

Introduction

Inverted commas can reveal a lot. Their use in the title of this Element, *'Ritual Litter' Redressed*, was conscious and deliberate. When the term 'ritual litter' appears within the pages of other books and journals, it is often similarly accompanied by those telltale inverted commas. First given serious consideration in 2003 by anthropologist Jenny Blain and archaeologist Robert Wallis as part of their 'Sacred Sites, Contested Rites/Rights Project', which explored contemporary Pagan engagements with archaeological sites (see forthcoming discussions), the term was offered as 'So-called "ritual litter"' (Wallis & Blain, 2003: 309). And since entering academic parlance, later writers have adopted the same grammatical strategy of presentation (cf. Blain & Wallis, 2004: 241; Rountree, 2006: 100; Bishop, 2016: 44). This is a strategy that marks the term 'ritual litter' as complex, provisional, questionable, or downright problematic. It is also a strategy that distances it from the author. Those two inverted commas represent our hands being held up in both apology and defence: *we're sorry, we know the term is contentious, we didn't coin it, don't blame us.*

Beginning with a definition would seem a logical first step, but 'ritual litter' is as ambiguous a categorization as it is a slippery term. Breaking it into its constituent parts only makes it harder to grasp. What is ritual? Scholars, particularly archaeologists and anthropologists, have been grappling with this question for decades, and a thorough investigation is far beyond the scope of this Element – although a brief overview is necessary. The *Oxford Dictionary of English* (2021) proposes various definitions, from 'The prescribed form or order of religious or ceremonial rites' to 'repeated actions or patterns of behaviour having significance within a particular social group' and simply 'habitual, customary'. Certainly, the term has altered in use through the centuries. 'Instinctively most archaeologists feel they know what ritual is', writes Joanna Brück, 'but, on closer inspection, the picture becomes rather less clear' (2007: 284). Ritual is often 'identified by default'; when an action appears non-functional or beyond rational explanation, it is labelled ritual (Bender, Hamilton, & Tilley, 1997: 148).

To avoid this lacklustre form of identification, many scholars have attempted to pin the term down by proposing definitions. Anthropologist Don Handelman declares these definitions 'unremarkable, noncommittal, and innocuous' (1990: 11), but they do demonstrate some commonalities. Most focus on the physical and symbolic aspects of a practice in their designation of ritual. Robert Boccock defines the term as '*bodily action in relation to symbols*' (1974: 36, emphasis in original), and Susanna Rostas centres on 'a degree of corporeal performativity' in her definition (1998: 92). Some scholars describe formalism, stylization, and

repetition as the integral aspects of ritual (Fernandez, 1965: 912; Myerhoff, 1997: 199), while others designate sacred elements and intended preternatural results. Edward Shils, for example, describes ritual as 'a pattern of symbolic actions for renewing contact with the sacred' (1966: 447), while Handelman defines it as an event that 'makes recourse to paranatural, mystical powers' (1990: 5). So there are commonalities, yes, but no clear-cut definition. And as Moore and Myerhoff assert, this 'looseness of the concept of ritual ... is a serious obstacle to investigation of the subject' (1997: 21). For the purposes of clarity, this Element defines ritual as follows (whilst acknowledging it is far from comprehensive): intentional, stylized, performative activities that draw on symbolism to make recourse to mystical or preternatural powers.

What of the second word in our slippery term: 'litter'? This undoubtedly refers to material objects linked to ritual activity, but official definitions are vague as to the level of negativity implied by the word 'litter'. 'Odds and ends, fragments and leavings lying about', offers the *Oxford Dictionary of English* (2021), which is quite harmless, but the addition of the terms 'rubbish; a state of confusion or untidiness; a disorderly accumulation of things lying about', gives a less innocuous impression. 'Rubbish', after all, is more straightforwardly defined as 'Waste material ... rejected and useless matter of any kind ... Material that is considered worthless, unimportant, or of very poor quality: trash'. 'Rubbish' is an explicitly negative label, and the *Cambridge Dictionary* (2021) defines 'litter' as 'small pieces of rubbish that have been left lying on the ground in public places'.

