Archaeological evidence for ritual deposits in a Christian age: occurrence, meaning and reception

Introduction

One of the purposes of Cluster 7 of the DAI is to facilitate discussion between various specialists researching Late Antiquity and to encourage the usage of multiple sources in the reconstruction of daily life between 240 and 640 A.D. When it comes to the study of religion in Late Antiquity, the integration and full appreciation of archaeological sources in particular is long overdue. The study of the nature of Early Christianity in particular has largely been dominated by literary sources. Because of the high volume of production (and preservation) of their writings, their eloquence and strong convictions, the writings of church authorities still largely define our vision of what it meant to be Christian in late antique and Byzantine times. This overreliance on texts has led to a drastic disregard for or misinterpretation of certain kinds of archaeological evidence, both by archaeologists and other researchers, and the ensuing neglect of an entire domain of religious experience at the end of Antiquity.[1] In this contribution, I will discuss one of these disregarded areas of research: building and termination deposits.

Building and termination deposits, or ritual deposits, are one of the means by which people tried to establish contact with supernatural forces. They are widely attested among almost all cultures and in all time periods, but virtually unknown in the Christian late antique and Byzantine Eastern Mediterranean. In this paper, I will first explain what building and termination deposits were and then present a case-study of one commercial-residential building at Sagalassos.[2] After identifying various possible ritual deposits, I will evaluate why they can be distinguished from other archaeological assemblages that were more pragmatic or coincidental in nature and will review the locations where possible ritual deposits were found. Thereafter, I will discuss how such practices relate to Christianity, which indubitably was the prevailing religion at Sagalassos in the sixth and seventh centuries A.D. Finally, I will

[1] A shorter version of this article will appear in Bosselmann-Ruickbie – Ruickbie forthcoming.

[2] Most of the evidence discussed below was uncovered during the 2011-2013 seasons and it is still being processed for final publication. Therefore, new discoveries and altered insights will no doubt change the detail of our current understanding. Rather than representing the final publication of the vicissitudes of the southern city quarters, this paper is intended as a preliminary essay eliciting further discussion.

examine why ritual deposits have been and are still being neglected in archaeological research of the Eastern Mediterranean and will return to the difficult relation between archaeological and literary sources.

Building and termination deposits

Both building and termination deposits are part of a larger category that can be defined as ritual deposits. These are objects that were "deposited deliberately, not as refuse or in connection to rituals pertaining to death, but in an act directed at communication with or concerning supernatural (i.e. transcendent) powers".[3] Building deposits are the material remains of the ritual burial of objects, artefacts or ecofacts, under the foundations of buildings, built into their walls, placed under their floors or even integrated into ceilings and roofs.[4] Their burial was presumably accompanied by prescribed rites and prayers. Originally, building deposits underneath specific buildings or even connected to an entire city may have been associated with their consecration to a deity.[5] Over time, such deposits became interpreted more broadly as attempts to initiate communication with supernatural powers that could ensure prosperity and bring luck. Termination deposits mark the end of the communication. They are created when the building stops being used, because the residents have moved away or when it has been suddenly destroyed. Further on it will be argued that similar deposits are found underneath and in relation to objects that had a special importance to their owners. Building deposits differ from other ritual deposits such as the better studied votive practices, because they confer a special status upon a location, rather than being deposited because the place already had a pre-existing status.[6] By contrast, termination deposits can be considered a variant of votive deposits because they are dependent on an already existing special status of a building or object. How exactly the communication or

[3] Osborne 2010, 1.

[4] Another term used frequently is 'foundation deposit'. As this excludes all items not related to foundations, the term 'building deposit' is used here, although even this does not cover the entire spectrum of related ritual deposition. The literature on building deposits is vast. For an overview see Fingerlin 2005; Hunt 2006 for the Eastern Mediterranean; Beilke-Voigt 2007, 48–52; Hukantaival 2007.

[5] Hub 2012, 31 with an extensive bibliography for all periods until the Early Modern period.

[6] Osborne 2010, 7–8.

relationship with supernatural powers is to be interpreted depends on a broader understanding of the contemporaneous religious culture, which, in our case, is late antique Christianity.

