened to a painting, density may be said to be concerned with brush strokes, while composition is concerned with color schemes.



Figure 5. The artifactual contents of a randomly selected unit (1207) illustrating the aesthetic regime of chaotic juxtaositions characteristic of Buried Culture.

Table 1. The column of excavated units in the southern corner of Area A and their artifactual content.

Excavated Unit					Artifactual Content		
Unit of Excavation	Top Elevations	Bottom Elevations	Excavated Volume (m ³)	Description	Substance Categories	Ratio	Density (g/L)
1002	20	17–36	0.26	Brown, loose, somewhat ashy sediment; southwest part of Area.	Glass	0.5	255.5
					Metal	0.1	67.9
					Bone	0.035	4.5
					Stone	0.1	55.2
					Ceramics	0.15	70.7
					Botanics	0	0
					Other	0.055	10.9
1003	17–36	22–42	0.26	Same as above; tracing layer below.	Glass	0.3	279.4
					Metal	0.25	153.3
					Bone	0.02	10
					Stone	0.2	111.3
					Ceramics	0.2	72.1
					Botanics	0	0
1004	18	47	0.32	Brownish-yellow sediment; many finds demonstrate significant heat impact	Other	0.03	7.7
					Glass	0.43	491.7
					Metal	0.17	263.3
					Bone	0.09	69.8
					Stone	0.09	175.8
					Ceramics	0.17	159.2
					Botanics	N/A	0.05
					Other	0.05	31.6

Table 1. Cont.

Excavated Unit				Artifactual Content			
Unit of Excavation	Top Elevations	Bottom Elevations	Excavated Volume (m ³)	Description	Substance Categories	Ratio	Density (g/L)
1005	37	49	0.12	Sand mixed with ash; small patches of clean, sterile yellow sand.	Glass	0.25	172.3
					Metal	0.23	152.9
					Bone	0.27	106.6
					Stone	0.07	65.3
					Ceramics	0.12	58.7
					Botanics	0	0
					Other	0.06	14.6
1009	41–44	53	0.08	Sandy ash layer along southeast section	Glass	0.2	179.7
					Metal	0.15	206.8
					Bone	0.25	118.5
					Stone	0.15	153.8
					Ceramics	0.13	54.6
					Botanics	N/A	0.2
					Other	0.12	42.5
1111	50	59	0.09	Leveling; thick ash; reddish deposit in N corner; ash recedes to southeast	Glass	0.19	198.8
					Metal	0.18	258.9
					Bone	0.22	117.9
					Stone	0.21	326.9
					Ceramics	0.09	55.6
					Botanics	0.01	1
					Other	0.1	39.2
1113	59	65–77	0.09	Ash sediment and yellowish sandy layer around large iron/metal piece	Glass	0.18	132.1
					Metal	0.22	339.7
					Bone	0.22	117.3
					Stone	0.18	287.1
					Ceramics	0.04	16.2
					Botanics	0.06	6.82
					Other	0.1	32.2
1116	62	70	0.08	Yellow sand; contains significant amounts of metal and charred organic matter; basket closed upon encounter of mat/rag (?)	Glass	0.09	18.5
					Metal	0.35	282.1
					Bone	0.25	63.7
					Stone	0.1	45.9
					Ceramics	0.03	1.73
					Botanics	0.09	4.9
					Other	0.09	7.1
1119	70	76	0.06	Yellow sand below mat/fabric (including)	Glass	0.19	65.9
					Metal	0.21	103.3
					Bone	0.2	51.8
					Stone	0.2	138.5
					Ceramics	0.03	7.3
					Botanics	0.05	5.6
					Other	0.12	17
1121	65	77–83	0.04	Removal of sand layer, tracing ash below	Glass	0.35	266.7
					Metal	0.15	88.2
					Bone	0.25	73.9
					Stone	0.1	112.2
					Ceramics	0.05	19.7
					Botanics	0.04	1.8
					Other	0.06	14.4

Table 1. Cont.