If the term 'litter' is intended to empirically describe the leaving of objects in public places in relation to ritual activities, then there may be little distinguishing them from objects labelled 'structured deposits'. This is an archaeological term coined by Richards and Thomas in their 1984 paper 'Ritual Activity and Structured Deposition in Later Neolithic Wessex'. It is a concept anchored within the archaeology of ritual, which Richards and Thomas describe as 'formalised repetitive actions which may be detected archaeologically through a highly structured mode of deposition' (1984: 215). By 'structured mode', they mean placed in a way that suggests deliberate deposition, and this constitutes a vast body of material, from prehistoric weapons deposited in rivers and coins left at Roman temples to rags tied around trees and bras hung on fences. Various terms ritual deposits, votives, ex-votos, and folk assemblages, these are all objects that have been deposited in public places as part of ritual activities. The empirical term 'ritual litter' could apply to most of these items and would therefore be almost interchangeable with the immense subject of structured deposition. However, this Element is not viewing the term 'ritual litter' as an empirical description but interpreting it as a negative appraisal of

material culture. For the purposes of this Element, therefore, 'ritual litter' refers to that subcategory of structured deposits that are viewed as problematic.

Considering how the term is used has been vital to this decision. In 2003, for example, Wallis and Blain observed that 'So-called "ritual litter" is an increasing problem at many sacred sites' (2003: 309), while anthropologist Kathryn Rountree opined in 2006 that 'ritual litter' is a term employed 'by those inclined to disapprove of their deposition' (2006: 100). The term often identifies the negative interpretation of ritual deposits. But what fuels these negative interpretations? What causes these structured deposits to be viewed as problematic? To be treated as rubbish: 'rejected and useless . . . worthless, unimportant, or of very poor quality'? There is no straightforward answer.

Is it a matter of age? Objects assembled in relation to ritual activities in prehistoric and historic contexts – from Bronze Age river deposits to votive offerings on the Athenian acropolis – do not tend to be viewed as unimportant or problematic. They are 'ritual deposits' rather than 'ritual litter'. Is this a case of age validating the value of something? As Sefryn Penrose observes, 'the older something becomes the more important it tends to be thought' (2007: 13). In his research on arborglyphs (tree graffiti), Troy Lovata notes the heritage value given to historic examples of such graffiti, viewed as worthy of study and preservation, in contrast to contemporary examples, which are disapproved of and prohibited (2015: 95). This notion of age value may go some way in explaining the conceptual difference between 'ritual deposit' and 'ritual litter'. However, as this Element will demonstrate, some historic examples have been viewed as problematic. The personal possessions, such as clothing and jewellery, ritually deposited at the Catholic shrine to Our Lady of Lourdes in Lourdes, France (see Section 3), were viewed negatively by clerics in the nineteenth century, who commissioned people to remove material offerings and keep the grotto 'tidy' (Notermans & Jansen, 2011: 176–7). While in the twenty-first century, people have been actively encouraged to throw coins into wishing wells or attach love-locks (padlocks typically inscribed with the depositors' names or initials, locked in place to ritually declare romantic attachment) to particular structures (Houlbrook, 2015a: 183, 2021: 126–34). So it is not always a clear-cut case of 'old is good, new is bad'.

Is the problematic perception of some assemblages due more to their size than to their age? Are ritual deposits identified as 'litter' when they reach a certain quantity? This is no doubt true in some cases, but not all large assemblages are viewed negatively. Jordan Conley describes how votives have 'littered sites' through history, seen in 'excess at sanctuaries, shrines, and tombs' (2020: 47), and yet here the verb 'litter' does not necessarily indicate the noun 'litter'. Is it perhaps more to do with the nature of the object? Does having a higher

monetary or perceived aesthetic value prevent a ritual deposit from being deemed 'litter'? Again, this is true in some cases. But, as demonstrated in research conducted on 'The Votives Project', objects can be cheap and mass-produced without being interpreted as worthless or problematic.¹