In situ foundation and termination deposits at the Upper Agora South Building at Sagalassos

Previous research at Sagalassos

Sagalassos was a Greek-Roman city in the southwest Taurus Mountains in Turkey, at ca. 1,500 m above sea level, about 100 km north of the southern coast of Turkey. Since 1990, a multi-disciplinary research team from the University of Leuven directed by Marc Waelkens and since 2014 by Jeroen Poblome has been carrying out systematic excavations especially in the town centre and the eastern suburbs. It has been established that Sagalassos was inhabited from at least the 3rd century B.C. to the 13th century A.D., with large-scale occupation ending in the early 7th century A.D., after a major earthquake.[7] The last phase of large-scale occupation of the town can be situated in the first half of the sixth century, when large parts of the city were being renovated after they had been destroyed in an early sixth-century earthquake. From around 550 onwards, Sagalassos entered a phase of decline. When the town was hit by a massive earthquake shortly after the year A.D. 610, the population count had already declined drastically.[8] The changes occurring in the course of the sixth century therefore left permanent imprints in the archaeological record, providing us with detailed and privileged insights into daily life.

Excavations of the west portico of the Upper Agora (1997-2000, 2008-2009) at Sagalassos and a building located to the north of it (1994-1997) had already alluded to a wealth of information on daily life in the sixth century, mainly in the form of objects of everyday use.[9] Quite a few of them were related to the religious worldview of the local inhabitants. To name just a few, in the terraced building to the north of the Upper Agora, three

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[7] Waelkens et al. 2006.

[8] Jacobs 2015 with further references.

[9] Jacobs – Waelkens *forthcoming* for an overview of the history of this market square in Late Antiquity.

bronze amulets with the effigy of Solomon were discovered.[10] Based on the layers in which they were found, they were dated to the sixth century. Excavations around the Upper Agora also yielded a cameo gemstone with a wreath around the words θεοῦ χάριν, as well as numerous small bells or *tintinnabula*, that were hung by doors or above an infant's cradle or tied to the child's arm, leg or clothes, again to ward off evil.[11] Finally, a large number of ceramic figurines depicting riders on horseback as well as various animals was discovered.[12]

As interesting as these objects were, contextual information was very scarce. The layer in which they had been found had been registered, but little attention had been paid to the exact position they were in, their location within the layer, to connections with other objects and so on. Therefore, interpretation of these finds remained limited and a reconstruction of their usage and meaning for the sixth-century population of Sagalassos will always be troublesome. This is true for the large majority of objects related to the supernatural found throughout the Eastern Mediterranean. Their sheer quantity suggests that they remained very important also after classical Antiquity, but as information regarding their find context is limited or missing, their context of use can only be guessed at.

For this reason, when it was decided to uncover the building to the south of the Upper Agora, one of the objectives was to carefully record the find locations of all objects. The wealth of information discovered exceeded all expectations. I will limit myself here to the most explicit evidence related to the subject at hand.

*The Upper Agora South Building (*fig. 1*)*

The building on the rocky outcrop to the south of the Upper Agora was excavated between 2011 and 2013. Most of the material evidence recovered from this complex dates back to the late antique and early Byzantine periods, although earlier (Hellenistic) and later (nineteenth

[10] Scheers 1997, 338 cat. no. 289–291. They are of a type that was widespread in the eastern Mediterranean. On the obverse, a cross composed of four circles within a double circular border decorated with short oblique stripes is depicted. Below, to the left and right a triangle of six grains is shown, below in the centre another two grains and around the legend *sfragis snomonos boèth*. On the reverse we see a rider, nimbate, with a short lance in his left hand stabbing a female demon, with a star in front of the head of the rider. The legend probably means the "seal of Solomon protect", *snomosos* being considered a degeneration of *Solomonos*. This type of amulet is assumed to have been intended to protect infants, as the female demon has been identified with Obyzouth (also Avyzouth or Vyzouth), who kills new-borns.

[11] Jacobs – Waelkens *forthcoming*.

[12] *Ibid*. for a discussion of these rider figurines and a complete bibliography.

and twentieth century) traces of occupations have been discovered as well. At the time of its final phase of large-scale occupation, the complex (ca. 30 by 16 m in size) consisted of twenty spaces and a narrow portico at the front. The back of the building was not well preserved since most of it has disappeared downhill. Almost all pertinent evidence came from the smaller Rooms 10, 9/11 and 16 at the front, and mostly from the last phases of their occupation, which can be dated between c. A.D. 525 and the early seventh-century earthquake.[13] At this time, the individual rooms of the building appear to have been privately owned and to have had a residential function. Some of them may in addition have served a storage and/or commercial purpose as well, as indicated by the large number of dolia, vessels used for the storage of foodstuffs such as grain or wine.