Excavated Unit				Artifactual Content			
Unit of Excavation	Top Elevations	Bottom Elevations	Excavated Volume (m ³)	Description	Substance Categories	Ratio	Density (g/L)
1151	82–83	88–91	0.08	Densely packed glass bottle layer, associated with fine, loose, dark brown sediment	Glass	0.8	2706.6
					Metal	0.05	98.4
					Bone	0.05	73.1
					Stone	0.03	63.2
					Ceramics	0.05	54.6
					Botanics	N/A	N/A
					Other	0.02	19.1
1152	88–91	94–100	0.08	Dense ‘bottle layer’; sediment is loose brown with small patches of charcoal and organic residue	Glass	0.8	4093.9
					Metal	0.05	37.4
					Bone	0.05	30.4
					Stone	0.05	58.8
					Ceramics	0	0
					Botanics	0.01	2.2
					Other	0.04	14.5
1155	100	101–105	0.015	Leftover of ‘bottle layer’ on SW side of column	Glass	0.65	2714.9
					Metal	0.08	72.3
					Bone	0.12	86.5
					Stone	0.1	115.3
					Ceramics	N/A	N/A
					Botanics	N/A	N/A
					Other	0.05	20.9
1156	96	102–104	0.035	Leveling (mostly E side of column); reddish-brown sediment, a large amount of metal at lower part of unit, mostly towards northeast; large pieces of construction debris uncovered.	Glass	0.33	311.2
					Metal	0.33	197.3
					Bone	0.16	62.8
					Stone	0.06	59.6
					Ceramics	0.06	30.7
					Botanics	0.03	6.4
					Other	0.03	4.1
1159	102–104	108–111	0.067	Reddish-brown sediment, a considerable amount of metal and construction debris.	Glass	0.06	102.8
					Metal	0.35	306.6
					Bone	0.04	29.1
					Stone	0.45	1560
					Ceramics	0.025	19.9
					Botanics	0.02	4.4
					Other	0.055	24.1
1186	108–111	110–116	0.013	Cleanup and leveling; mostly metallic scraps; in the middle, pale reddish-brown fine sediment.	Glass	0.2	1196.3
					Metal	0.4	2298.8
					Bone	0.1	301.9
					Stone	0.2	2112.4
					Ceramics	0.04	206.7
					Botanics	0.01	2.4
					Other	0.05	116.7
1187	110–116	116–120	0.053	Removal of metallic layer, exposing silty reddish sediment below. Large cement block removed from S corner, brown ashy sediment below it.	Glass	0.1	124
					Metal	0.6	429.2
					Bone	0.1	41.6
					Stone	0.1	145.2
					Ceramics	0.05	16.4
					Botanics	0.02	0.4
					Other	0.03	1.57

Table 1. Cont.

Excavated Unit				Artifactual Content			
Unit of Excavation	Top Elevations	Bottom Elevations	Excavated Volume (m ³)	Description	Substance Categories	Ratio	Density (g/L)
1188	116–120	119–123	0.024	Fine, reddish, relatively compact sediment. South part of trench consists of amorphous metal pieces, while north part of trench has more sediment, ceramics, and stones.	Glass	0.1	301.3
					Metal	0.15	323
					Bone	0.1	109.3
					Stone	0.5	4652.1
					Ceramics	0.06	34.8
					Botanics	0.05	8.1
					Other	0.04	17.2
1189	119–123	127–129	0.058	Leftover of metal layer removed along with reddish silty deposit below. Along southeast section, sediment is yellowish-grey, although otherwise identical to abovementioned reddish deposit.	Glass	0.06	62.7
					Metal	0.36	807.2
					Bone	0.23	77.9
					Stone	0.23	434.1
					Ceramics	0.07	58.2
					Botanics	0.015	4.26
					Other	0.035	15.4
1197	126–129	130–133	0.028	Silty, moderately compact sediment. Yellowish-grey sediment with more gravel and construction debris in southeast part; more brown and reddish with bones and ceramics in northwest part.	Glass	0.2	280.2
					Metal	0.15	252
					Bone	0.2	180.2
					Stone	0.25	662.4
					Ceramics	0.1	74.6
					Botanics	0.03	3.4
					Other	0.07	36
1198	130–133	132–138	0.024	Fine silty sediment, variegated: yellow, reddish-brown, and grey. In northeast part, a large piece of tire (?) was exposed, along with fine whitish sediment (ash? plaster?)	Glass	0.15	89.2
					Metal	0.28	302.2
					Bone	0.2	73.9
					Stone	0.24	291.9
					Ceramics	0.07	32.2
					Botanics	0.03	7.5
					Other	0.03	5.79
1199	132–138	137–142	0.027	Fine, silty variegated sediment (as above) deposited upon fine yellowish sand.	Glass	0.12	245.4
					Metal	0.2	761.8
					Bone	0.16	196.6
					Stone	0.16	899.1
					Ceramics	0.07	51.8
					Botanics	0.06	5.2
					Other	0.07	49.7
1200	137–142	140–144	0.022	Fine yellow sand, superimposing a reddish-brown variegated deposit, which is much denser in finds.	Glass	0.1	47.4
					Metal	0.24	171.2
					Bone	0.26	83.2
					Stone	0.11	133.8
					Ceramics	0.11	49.6
					Botanics	0.04	2.8
					Other	0.14	61.5
1206	140–144	147–151	0.052	Dark brown, sometimes rusty, sediment. Feels as if finds are in comparatively good condition.	Glass	0.08	101.3
					Metal	0.24	245
					Bone	0.23	95.1
					Stone	0.23	613.6
					Ceramics	0.12	133.3
					Botanics	0.02	3.6
					Other	0.08	66.8

