

Introduction: Ancient Small Objects in the Mediterranean

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In recent years, an increasing interest in the study of ‘small finds’ has arisen. These small-sized objects from ancient societies that occupied the Mediterranean area were traditionally labelled as ‘special finds’. Currently, small objects are consistently being studied from new perspectives that seek to contextualise and interpret them. In line with this scholarly interest, this volume brings together a diverse collection of papers that explore the subject from intriguing perspectives. At its core, this book continues the interesting conversation started at the session we organised during the 29th Annual Meeting of the European Association of Archaeologists (Belfast, 2023) entitled ‘Between miniatures and models: interdisciplinary approaches for analysing small objects meanings, uses, and contexts in the Mediterranean and surrounding areas’. The presentations delivered in that opportunity, along with contributions from experts that are studying small objects from different points of view, enrich the volume.

We set to organise a session on the topic of ‘small finds’ motivated by the interest of exploring interdisciplinary approaches to the study of small objects. Traditionally, a wide variety of these artefacts made from different raw materials have been tentatively interpreted as religious or artistic objects, and several categories proposed for their study—including models, miniatures, miniaturised items, and special finds. To better understand these objects, the session had the aim of critically examining the categories traditionally used, their contexts, meanings, and possible functions. Several key questions guided the discussion: Should small objects be granted a distinct category within archaeological analyses? Can small objects provide insights different from those offered by other material remains? Are the categories used to classify them methodologically useful? What criteria define an object as ‘small’ within the broader assemblage of archaeological materials?

The session fostered a stimulating discussion on those emerging questions and the interpretation of small objects to better understand their roles in various practices of past societies from an interdisciplinary perspective. It also provided an opportunity to examine the relevance of the concepts and categories employed in each case study, the management of databases, the comparison of classificatory frameworks, and the theoretical and methodological

approaches used. Furthermore, it stimulated discussions on their meanings and uses, as well as issues related to their conservation and public presentation. From the session, we have endeavoured to enrich the discussion on the subject with this volume addressing the study of small objects made from various materials and originating in different regions of the Mediterranean in order to reflect on the concepts of miniature, model, and special find, evaluating their explanatory potential as analytical categories. This discussion also extended to the role of small objects in both daily life and symbolic-ritual practices, as well as their significance in the interactions and exchanges between societies across the Mediterranean.

The contributions in this volume set within the current international interest in the issue, that has led to the organisation of specialised academic meetings, such as the workshops ‘Excavating the Extra-Ordinary: Challenges & Merits of Working with Small Finds’ (1 and 2), held in April 2019 and November 2022 at Johannes Gutenberg University, Mainz, Germany (Kilian and Zöller-Engelhardt 2021; Kilian, Pruß, and Zöller-Engelhardt 2024). and the ‘International Conference on Amulets’ (ICA 2024), organised by the Museum of Archaeology D. Diogo de Sousa (Braga, Portugal) in November 2024. While significant progress has been made in this research area, much remains to be explored, given the vast range of archaeological examples and analytical possibilities that small objects present.

Our interest in organising both the session and the present volume initially stemmed from a critical reconsideration of the concept of ‘small find’, a term widely applied to refer to special discoveries, particularly within the fields of Near Eastern archaeology and egyptology. Following an analysis of objects classified as ‘small finds’ from the archaeological site of Tell el-Ghaba (Eastern Delta, Egypt)¹, Calomino (2021, 239–244) identified two principal issues. Firstly, the concept itself appears to be

¹ Tell el-Ghaba is located on the Eastern Nile Delta (North Sinai, Egypt), close to the extinct Pelusiac branch of the Nile. It is an urban settlement that was occupied between the beginning of the Third Intermediate Period and the Early Saite Period (from the mid-10th century BCE to the end of the 7th century BCE).

a broad and somewhat ambiguous category (Salem and Calomino 2021), with limited explanatory value due to the wide variety of objects it encompasses. Secondly, the classification systems employed have often attempted to distinguish between decorative/ornamental and utilitarian/functional artefacts (Calomino 2018, 2020). In this regard, two primary approaches can be identified in the way scholars have published studies on these objects.