Room 9/11 originally was one big space that in its final phase was subdivided into two spaces (Room 9: 2.47 x 1.76 m and Room 11: 3.05 x 2.16 m). Two clear examples of very modest foundation deposits were uncovered, both involving small coins and both deposited around the same time, presumably by the same individuals. At some point during the sixth century, Room 9 received a new floor. This refurbishment entailed the raising of the floor level and the installation of a new, small type of dolium. The storage vessel was placed on top of several discarded objects, including half a plate with a hunting scene, and the head of a figurine. Whereas these objects can be considered refuse, things that were no longer useful because they were broken, this is not true for a bronze *nummus*, unidentified. Before the occupants installed their dolium, they placed this small coin just underneath its centre (*fig. 2*). There is no practical reason whatsoever to do this.

A similar deposit was created more or less simultaneously, when the entrance to unit 9/11, located in the north wall of Room 11, was repaired. Previous floor levels were partially dug away in order to install a more solid foundation consisting of small stones, brick fragments, lots of mortar and some tuff stones. Both underneath the lowest rubble block and a brick fragment just next to it, a *nummus* (again unidentified, probably of fifth-century date) was deposited.

Room 16, located somewhat further to the west inside the same building was larger (4.80 x 2.77 m). Remains of painted plaster with intricate motifs indicated that it also possessed a more luxurious character than Room 9/11. The quality and quantity of the ritual deposits discovered here likewise are somewhat more impressive. Not all objects discussed here can be indubitably identified as special deposits though. I will describe all possible

[13] Preliminary dating of the ceramics was done by Jeroen Poblome.

foundation deposits linked to this room below, whereupon in the following section it will be argued further why they cannot simply be labelled as discard or loss.

After the early sixth-century earthquake, the bedrock surface on which the walls of the room were constructed was covered by a new earthen infill to create a more even floor level. Before the deposition of the earth, a 0.51 m long intact iron sword was placed on top of the rock (*fig. 3*). The tip of the sword was covered by a rubble stone and around it charcoal and ashes were discovered, as well as some glass sherds and half a ceramic cup. In addition, an intact *unguentarium*, a typical late antique specimen with a spindle-shaped body and flat base, had been laid down on the rock. This again was protected by a rubble stone. Bar these two exceptions, the earthen fill thrown on top contained almost no stone.

Sometime after the creation of this first earthen floor, the users of the space installed a large dolium over a meter high and with a diameter of ca. 0.90 m. The installation was clearly labour intensive. The ceramic container was placed on top of a mortar platform. Next to its base a bronze buckle was deposited. On top of this buckle and around the base of the dolium a mortar ring was created. The end of this step was marked by pushing a miniature jar into the wet mortar (*fig. 4*). Subsequently, larger stones and brick fragments were piled up on top of the mortar to provide additional support. Amongst these, an iron buckle had been placed in the corner between the vessel and the south wall of the room. In the corner between the vessel and the east wall, there was a superposition of a shallow ceramic bowl containing small bones of cow, pig and sheep or goat, the lid of a ceramic vessel, a second miniature vessel, an unidentified but complete glass object and an iron ladle, broken in two (*fig. 5*). After the dolium had been secured in the corner of the room, a new earthen floor was laid out, allowing occupation of the room to continue, and the storage container was taken into use.

At a slightly later date, a second, somewhat smaller container was added, which was simply placed in a shallow cavity in the floor. As far as we can tell, this vessel was not treated in the same respectful manner either. Conversely, the first dolium remained a location around which objects, especially intact or semi-intact pottery but also half of a large ceramic plate and the intact bolt of a door lock, aggregated.

At a certain moment, possibly as a result of the early seventh-century earthquake, the room suffered structural damage. It seems that some stones detached themselves from the walls and fell into the room. The first dolium seemingly survived the event without any damage. Its neighbour was, however, moved to the opposite corner of the room, where it was again given a shallow foundation of broken brick, roof tiles, rubble and one chipped *unguentarium* (*fig. 6*). Occupation continued a little while longer before the space and the two

storage vessels were eventually permanently left behind. The dolium in the corner could not be salvaged as it was simply too firmly embedded in its foundation, the second may already have been broken at the time. When the residents were moving out, they either collected all sherds of a large ceramic bowl that had just been broken or deliberately smashed the bowl before they positioned all sherds next to the dolium in the corner. Moreover, inside the vessel, they carefully placed two (at that time) intact ceramic vessels – a cooking pot and a spouted vessel –, a glass bead and a clipped bronze coin (*fig. 7*). The second dolium did not receive similar treatment. The objects inside the dolium can be considered a termination deposit, left there on purpose without a practical reason. If the residents had simply wanted to leave their cooking pots behind, they could have left them anywhere in the room. There was no need to place them inside the dolium.