Table 1. *Cont.*

Excavated Unit				Artifactual Content			
Unit of Excavation	Top Elevations	Bottom Elevations	Excavated Volume (m ³)	Description	Substance Categories	Ratio	Density (g/L)
1207	147–151	150–152	0.01	Dark brown loose deposit, highly variegated with local concentrations of different finds (metal, bone, etc.). Seems to contain much organic matter. Quite airy. A more yellowish deposit begins cropping up over much of the square.	Glass	0.15	253.3
					Metal	0.17	467.6
					Bone	0.15	144.5
					Stone	0.22	2056.7
					Ceramics	0.18	458.9
					Botanics	0.04	4.7
					Other	0.09	62
1208	153–154	158–161	0.042	Alternating and mixed deposits of yellow sand and dark brown sediment. Finds are in relatively good condition.	Glass	0.15	145
					Metal	0.21	396
					Bone	0.11	46.5
					Stone	0.2	480.8
					Ceramics	0.13	81.2
					Botanics	0.02	7
					Other	0.18	70.8
1209	158–161	163–166	0.037	Variegated sandy/brown deposits, overlying a dense deposit of metals.	Glass	0.09	59.6
					Metal	0.35	566.6
					Bone	0.1	46.9
					Stone	0.15	383.6
					Ceramics	0.08	22.9
					Botanics	0.08	5.2
					Other	0.15	70.3
1214	163–166	165–170	0.03	Removal of dense metal layer, exposing below an uneven upper face of a sandy variegated deposit.	Glass	0.04	33.4
					Metal	0.7	1813.3
					Bone	0.08	29.7
					Stone	0.05	93.6
					Ceramics	0.03	21.2
					Botanics	0.02	2.9
					Other	0.08	38.4
1215	165–170	170–177	0.045	Variegated sandy deposit. Pale grey (cement-like) deposit, relatively dense in northeast part of trench. In southwest part, below dark brown-reddish sediment, the same pale grey sediment was exposed, but with numerous finds. Near southern corner, a concentration of charred matter was noted. Against southeast section, a tin vessel was exposed.	Glass	0.24	208.1
					Metal	0.27	279.2
					Bone	0.07	19.1
					Stone	0.24	615.1
					Ceramics	0.03	6.2
					Botanics	0.04	6.2
					Other	0.09	17.1

Table 1. Cont.