In some cases, ‘small finds’ is not explicitly defined; instead, catalogues specify the categories of items included for particular sites. For example, at Megiddo (Finkelstein, Ussishkin and Halpern 2006) the ‘Small finds’ section encompasses vessels; fishing equipment; personal objects; recreational items; figurative and religious art; written documents; coins; architectural elements; items of unknown function; manufactured products; raw materials; and residues. At Kom Rabi’a (Giddy 1999), categories distinguish between figurines and statuettes; personal ornaments; domestic items; tools; inscribed pieces; gaming pieces; and miscellaneous objects. Such catalogues typically address large assemblages recovered over multiple excavation seasons; they require systematic sorting, classification and analysis, and they provide detailed descriptions of individual objects to facilitate subsequent study and comparison.

In other cases, publications devoted to particular categories within the ‘small finds’ assemblage have been produced, most often addressing amulets, items of personal adornment, seals, and scarabs (e.g. Newberry 1908; Petrie 1914; Wilkinson 1971; Ward 1978; Tufnell 1984; Ben-Tor 1993, 2007; Andrews 1994; Sliwa 1999; Sparavigna 2009; Velázquez *et al.* 2015; Ameri 2018). Alongside their substantive proposals and case-specific contributions, such general syntheses provide operational definitions of the classes under review and re-evaluate the functions ascribed to them—amuletic, identity, and property values, amongst others. In this sense, an amulet is

[...] denominaremos amuleto a un objeto de dimensiones reducidas, ideado para estar en contacto directo con su poseedor, sea durante la vida o después de la muerte, con efectos que incluyen tanto aspectos protectores como propiciadores y cuyo poder, según nuestro criterio, es efectivo más allá de su presencia en el objeto en concreto, es decir, los amuletos no son eficaces por sí mismos sino por lo que representan² (López Grande *et al.* 2014, 14).

This passage highlights the difficulty of separating ornamental aspect from its utility, value, meaning, and presumed efficacy, and thus reprises the issue noted above: the standard twofold classification of objects into symbolic/decorative—encompassing most small finds—and

utilitarian/functional—embracing, for example, pottery assemblages. Publications of this kind focus on specific artefact categories and typically privilege definitional and interpretative concerns. Yet the reliance on terms such as ‘amulet’, ‘ornament’, and ‘seal’ has channelled attention towards internal figurative iconography and inscriptions, while overlooking characteristics such as form, materiality, colour, modes of manufacture, and non-figurative motifs, amongst others.

How, then, should objects be treated that plausibly belong to more than one class—those with amuletic and protective force, that register ownership or contents, function as adornment or furnishing, can be threaded with other elements, or serve to make seals? This ambiguity confronts authors with choices about catalogue placement and readers with questions about where to search in indices. Two debates are salient. On the one hand, items labelled ‘ornamental’ demonstrably perform ‘utilitarian and functional’ roles. Analyses of Egyptian amulets, for example, link them to strategies of power, protection, and aversion (e.g. Petrie 1914; Baines 1984; Andrews 1994; Kemp 2003; Assmann 2005), and such roles are articulated not only through imagery but also through colour and material selection (Petrie 1914; Baines 1984; Andrews 1994; Wilkinson 1994; Friedman 1998; Nicholson and Shaw 2000; Assmann 2005; López-Grande *et al.* 2014). On the other hand, the category itself is often a functional tautology: an amulet is so called because an amuletic role is inferred—‘functional terms are frequently given to artefacts purely because they provide convenient labels. Such labels, or categories, often assume a direct relationship between shape and function’ (Allison 1999, 10). Yet shape and function do not stand in a simple, unidirectional relation; nor is use necessarily singular or temporally ordered. Rather, it is conditioned by the total design—form, size, raw materials—whose formal properties afford participation in specific practices (Swift 2017; Calomino 2018). Shifting emphasis from immediate function to potential affordances allows recognition of the range of activities an object could support and, in context, those it did. Consequently, assigning a unique functional domain is problematic (Allason-Jones 2011), not least because it presumes a neat separation of utilitarian from non-utilitarian traits—especially challenging in domestic contexts marked by a multiplicity of practices (e.g. Lupo, Calomino and Scaro 2019).

So far, the above has focused on the way the concept of small finds has been approached by researchers in their analyses and presentations. Another outlook opens up when considering how it has been explicitly defined. The Oxford Dictionary of Archaeology (Darvill 2008) defines ‘small find’ as

an object recovered during an excavation which because of its nature or position is individually recorded. The range of materials treated in this way will vary according to the nature of the deposits being examined and the range and quantity of material being

² ‘an object of reduced dimensions, devised to be in direct contact with its possessor, either during life or after death, with effects that include both protective and propitiatory aspects and whose power, according to our criteria, is effective beyond its presence in the specific object, *i.e.* amulets are not effective by themselves but by what they represent’.

recovered. At some excavations, all finds are treated as small finds while at others it may be that, for example, pottery, bone, and building materials are treated as bulk finds and recorded only in their context of origin while coins, metal objects, and finely worked objects in other materials are treated as small finds.