In Room 10 at the eastern end of the building (min. 6.07 m x 1.76 m), a similar but even more straightforward example of a termination deposit was encountered. Here a dolium had been installed entirely underground (*fig. 8*). In this case, no ritually deposited material seems to have been present at the time of its installation. Like the vessel in Room 16, it was so deeply buried in the ground that it could not be recovered when the occupants of the room left. Just like their neighbours, the occupants of this room deposited a coin inside the vessel instead, again an unidentified *nummus*, and on top of this arranged the sherds of an amphora, a vessel that either broke just before they abandoned the room, or one that was intentionally broken at that moment (*fig. 9*). The sherds were not just thrown in. The opening of the dolium is so small that anything but a careful lowering of the sherds is physically impossible – just as the careful extracting of the sherds proved a difficult undertaking. The end of usage of the dolium was therefore without a doubt ritually marked.

There are three important questions to answer in relation to this material: First, what makes these examples dedicated objects? How can we explain why those who made the deposit chose to make it in that particular location? And finally, how do we account for what is ritually deposited? Why did anyone think that depositing a coin or a small jar was an appropriate way of establishing communications with transcendental powers?

Recognising ritual deposits

First of all, why should the deposits described above be interpreted as intentional acts aimed at supernatural powers? In virtually all instances, a combination of characteristics leads to this conclusion, including the nature of the object, the condition of the object at the time of its deposition, the exact context of the object and the nature of the building, structure or item of furniture it was associated with.

In some cases, the nature of the object deposited can provide indications that something out of the ordinary is going on. In Greek and Roman times, it was common to present offerings of objects with religious imagery, valuable items, precious or exotic material and foodstuffs including water, wine, milk, oil, meat, grain, bread, and so on.[14] Even though the items discovered in the Upper Agora South Building were on the whole more modest, some of them do stand out. For instance, the ceramic vessels mentioned above comprised everyday cooking and table wares such as plates and bowls, but one of them had been deposited with pieces of meat inside. The offering of foodstuffs may therefore have been much more longstanding than previously thought. In addition, there were also more specific items such as *unguentaria* and miniature vases, both categories of ceramics that have been connected to ritual practices. The Sagalassos *unguentaria* were not produced locally. They may have been imported from western Asia Minor,[15] Rhodes, Cilicia, Cyprus or northern Syria.[16] The exact purpose of *unguentaria* is not entirely clear. Their size and shape indicates that they were used for liquids for personal use, medicinal or cosmetic, although they could also have played a role in ecclesiastical contexts.[17] There may even have been a connection to pilgrimage and the veneration of saints, as was suggested for *unguentaria* found on the island of Rhodes,[18] as well as for the Church of St. Nicholas in Myra, where a large number of such vessels was found.[19] The *unguentarium* therefore does seem to be a special type of ceramic.

Miniature vessels as well have been suggested to have a special connection with the supernatural in Greek and Roman times.[20] In Pompeii, for instance, they played a part in domestic and public ritual and were used in dedication ceremonies as well as foundation

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[14] Hub 2012, 29.

[15] Şimşek and Duman 2007, 296, 302. Alternatively, they may have come from Kibyra in Pisidia where Late Roman *unguentaria* were discovered in the local potters' quarter.

[16] Metaxas 2005, 93–94.

[17] Metaxas 2005, 94–95; Laflı 2012, 182; Pitarakis 2015, 178, cat. no. 105.

[18] Laflı 2012, 187.

[19] Türker 2009, 115–125.

[20] Kiernan 2009, 6–7 with further literature.

deposits and construction trenches.[21] What they contained or what their exact purpose was remains unknown. Possibilities mentioned in the literature are incense, unguents, oil, and perfumes. Alternatively, they could have been used to take symbolic sips of water or another fluid or may have held representative morsels of food.[22] In addition, they have been suggested to have played a role in ritual meals or to have been used for drinking water from sacred springs.