Excavated Unit				Artifactual Content			
Unit of Excavation	Top Elevations	Bottom Elevations	Excavated Volume (m ³)	Description	Substance Categories	Ratio	Density (g/L)
1217	174–187	187–192	0.075	A deposit of metal and organic (?) substances. It is loose and airy. In south corner, a small patch of lime-like sediment and construction debris. There are also many roots in this layer. Below it is a relatively dense silty sediment, reddish-brown.	Glass	0.23	376.4
					Metal	0.35	512.1
					Bone	0.07	17.2
					Stone	0.12	197.2
					Ceramics	0.04	11.5
					Botanics	0.07	9.9
					Other	0.12	24.8
1218	187–192	190–193	0.016	Exposing <i>hamra</i> layer; variegated deposit, leftovers of previous ones.	Glass	0.2	99.5
					Metal	0.4	274.5
					Bone	0.03	2.5
					Stone	0.15	158.3
					Ceramics	0.06	11.9
					Botanics	0.06	6.8
					Other	0.1	17.6

5.1. Artifactual Density

The distribution of densities along the depositional sequence for the different material categories—glass, metal, stone, bone, and ceramics—is presented in Figure 6a. A two-level tripartite division presents itself, first in terms of the distinction between steady and oscillating densities—delineated in Figure 6a in terms of unshaded and shaded areas, respectively—and second in terms of a distinction between oscillations of one substance at a time and oscillations of several substances in concert—presented as light and dark shaded areas, respectively.

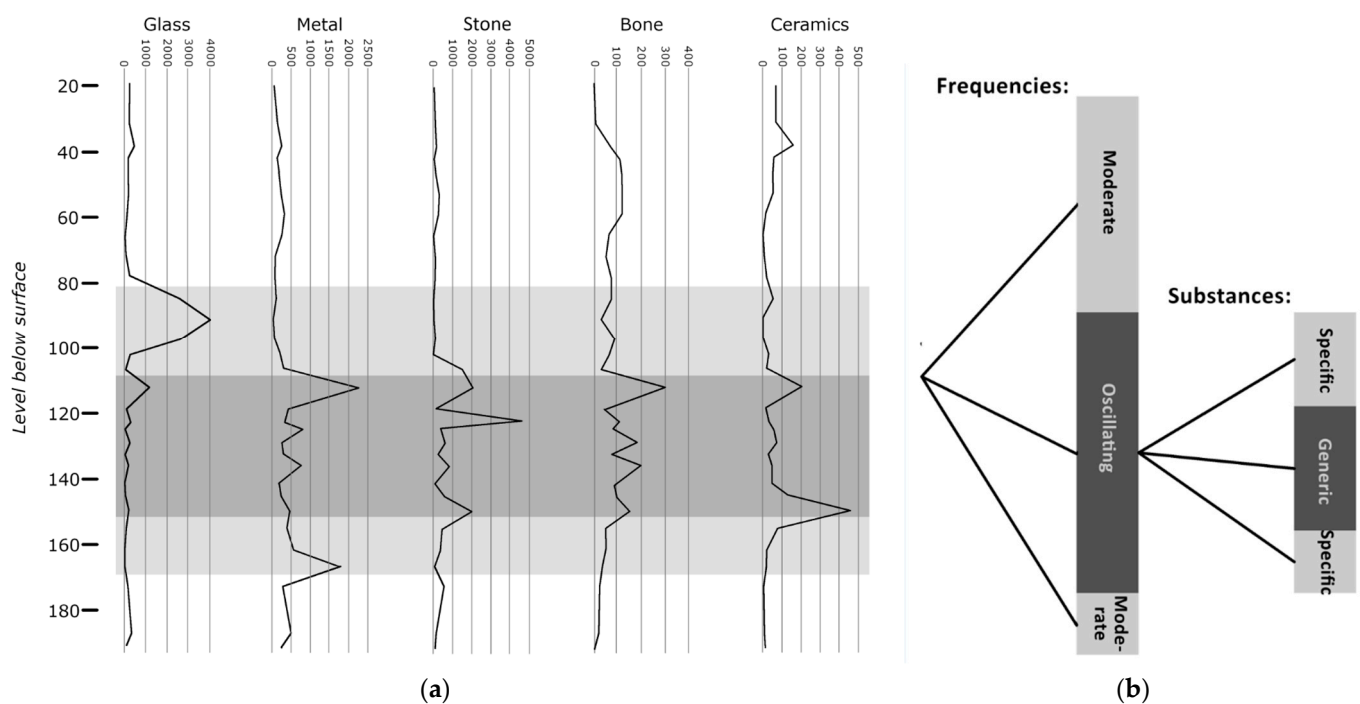


Figure 6. (a) Distribution of artifact densities (g/L) along depositional column; (b) Structure of artifactual density.