The third edition of the Archaeological Site Manual (Museum of London Archaeology Service 1994) offers no explicit definition; instead, it treats a small find as any object assigned an individual access number in an excavation's finds record. In Spanish scholarship, this notion is commonly rendered as 'hallazgos especiales [special findings]', denoting 'small, transportable, functionally diverse artefacts, scarce in comparison with those commonly recovered at the site and generally requiring some labour investment' (Crivelli, Guillermo and Fernández 2018, 41).

These definitions and debates indicate that the label 'small find' may be deployed at distinct, interrelated—sometimes simultaneous—stages of research. Taking Tell el-Ghaba as a case study,³ its use can be traced in: a. the *in situ* recording of finds within grids or excavation areas—aimed at establishing the *locus* of provenance and contextual relationships—and the compilation of record sheets supplementary to the *locus* form (Crivelli 2015, 39–43; Fusaldo 2005, 24), prepared in line with excavation and documentation manuals and proposals (e.g. Harris 1989; Herr and Younker 1994; Museum of London Archaeology Service 1994; Herr and Christopherson 1998; for further detail see Crivelli 2015) and with prior fieldwork and artefact-recording practice in the Near East; b. the laboratory recording and graphic documentation (photography and illustration) of these objects with their field references, to enable detailed survey against pre-established record sheets and to undertake required restoration and conservation (e.g. Arbolave 2006, 2015); c. the construction of digital databases derived from such records; d. the preparation of publications and catalogues based on those databases and records—often introducing further sub-categories (e.g. lithic tools, initially registered as small finds with domestic function, are extracted for specific analysis), varying according to each study's needs, research questions, and publication venue; e. the selection of objects for exhibition or for transfer by the Supreme Council of Antiquities.⁴ These stages may occur over short and/or extended periods and, although the notion of small finds may encompass different objects along this process, it generally gathers those items that may be regarded as 'portable art' on site, where 'small'—associated with portability by one person—and 'special'—indexed by

relative scarcity in context, particular characteristics, the presence of imagery, and parallels in Egyptian history—remain decisive criteria.

More recent studies addressing this issue (Kilian and Zöllner-Engelhardt 2021; Kilian, Pruß, and Zöllner-Engelhardt 2024) have sought to highlight the significance of examining objects that are often relegated within the material record in favour of others. These artefacts, also categorised as small finds, include fragmentary and seemingly unremarkable objects that are frequently overlooked. Such ordinary finds have generally been excluded from publications—particularly catalogues—and pose significant analytical challenges, either due to their inherent characteristics or the vast quantities in which they appear. The authors also advocate for a conceptual discussion of the term, arguing that:

- a. small finds are sometimes equated with small artefacts, a definition that fails to account for the full spectrum of complete objects and fragments, as fragmentary items are typically classified as small finds;
- b. in other instances, small finds are defined by negation—by what they are not. This approach presents methodological disadvantages, as it often results in an overly fragmented treatment of assemblages in comparison to other objects;
- c. a clearer delineation of the term is essential for structuring our analyses. Furthermore, we should consider developing theoretical and methodological frameworks that enable the creation of meaningful classifications across all areas in which we work with small finds—from excavation and post-processing analysis to storage, publication, and their curation in museums and collections.

The brief, though not minor, critical review of the concept of small finds presented herein enables the rethinking of how certain objects have been analysed and treated in the course of research, both at a particular archaeological site and in Egyptology in general. We problematise the concept of small finds and the inherent difficulties that complicate the approach to these assemblages and require new proposals in the hope of opening new perspectives and insights for research on different sites.

The contributions in this volume explore various approaches to the analysis and interpretation of small objects, offering diverse perspectives and methodological insights for their study in the Mediterranean. By bringing together a wide range of case studies, the publication aims to highlight the significance of these artefacts in reconstructing past societies and cultural interactions. The chapters are organised following a geographical framework and a chronological sequence, ensuring a comprehensive examination of different regions of the Mediterranean and their respective historical contexts. This structure not only facilitates comparative analyses but also underscores the diversity of materials, functions, and meanings associated with small objects. Furthermore, the

³ The research phases from Tell el-Ghaba are generally similar to those used in other archaeological sites along the Egyptian Delta. This does not presume that they are identical in other research projects or other types of sites throughout Egypt.