The condition of the object can provide additional indications as to the intention underlying the deposition. Most of the ceramic vessels found were still intact and usable at the time they became part of the archaeological record, in contrast to the large majority of sherds recovered at the site.[23] The same is true for the metal objects – the sword, door bolt, and buckles. Conversely, the iron ladle had been broken in two. The well-known breaking or twisting of metal objects in votive contexts has been interpreted as a ritual killing of the object.[24] Although in our case the damage could have happened accidentally, it is rather peculiar that the ladle was left at the bottom of the dolium instead of being thrown out. Likewise, some of the ceramic vessels encountered appear not to have been broken until the time of deposition. Examples include the amphora inside the dolium in Room 10 and the bowl left behind on site when the dolium in the corner of Room 16 was finally abandoned. Interestingly, the coin found inside the dolium in Room 16 was clipped. The clipping of coins could have been done for monetary reasons, but ritual purposes have been suggested as well.[25]

Coins are known to have supplemented or even replaced offerings already in Roman centuries. However, coins like the ones discovered in the Upper Agora South Building are very difficult to connect to intentional deposition because they were of such low value and because they are extremely numerous. They were apparently lost on a regular basis, as is attested by the high numbers of such small coins found at every late antique site. Likewise, even though metal objects like swords have frequently been encountered in what are considered to be votive contexts, belt buckles and ladles, as retrieved from Room 16, are

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[21] E.g., Stroud 1965; Grasso 2004; Cool – Griffiths 2015 for Pompeii.

[22] Kiernan 2009, 168 for possible functions of small ceramic vases in the northwestern provinces of the Roman Empire. Cool – Griffiths (2015, 13‒14) suggested that they were not recipients but together with small 'lids' represented miniature musical instruments.

[23] Fulford 2001, 202 considers the recurrent presence of intact or semi-intact vessels to be indicative of 'ritual behavior'.

[24] See for instance Derks 1998, 46 on swords; Grummond 2009, on the ritual killing of mirrors.

[25] Aubin – Meissonnier 1992; Kiernan 2001 with further references.

recurrent at every site. A precise analysis of the find context of these mundane but also of the more extraordinary objects is an extremely vital step in determining whether or not a deposition held special meaning.

If we for instance consider the four small coins mentioned above, the clipped one was encountered inside a dolium and another coin exactly underneath the centre of a dolium, while the latter two were found underneath the two lowest elements of a new entrance into a room. Entrances were considered to be liminal areas in many cultures. They were vulnerable to attacks from evil forces and thus in need of additional protection.[26] During the Christian period in the Eastern Mediterranean this took the form of apotropaic images, protective symbols – especially from the fourth century onwards, the sign of the cross – and words, often short prayers, carved as architectural decoration or applied in the form of graffiti on door posts and door lintels.[27] Christian populations could have inherited the practice of burying objects underneath thresholds or foundations from either their pagan or their Jewish predecessors and probably from both. Literary sources from the Roman period mention that objects underneath doorsills had the power to both bring good luck or prosperity to the building and its residents, and to ward off bad luck and evil magic.[28] At Pompeii not only miniature vases but also coins were found underneath the thresholds of interior doorways of several houses.[29] The burial of objects beneath doorsills is apparently a feature of Jewish tradition as well. In a cavity underneath the doorsill of the synagogue at Dura Europos for instance two human fingers were discovered.[30] In the early seventh century Sophronius of Jerusalem recounts how the Cypriot doctor Theodorus had become the victim of sorcery after a Jewish magician had buried a magical item underneath the threshold of his bedroom.[31]

The deposition of objects, not only coins but also metal items and ceramic vessels, in association with dolia may be less widely attested but is not at all surprising considering the

[26] Faraone 1992, esp. 7–9. To name just one contemporaneous example, in late antique settlements in the North Sea zone there was a special relationship between special deposits and entrances as well (Hamerow 2006, 9–12, 23).

[27] The most extensive ensemble can be found in the Dead Cities of Syria (Prentice 1906).

[28] According to Pliny the Elder for instance burying the head of a ‘dragon’ (‘draco’), probably some variety of snake, underneath the threshold brought prosperity to the residents (Plin. nat. 29.20.76), while the genitals of a black dog averted evil magic (Plin. nat. 30.24.82).

[29] Note 21 for miniature vases; Anniboletti 2010, 119–120 for coins.