The relationship between the two is both hierarchical and symmetric (Figure 6b). It is hierarchical in the sense that one structure contains the other; it is symmetric in the sense that both structures are similarly proportioned and organized: the upper segments are larger than the lower ones, and the sum of these is similar to the size of the middle segment. The symmetry in question is, therefore, not bilateral but translational: the terms shift between frequencies and substances, and the scale changes between the entire sequence and a part thereof, but the resulting structures and forms are the same.

This structure of hierarchical symmetry suggests convergence, implying that the sequence, as a whole, rests on a specifiable center of gravity: the region marked by substance-generic oscillating frequencies (110–150 cm below the surface). Accordingly, in terms of density distribution, the sequence's balance is metrically skewed, leaning towards its lower third quartile rather than its center. Lastly, a suggestion for a third binary opposition (i.e., distinction) of glass and metal may be considered on account of the two instances of substance-specific oscillations.

5.2. Assemblage Composition

The admixtures of the artifactual elements seem to converge on three principal types of depositional segments:

1. Segments containing admixtures with a clear leaning towards glass;
2. Segments containing admixtures with a strong leaning towards metal, stone, or a combination of the two;
3. Segments containing 'generic' or widely dispersed admixtures, marked by a balanced presence of at least three substance categories and possibly more.

The distribution of these segment types along the depositional sequence is represented graphically in Figure 7a, marked by varying shades of grey. Read from top to bottom, the first and third segments are of the glass-oriented kind (type 1; dark grey); the fourth and sixth segments are of the metal/stone kind (type 2; medium grey); the second and fifth segments are of the generic kind (type 3; pale grey). Viewed collectively, the six segments seem to coalesce into a binary and remarkably symmetric structure, consisting of two depositional units (Figure 7b). Both units are approximately 0.9 m thick, and both are composed of three segments consisting of a 'generic' middle (type 3) and 'specialized' sides. In the case of the upper unit, the 'specialized' sides are of the glass-oriented sort (type 1), and in the case of the lower unit, they are of the metal/stone sort (type 2).

Two binary distinctions seem to be operating here. One is the opposition between generic and specific assemblages, which generates the tripartite structure within each of the collective units. The other is the opposition between glass, on the one hand, and metal/stone, on the other, which generates the distinction between the units.

5.3. Towards an Aesthetics Appreciation of Mikve Israel Landfill

Drawing on the same body of evidence, it is not surprising that the results of the two analyses proved to have much in common: they share the same binary distinctions (general/specific, glass/metal), they both consist of two-tiered tripartite structures, and they both demonstrate remarkable symmetries. However, in other respects, they seem significantly different, articulating the sequence in noticeably distinct ways. Thus, while assemblage composition is essentially binary, artifactual density is tripartite, and while assemblage composition is well balanced and evenly distributed, artifactual density leans towards the lower part of the sequence and features a convergent structure.