Interestingly, Hilary Joyce Bishop, writing about Mass Rocks (natural, remote sites where Catholic Mass was held during Penal times) in Uíbh Laoghaire, Ireland, implies it is an absence of inherent sacrality that designates a ritual deposit 'litter'. 'The range of votive offerings deposited at sacred spaces can vary enormously', she writes. 'It can range from "ritual litter" such as flowers, coins, candles, tea light holders and other such objects to the deposition of objects already considered sacred such as stones and crystals' (2016: 44). The implication here is that the ritually recycled object – that which was not *already considered sacred* before deposition – is more likely to be deemed 'litter'. The coin that was currency before being hammered into a tree. The rag that was clothing before being tied around a branch. The teddy bear that was a toy before being placed on a public memorial. However, this distinction is difficult to maintain. The prehistoric weapons ritually deposited in watery places, as described by archaeologist Richard Bradley (1990), for example, were not originally crafted as ritual deposits but as weapons, and yet the fact they were ritually recycled does not equate them to 'litter' in the modern gaze. While some contemporary love-locks were created specifically as ritual deposits, crafted in the shape of love hearts with no accompanying key, they can only really be used in the love-lock ritual. And yet so many love-lock assemblages have been derisively judged 'rubbish'.

Is it more about the nature of the place of deposition, rather than the object itself? Rountree observes that people 'might light a candle or write a prayer and deposit it in a special place in a church without the candle or prayer being termed "ritual litter"' (2006: 100). The difference, she argues, is that churches are generally seen as 'sacred places'. It does not follow, though, that objects deposited in explicitly acknowledged 'sacred places' are never viewed negatively. As we have already seen, items left in the Marian grotto in Lourdes were and are treated as litter. Conversely, some ritual deposits placed in seemingly mundane public spaces are not treated as litter.

One example of this is the Canang Sari (Figure 1). Consisting primarily of leaves, flowers, food, and incense, these neat packages are deposited on a daily basis by Balinese Hindus, as sustenance for, and thanks to, the spirits. As Emily Martin, who conducted fieldwork for her undergraduate anthropology thesis in

¹ For example, Maria Anna De Lucia Brolli and Jacopo Tabolli (2015) discuss the 100 iron keys found deposited at the ancient sanctuary of Monte Li Santi-Le Rote at Narce, Italy, as valuable finds, while E.-J. Graham (2014) explores the possibilities of ('cheap') wax figurines of gods deposited in Graeco-Roman shrines.



Figure 1 The disarranged offerings of the Canang Sari at the end of the day, Bali, Indonesia, 2013 (photograph by the author)

Bali, observed, 'offerings are placed everywhere': at busy road junctions, on the beach, on the street in front of houses and shops, placed strategically so that 'those walking by are forced to look at them' (Martin, 2018: 70). Lindsey Siadis, who conducted postgraduate research on the phenomenon, also noted their prevalence, declaring that she 'found it highly remarkable that these offerings were often put in places where they would most likely be run over' (2014: 31). Those not run over are often eaten by animals, such as dogs or monkeys. Though beautifully crafted, after a day of road and foot traffic, these offerings do begin to resemble disorderly accumulations of waste material, all the more so for the modern trend in including packaged sweets. They begin to look like rubbish.

However, these ubiquitous contemporary offerings of low economic value, which are placed on the ground to be trampled and scavenged, *littering* the street, are not viewed as ritual litter. They are actively encouraged by communities and religious authorities, with the government reportedly distributing pamphlets that specify the ingredients and frequency of offerings and temple loudspeakers reminding Hindus to make their offerings (Martin, 2018: 99). In fact, both Martin and Siadis comment on the immense pressure Balinese women in particular feel to make and publicly deposit the correct ritual offerings. The fact that many of these offerings are made in the street does not negate their ritual value, which again calls into question the theory that deposits made in non-sacred spaces tend to be classed as ritual litter. Notions of 'sacred place' and 'non-sacred space' are notoriously subjective anyway.²

So why are Balinese Canang Sari encouraged as ritual deposits, while in other cases elsewhere in the world, ubiquitous contemporary offerings of low economic value are problematized as litter? Is it a matter of permission and authority? The Balinese government approve of these offerings because they are an integral element of Indonesian Hinduism (Martin, 2018: 71–3). Conversely, many Roman Catholic clerics did not (and do not) view material offerings made at the Marian grotto in Lourdes as a prescribed practice of their religion; they are therefore viewed and treated by authorities as ritual litter: prohibited, removed, and largely disposed of (Notermans & Jansen, 2011). The defining characteristic of 'ritual litter' may therefore be objects ritually deposited *without the approval or permission of authorities*.