[30] Magness 2010, 145–147.

[31] v. Cyr. et Jo. PG 87(3): 3625. Discussed in Dickie 2001, 282.

high value of such large storage vessels. They were difficult to manufacture as they could not be turned on the wheel. A fully formed dolium with a production mistake like the one in the corner of Room 16 would not be discarded but repaired and its walls strengthened with a series of lead connections before it was fired (*fig. 6*). Because they were so valuable, dolia were not often abandoned. Their owners preferred to salvage them whenever they could. The only traces of their earlier presence in the archaeological record then are cavities in the floor if they had been set below ground level and dolia lids or no traces at all if they had stood on the floor. In our building complex, dolia that could not be salvaged were not simply abandoned, but apparently paid a final mark of respect. Both the related foundation and termination deposits confirm their high value. Whereas the former were probably intended to entreat good luck and prevent the spoilage of food, the latter may have been left as acknowledgement of good services. In both cases, a general concern with fertility and ensuring future fertility can be surmised. Although comparable evidence from other sites in the East is lacking, it is interesting to note that at more or less contemporaneous sites in Britain, termination deposits have been associated with a variety of grain storage locations.[32] Interestingly, the dolium in Room 16 functioned as a magnet for the deposition of objects during its installation, throughout its period of use and at the moment of its abandonment. Although most of the objects were everyday items, their accumulation is highly meaningful.

Finally, the sword and *unguentarium* beneath the oldest floor in Room 16 were both associated with rubble, which otherwise was absent from the layer. In addition, the sword was surrounded with ashes and charcoal, often associated with sacrifice and votive deposits. Foundation deposits associated with floors are probably the most difficult to identify with certainty, as so many objects could have ended up in the soil used to raise a floor level. Nevertheless, when one of the more extraordinary objects at a site is found intact and associated with a floor, this should serve as a signal that the deposition may have held special meaning. This is corroborated for instance by the many occasions upon which miniature jars were found in association with floors, foundations and construction rites. Examples from Pompeii have been mentioned above. To name but a few examples from Sagalassos: in a fold of the bedrock underneath a room next to Room 16 of the same building another miniature vase was found. Two intact small vases were found underneath a sixth-century floor in the terraced building to the north of the Upper Agora, together with a female figurine, a key, and three complete oil lamps. In the first half of the sixth century, a "restaurant" was installed in

[32] Clarke 1997, 80–81; Fulford 2001, 213–214; Hamerow 2006, 28.

the east portico of the Lower Agora. A small jar was stuck in between the slabs just behind the entrance to the complex.

Based on this summary overview, it can already be said that the nature of the building itself is not necessarily helpful in distinguishing ritual deposits. A too large focus on sacred sites in the past has even led to the disregard of such deposits elsewhere. The following definition from the DPhil *Foundation Rituals and the Culture of Building in Ancient Greece*, is telling, as foundation rituals are described as “ceremonies known throughout the ancient Mediterranean that marked the initiation of a *sacred* building’s construction with prayer, sacrifice, and the burial of various materials in foundation deposits.”[33] Although there can be no doubt that building deposits were recurrent at temples or other cult sites, I hope to have demonstrated by now that the locations of (possible) ritual deposits are much more diverse and that contacts with the supernatural were not limited to obvious cult locations.

Ritual deposits and “official” Christianity

At the start of this article, the occurrence of apotropaic devices at the Upper Agora of Sagalassos was mentioned. No amulets have been retrieved from the Upper Agora South Building, but a number of *tintinnabula* were excavated, including one on the floor just next to the *dolium* in the corner of Room 16 (*fig. 10*). At the same time signs that the residents of the building believed in the Christian God were omnipresent as well. Examples include a pilgrim flask found in a neighbouring room of the Upper Agora South Building and the many monograms and crosses incised in the amphora deposited in the dolium in Room 10. The long history of building and termination deposits suggests that they as well tap into diverse and widespread beliefs in the existence of supernatural powers besides the Christian God as well.

Such beliefs in spirits and demons were widespread among late antique Christians. This is for instance suggested by the apotropaic formulae mentioned earlier or by the fact that exorcism was a fixed part of baptism.[34] The Church fathers themselves painted a vision of a world in which demons lurked not only in pagan shrines, but on every street corner. They castigated their congregants for exposing themselves to demonic forces in the theatre, the

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[33] Hunt 2006, 1 (*my stress*).