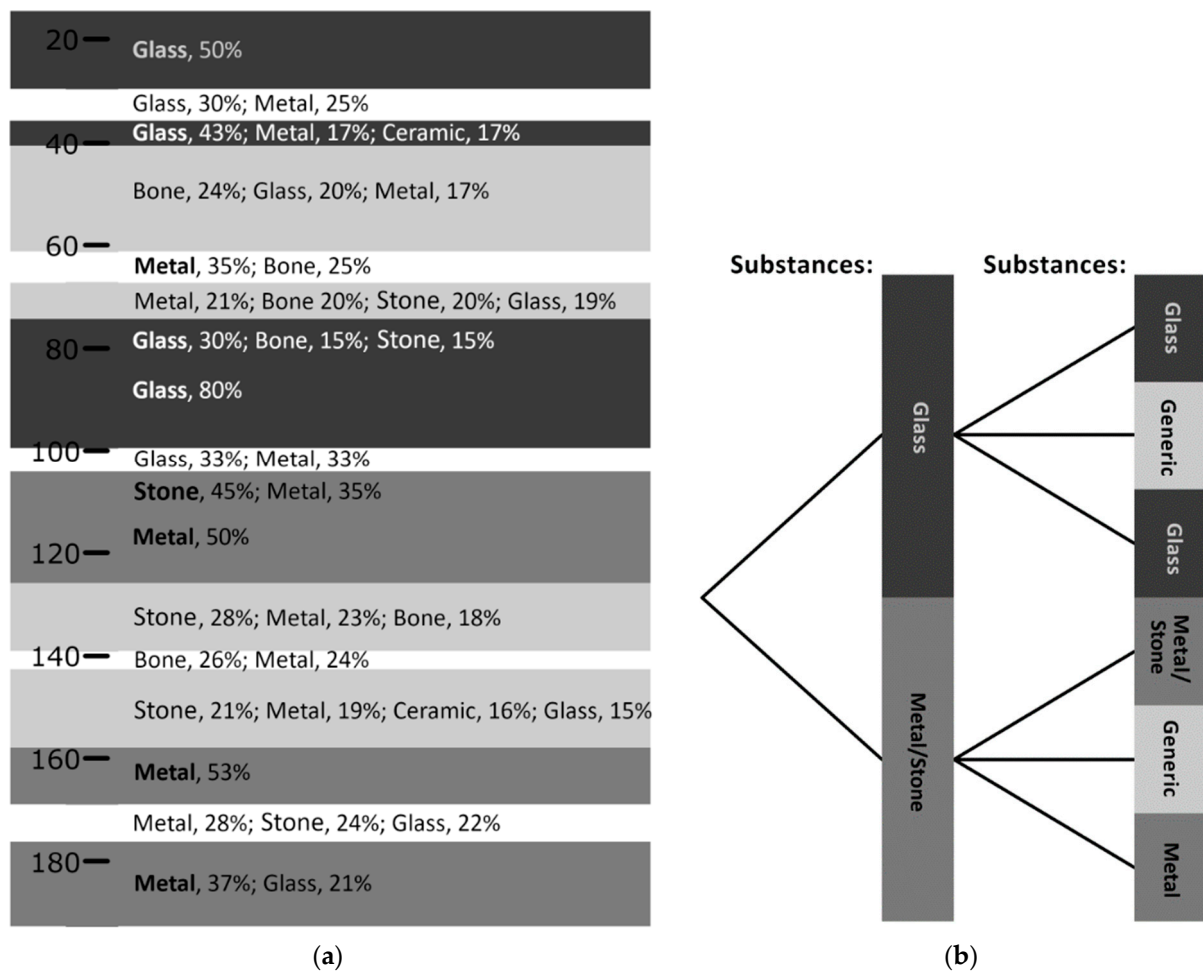


Figure 7. (a) Distribution of assemblage compositions along the depositional column (text refers to the most dominant categories, white shaded areas are indeterminate); (b) Structure of assemblage composition.

Seemingly incommensurable, the incompatibilities of the two readings do not amount to something that needs to be overcome. Firstly, they underscore the relative autonomy of the two aspects. As suggested above, likened to a painting, matters of artifactual composition are akin to questions about the color schemes observed, and matters of density are akin to questions about the delicacy and coarseness of the brush strokes. The two impose few restrictions on one another but are entwined to produce the particular textural composition of the depositional sequence. Secondly, these incompatibilities open up a space for further deliberations, spinning off a tension inherent in all beings between the many contrasting aspects they embrace and the single object they jointly constitute. Paraphrasing Goodman [63] (p. 2), the one may be taken as many or the many taken as one; whether one or many depends on the way of taking.

Having said this, the analyses offered here are far from exhaustive, and the proposed reading is in no way definitive. Indeed, a whole lot more needs to be done before one can claim to know the site of Mikve Israel as an instance of Buried Culture. However, for the present purposes, it is sufficient: it demonstrates that for those willing to look [64], Buried Culture possesses aesthetic, and by extension cultural, features to trace and explore.