Who constitutes the authorities, however, is also subjective. Landowners, site managers, spiritual leaders, heritage specialists, archaeologists, and ritual practitioners – not to mention members of the general public – all claim some authority in how a space or place is used. It is rare for all stakeholders to be in agreement. Therefore, what are 'small pieces of rubbish that have been left lying on the ground' to one group may be a 'sacred assemblage of ritual deposits' to another (Rountree, 2006: 100). 'Ritual litter' thus proves to be as subjective a term as it is elusive. This subjectivity – while making a neat definition impossible – proves central to the concept of 'ritual litter' and is hence a recurring theme throughout this Element.

² Geographer Della Dora discusses how 'sacred space' is difficult to define: 'Sacred space eludes us. It stretches our senses. It problematizes traditional binary distinctions, such as those between the spiritual and the material, the invisible and the visible, the eternal and the contingent. Where do the boundaries of the sacred lie? Is sacred space an ontological given or, a social construction? Is it a portion of territory or the product of a set of embodied performances? Is it permanent or ephemeral?' (2011: 165).

This Element does not claim to offer a comprehensive look at 'ritual litter' worldwide. Such an endeavour would require a far larger word count and knowledge of many languages (perhaps a future project for an international group of researchers). Nor is it within this Element's remit to tackle questions of ritual continuity or debates over the broader uses of, and rights to, sites. What this Element does offer are some examples, largely from Europe and North America, of ritual deposits identified by at least one group of stakeholders as problematic. They range from Neopagan offerings made at Stone Age sites in Finland to roadside shrines in New Mexico, from coins thrown from the peak of a Californian mountain to a vast assemblage of love-locks in Paris. These examples are chosen to illustrate the wide variety both in the forms of deposited objects and in how such objects are treated.

Section 1 considers the people and places of contemporary ritual deposition, exploring who makes such offerings and at what types of sites. Section 2 takes a contemporary archaeological perspective, unpicking the material culture of the different types of deposits and asking why particular items were chosen and what their intended purposes or messages were. Section 3 considers how and why such objects have been interpreted as problematic by certain stakeholders and how they – along with the sites that accommodate them – have subsequently been treated. Section 4 concludes by examining the cultural heritage value of purportedly problematic ritual deposits. Examples are presented of particular individuals and groups who have recognized this value and employed a variety of methods to preserve or record the tangible cultural heritage of what some dismiss as litter.

The aim throughout this Element is to demonstrate both the prevalence and inevitable plurality of 'ritual litter'. Taking the deposited object as a focal point, it details the challenges it has raised and the opportunities it has proffered. Most significantly, the Element explores what our responses to 'ritual litter' reveal about our relationships with the past, the places we experience, and the people we share them with.

1 The Places and the People

Coins and crystals. Rags and teddy bears. Flowers and human ashes. Virgin Mary statuettes and Barbie dolls. Padlocks and 'I Voted' stickers. Other than their portability, these objects have little in common in terms of their material culture. And yet they are all examples of unsanctioned ritual deposits. The aim of this section is to consider why. After all, conscious decisions and motivations were behind their selections, whether they were a matter of convenience, disposability, some perceived significance within the materiality of the object,

cultural associations surrounding the type of object, or more personal associations.

As ancient historian Robin Osborne asks: 'Why did anyone think that depositing this or that particular object or group of objects was an appropriate way of marking or establishing communications with transcendent powers?' (2004: 7). Some deposited objects were originally crafted *as* deposited objects, such as medieval pilgrim badges or statuettes of deities. The vast majority of 'ritual litter', however, are the ordinary, mundane objects that have been ritually recycled or, to use Osborne's word, 'converted' into ritual objects (2004: 2). This section, therefore, surveys the various types of objects that could be classed as 'ritual litter' and considers potential reasons behind their selection as deposits. It is beyond the remit of this Element to delve into the broader contexts of the places at which they are deposited, which range from prehistoric sites of archaeological value to contemporary bridges, from path-side tree boles of no obvious significance to roadside sites of fatal car accidents. It is also beyond the Element's scope to detail the myriad (and often indistinct) groups of depositors, with the multitude of beliefs, aims, and politics that may motivate them. Both are, however, necessary to explore in this section, to provide context for the central focus of the next section: the objects themselves.