[34] Maxwell 1999.

circus, when gambling and so on.[35] The reputation of many a saint was based on his or her ability to resist, conquer or exorcise such malevolent forces.[36] It is therefore only to be expected that ordinary people would have felt the need to seek protection for their persona, their house and possessions. The saints' solution of making the sign of the cross and the Church's further recommendations of singing psalms,[37] saying prayers and holy oil, seemingly failed to meet all daily needs. They were supplemented by other and often ancient means of protection, such as incantations, the wearing of amulets, inscribing protective formulas or particular images, hanging bells by the door or burying items underneath floors, doorsills and valuable items of furniture. In 1995 Russell referred to such practices as "domestic necessity", since such simple means of protection were part of daily life for a large part of the population.

Although all these solutions were condemned by the Church,[38] there is no literary evidence to suggest that they took actual measures against the more innocent forms of magic. It is becoming ever more clear that magic and Christianity were not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, with time there was a true convergence between Christianity and benign "magical" practices.[39] Foundation and termination deposits were probably considered quite harmless and were likely completely absorbed into the Christianised society.[40]

Corroborating this hypothesis is the fact that building deposits in these Early Christian centuries could form part of church construction as well. At Sagalassos itself, a miniature vase was integrated into the *synthronon* in the apse of the so-called Apollo Klarios Church on the western side of the Lower Agora. The *synthronon* had been almost entirely dismantled in later times, so that only three steps of the structure were preserved. Consequently, the complete miniature jar that had been pressed into the mortar in between the stones was discovered.[41] Such examples of building deposits are known from church sites in other regions of the Empire as well. On Crete, for instance, foundation deposits incorporating "small bones" have

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[35] Jacobs 2014.

[36] Brakke 2006; Saradi 2008.

[37] Grig 2013.

[38] Dickie 2001.

[39] Maguire et al. 1989.

[40] Another good example is the deposition of early Christian pilgrim flasks discussed by William Anderson. Their appearance at ancient sites of worship can be regarded as an adoption and adaptation of age-old votive customs. It echoes the deposition of pottery and votives in pagan centuries (Anderson 2007).

[41] Excavated by the author in 2006.

been reported. Underneath the Panormos basilica a "container filled with bones" was thus found buried below the foundations of the chancel.[42] A hole containing a concentration of small bones was found underneath the entrance to the chancel of a basilica at Kera-Onythe Goulediana.[43] And a small heap of burnt bones was unearthed again centrally underneath the apse of the Sanatorium basilica at Knossos.[44] Whether these were animal or human bones remains unknown. Conversely, at the Torre de Palma basilica in Lusitania, the builders buried 10 coins underneath the building's floor in the third quarter of the fourth century.[45] The evidence at the moment is much too insubstantial to draw any meaningful conclusions, but it does indicate that the practice was not unknown in official Christian contexts. Although in the cases of the Crete basilicas and the Sagalassos church it could be argued that the ritual deposits were created by workmen with the clergy being unaware of them, the high value of a deposit such as that of the Torre de Palma basilica would suggest otherwise. In addition, the location of the deposits, with a strong focus on the apse, the chancel and the altar, also points towards a connection with the rituals carried out here.

There are no contemporaneous literary sources for ritual deposits in Late Antiquity, but passages abound that testify to the fact that the building of a late antique church was prepared with great care and a solid dose of ritual and theatrics. The sixth-century account of the construction of the Marneion Church at Gaza[46] for instance described the clergy as being intimately involved in church construction, with the bishop physically laying the first stones. It is not inconceivable that on such occasions other items were deposited as well to ensure the well-functioning of the monument in every way possible.

Finding and recognising ritual deposits

The omnipresence of ritual deposits in Late Antiquity is not inconceivable, but only very few of them have been recognised and published to this day. Admittedly, the problem is general

[42] Sanders 1982, 117–118.

[43] Sanders 1982, 120–121.

[44] Sanders 1982, 106.

[45] Huffstot 1998. I am grateful to prof. Gisela Ripoll for this reference.