6. Discussion

The present paper strived to convert Buried Culture from an *unknown known* to a *known unknown*, tracing its outlines in sufficient detail to draw it out of obscurity and justify its constitution as a new object of cultural research [65]. In this vein, the paper pursued

a didactic goal-oriented line of reasoning: demonstrating the issue, defining it, offering a tentative way forward, and ending with a brief empirical illustration. However, for many readers, the scene is probably still muddled with confusion. Striving to substantiate Buried Culture as an object of research, the paper negotiated the conceptual architecture of established disciplines, bringing into focus and calling into question premises that usually remain unstated. Thus, it seems fitting to end the paper with a closer consideration of the conceptual maneuver promoted. Ultimately, it entails two interrelated shifts:

1. Rather than locating Buried Culture on a trajectory of increasing entropy (disorder), the proposed framework conceives it as an emergent new being. By this token, processes hitherto considered negative and destructive become positive and creative.
2. Instead of employing analytical procedures that prioritize the articulation of process and temporality, the proposed approach directs analysis at questions of form.

Importantly, and as suggested above, these moves entail a trade-off of concepts and priorities. We loosen our grip on some features in order to tighten our hold on others. The proposed move does not embody a claim that other programs are mistaken but only that they are incomplete, and it does not imply superiority of any sort, but only that to answer its concerns inevitably entails letting go of others. Something has got to give, and completeness is forever beyond us.

Having said this, let us take a closer look at the conceptual move proposed. For all intents and purposes, the established view, embodied by archaeology and sedimentology, approaches Buried Culture as a secondary and derivative entity. Whatever it is, its constitution is a function of other beings [66]. Sometimes, this is a matter of purposeful design (e.g., agriculture, construction) and, sometimes, an agency with measurable effects (e.g., environmental studies). However, for the most part, it is considered a consequence of entropic processes of disintegration and transportation, as is regularly framed by archaeologists and geologists. Widely used terms such as ‘fossil,’ ‘trace,’ ‘relic,’ and ‘vestige’ demonstrate this particularly well: They designate instances or features of Buried Culture as diminished leftovers of preceding conditions and events [42,67,68]. Moreover, according to this view, Buried Culture is not only a function of preceding circumstances; it is also a function of their demise. Thus, the archaeological record, for instance, is said to be plagued by loss and confusion: it is broken, distorted, and static, mixed and disturbed, far removed from the bustling, living human past from which it derives and to which it points [69–74].

Within this frame of mind, Buried Culture is principally a negative being; it is a void, an absence, and a loss, something that ceased to exist and that, in turn, calls for redemption [75]. Consequently, although substantive and voluminous, Buried Culture is rendered epistemically vacuous. The present paper’s main thrust was essentially to replace this negative valuation with a positive one. In this vein, the turn to aesthetics and formal analysis embodies an effort to move away from entropic processes and towards the substantial outcome. Rather than finding the decisive features of Buried Culture in a condition of loss, we may now seek them in its constitution as a physically distinct three-dimensional being. Processes that were hitherto conceived to be destructive and negative are now considered positive and creative; beings hitherto conceived to be depleted and distorted are now regarded as complete.

Landfills illustrate this well. As discussed in some detail above, social reasoning only touches their surface. It can comprehend a landfill as an institutionalization of waste, and it can conceive it as a consequence of various subtractive processes: devaluation, discard, fragmentation, mixing, disposal. However, it has proven incapable of capturing the voluminous being itself. This is because it keeps falling back on negative, destructive, and, therefore, also insubstantial explanations. The turn to formal analysis and aesthetic reasoning, on the other hand, has the effect of foregrounding a landfill’s physical properties, its constitutive components, and the textured patterns they produce. It shifts away from the landfill as a function of entropic forces and towards the landfill as an upshot of creative processes.

There is something fundamental here. It seems that the dominant understanding of Buried Culture has been systematically one-sided and skewed, negative and processual, hardly ever positive and formal. It is as if physicists would concern themselves solely with a particle's momentum and would remain oblivious to the question of position [76]; as if sociologists would know societies only in terms of agency and would deny matters of structure [8,77]; as if arguments for social constructivism would not be asserted against realism [17]. The tenuous but healthy dialectic between the centrifugal forces of process and relations, on the one hand, and the centripetal forces of structure and objects, on the other [78], seems to be entirely missing when it comes to Buried Culture. In many respects, it is this balance that the present paper hopes to promote. If one needs to choose, it is not between true and false options but between different priorities and values. Concerning humanly modified deposits, archaeology is one, sedimentology is another, and Buried Culture is a third.

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