The term 'ritual litter' is most explicitly applied to objects deposited at sites of prehistoric or historic significance, where they are seen as particularly problematic because they can compromise archaeological integrity. It is unsurprising that such contemporary deposits are so often made at such places, given their popularity as stages or centres of contemporary spiritual practices.³ These places include the globally high profile, some of which feature on the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage List: the prehistoric stone circle of Stonehenge, for example, or the pre-Columbian cultural complex of Chaco Culture National Historical Park, New Mexico. But deposition also often occurs at less internationally known sites: prehistoric dolmen in Brittany, France; historic Sámi ritual sites in Finland; Christian holy wells in Ireland; and Neolithic burial chambers in Wales (de la Torre, 2018; Gibby, 2018). Wallis and Blain (2003) estimate that the phenomenon of large-scale ritual deposition at such sites rose in the 1980s and continued rising into the 2000s.

Writing in 2019 of contemporary deposits left at sacred spaces in Finland and Estonia, Jonuks and Äikäs made the following observation:

³ Jutta Leskovar and Raimund Karl (2018) have edited a very useful multi-contributor volume on modern spiritual practices at archaeological sites, which demonstrates this popularity.

Deposits could be divided into three groups: those connected with old traditions and revitalising old folk beliefs, those that seem to stem from ritual creativity and build new ways of communication with sacred places, and finally deposits that are left for touristic purposes by copying the already existing phenomena. (2019: 40)

These three groups, however, are far from distinct, as Jonuks and Äikäs recognize. There is much overlap between them. The line between 'old traditions' and 'ritual creativity' is particularly hazy, especially given the ambiguities and contestations surrounding the concept of 'old traditions'. An illustrative example is the holy well.

Found globally, these sites of holy healing waters were and are believed sacred by their associations with Christian saints – who may in some cases have supplanted pre-Christian spirits or deities (Foley, 2011, 2013). In an empirical study of representative wells across Ireland, which accommodates an estimated 3,000 holy wells, Foley observes objects that evidence 'complex and ambivalent histories' (2013: 48) and a 'heterogeneous set of healing (spiritual and practical) practices' (2013: 47). These objects include rags used in healing rituals (see Section 2), crutches left in thanks for a miraculous cure, Mass cards, photographs of loved ones, and red ribbons believed to have been deposited by Wiccan practitioners (Figure 2). The author's own empirical studies of Irish holy wells reveal a similar (sometimes seemingly incompatible) concoction of objects. At St Brendan's holy well at Clonfert, County Galway, a holy water container in the shape of the Virgin Mary lay next to a Barbie doll (Figure 3). Not far from both were a Buddha statuette, a cluster of inhalers, many rosary beads, and a dustpan and brush. As Rackard, O'Callaghan, and Joyce, note: 'Some holy wells look like shrines to recycling' (2001: 12).

Such jarringly mismatched assemblages lead Foley to make the following observation:

As pilgrimage settings are invariably spaces of change and movement (of people, objects and meanings), new uses and identities, associated with groups of difference such as neo-pagans and Travellers emerge. These are in turn shaped by independently developed contemporary cultural practices so that they have increasingly become spaces of memory and mourning as well. Ironically for sites that are of their essence, organic, grounded and free, holy wells have been subject to a surprising number of contestations shaped by a series of 'gazes' including the religious, colonial and medical where they have at different times been suppressed, overwritten and dismissed. (2013: 49)

Similar complexities and contestations surrounding the distinction between 'old traditions' and 'ritual creativity' are evident in *sieiddit*, offering places used by the indigenous Sámi peoples of Finland, Sweden, Norway, and the



Figure 2 A cluttered assemblage of photographs, rosary beads, rags, and statuettes at St Brigid's Well, Liscannor, County Clare, Ireland, 2012 (photograph by the author)



Figure 3 A Barbie doll accompanies the Virgin Mary amidst the offerings at St Brendan's Tree, Clonfert, County Galway, Ireland, 2012 (photograph by the author)