[46] Marc. Diac. *v. Porph.* 77–79. The date of the Life of Porphyry is much disputed. I follow the critical analysis by Barnes (2010, 260-283) here, who situates the text in the Justinianic period.

and not limited to late antique or Byzantine archaeology alone.[47] As indicated above, the situation is worst by far for building and termination deposits related to private architecture. In contrast to the often more remarkable archaeological material used in votive contexts in sanctuaries or the grave goods encountered in tombs, ritual deposits in houses, storage structures, shops and so on generally consisted of bone material or very mundane objects.[48] It is not always easy to recognize that such an object has been dedicated, rather than simply discarded or lost. As explained above, correct interpretation depends on a careful investigation and analysis of the find context and ideally, on an analysis and comparison of several find contexts. But it has long been and often is standard archaeological practice to study such objects outside of their find context. Pottery goes to the pottery specialist, coins to the numismatist, iron to the metal specialist and so on. Consequently, building and termination deposits are often misidentified or poorly recorded and passed over in excavation reports.

Furthermore, there are some clear conceptual differences between archaeologists trained and excavating in different traditions. It is remarkable how many foundation and termination deposits there are in Roman and post-Roman western and northern Europe[49] compared to a country such as Turkey where they are non-existent.

Then there is the problem that some objects are so small that they are easily overlooked. This is for instance the case with small coins. Moreover, many structures in late antique and early Byzantine cities were constructed of stone, as opposed to for instance structures in western and northern Europe, which were often wooden.[50] Stone foundations have rarely been excavated in the past and are also rarely exposed now. The benefit of such an undertaking is not deemed to justify the investment of time and money. Very often, excavating underneath the youngest floor level of a room is still not considered necessary. And as far as objects integrated inside the walls themselves are concerned, we are completely dependent on chance preservation.

A final factor in the neglect of all ritual deposits is that archaeologists even now are very reluctant to infer beliefs from the material record alone, certainly in periods for which

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[47] In his introduction to the 2010 issue of World Archaeology entitled “The Object of Dedication”, Robin Osborne laments the lack of attention for all kinds of ritual deposits in archaeological research.

[48] The articles assembled in Denti – Tuffeau-Libra 2013 focus solely on ceramics. Most of them do focus on cult sites and tombs though.

[49] E.g. Merrifield 2001, passim; Hamerow 2006; Hukantaival 2007 with further references.

[50] See Hamerow 2006 for examples from Anglo-Saxon England and the wider North Sea Zone.

there are large quantities of literary sources available.[51] Our knowledge of material culture and archaeology of the late antique period is growing exponentially,[52] but this evidence has only very recently featured in the research on the nature of Christianity, and is more often than not used as proof of whatever trend is under discussion or sometimes to illuminate what the texts do not speak about. Nevertheless, the possibilities of archaeological evidence are great. When analysed with care, archaeology is a highly reliable source to find out what ordinary people who thought of themselves as Christians actually did, whereas until now the research has often been focused on how they were *instructed* to act and behave by the church elite.[53] Archaeological evidence can also do justice to the complexity of religious belief, attesting to individual practices and preferences or local customs within broader religious trends and even to variants of religious affiliation between different contexts.[54] By integrating material culture into the research on religion, it is possible to offer a much richer and more impartial description of people's behaviour than was deemed necessary or appropriate to give by participant observers. An integrated approach allows to illuminate alternative contexts for practices reported in literary sources and describe practices that they failed to mention altogether.[55] Indeed, as was argued in this article, even very common practices such as ritual deposits can remain entirely unattested in literary sources.

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[51] Osborne 2010, 6.

[52] Exemplified in the *Late Antique Archaeology* series.

[53] Cameron 2010, 6.

[54] Rébillard 2012 is a good example of this.

[55] Osborne 2010, 6–7.

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Figure Captions

fig. 1: Plan of the building complex to the south of the Upper Agora of Sagalassos indicating *in situ* dolia

fig. 2: *In situ* small coin underneath the dolium in Room 9.

fig. 3: Sword discovered underneath the oldest floor in Room 16

fig. 4: Miniature vessel pushed into the mortar stabilizing a dolium discovered in the corner of Room 16

fig. 5: Superposition of the lid of a ceramic vessel and a miniature vessel next to the dolium in Room 16.

fig. 6: Room 16, post-earthquake situation with the dolium in the corner still intact and the second dolium moved to a new position in the opposite corner of the room.

fig. 7: Cooking pot and spouted vessel found inside the dolium in the corner of Room 16.

fig. 8: Dolium discovered inside Room 10

fig. 9: Amphora sherds inside the dolium in Room 10

fig. 10: *Tintinnabulum* found on top of the last floor level of Room 16