⁴ The Supreme Council of Antiquities -SCA- (Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities) is the government body responsible for the regulation of archaeological excavations in Egypt and for the conservation and protection of all ancient artefacts.

volume fosters interdisciplinary dialogue by incorporating different methodological approaches from epigraphical, typological, and technological studies to spatial and contextual analyses, enhancing our understanding of these artefacts within their broader archaeological and historical frameworks.

The volume opens with two articles centred in Egyptian small objects recovered in funerary contexts that currently are part of Museum collections. In the first chapter, Inês Torres analyses the numerous miniatures recovered at Tutankhamun's tomb, considering them under the light of a 'technology of enchantment'. As such, these small objects are considered as powerful since they can introduce the user into another world, in this case linked to the funerary sphere, and by doing so empowering them to extend their control over the worlds represented by it. The second chapter extends the discussion by presenting a collection of miniature vessels housed in the Egyptian Museum of Barcelona and the Municipal Museum of Can Xifreda. Núria Torras-Benezet, Karin Harzbecher Spezzia, Imanol Munoz-Pandiella, and Jordi Moyés Ardiaca seek to increase the database of small objects available for analysis in the frame of the MagArt project, with the aim of reevaluating and valorising Egyptian magical artefacts. For doing so, the authors centre around the study of the function of the miniatures within ritual contexts to increase their understanding in Spanish collections. In order to enhance their study and museological presentation, the digitisation of the small objects is proposed; using 3D modelling and immersive reality applications, the study offers new possibilities for education, outreach, and museum curation.

Moving beyond Egypt, the third chapter explores the intersection of small objects, writing, and orality in the Ancient Near East and the Classical world. By analysing small, inscribed objects from Mesopotamia's Third Dynasty of Ur alongside early Greek alphabetic inscriptions, Rodrigo Cabrera and Analía Sapere investigate the ways writing circulated through different communicational contexts. These objects reveal the materiality of the written word, emphasizing the role of literacy, performative practice, and the relational dynamics between individuals and their inscribed objects.

Expanding the discussion towards pottery craftsmanship, in the fourth chapter Macarena Bustamante-Álvarez, Alberto Dorado Alejos, Alexis Maldonado Ruiz, and Elena H. Sánchez López present a pottery stamp with geometric decoration used for imprinting moulds in the manufacture of *terra sigillata*. Discovered at the Cartuja pottery complex in Granada, this rare implement provides valuable insights into the *chaîne opératoire* of Roman pottery production in the Iberian Peninsula. The chapter details the morphological and functional aspects of the stamp, presents the results of archaeometric analyses that determine its provenance, and highlights the creation of a digital replica that enables experimental archaeology without risking damage to the original artifact.

In the fifth chapter, Alberto Dorado Alejos and Julia García González shift focus to glass and faience bead production in Talayotic and Post-Talayotic Menorca, an area of study that has traditionally lacked systematic approaches. Through a newly proposed morpho-typological framework along network analysis, this research reconstructs the distribution and manufacturing techniques of these beads within the broader context of the western Mediterranean. The chapter offers insights into the artisans' technical knowledge and trade networks, creating a comprehensive classification system that serves as a foundational reference for future research.

The volume concludes by delving into medieval metallurgy. In chapter six, María Isabel Molina Campuzano analyses late medieval metal artifacts from the Jewish quarter of the castle of Lorca (Murcia, Spain), an exceptional archaeological site abandoned in the 15th century and never reoccupied. The objects, related to domestic activities, shed light on daily life within the Jewish community; their comparison with other sites both in the Iberian Peninsula and in Europe help to further contextualise them as well as to understand the degree of standardisation in metal production. Finally, Yaiza Hernández-Casas focuses on copper-based artifacts from the Jewish quarter of Molina de Aragón (Guadalajara, Spain) in the context of feudal expansion. Through typological, compositional (pXRF), and technological (metallography) analyses, the author investigates alloying, recycling, and re-smelting practices. By tracing craftsmanship specialisation and production standardisation, the chapter contributes to a broader understanding of medieval Iberian metallurgy, proposing a predictive model for copper-based artifacts in feudal contexts.

The contributions in this volume offer a rich and multifaceted exploration of small objects, considering their contexts of production, use, and circulation in a broad geographical and chronological span. The study of technological processes related to craftsmanship, access to raw materials, and to knowledge introduces a novel aspect to understanding small-scale artifacts, while considering their characteristics related to ritual contexts, and the materiality of writing, highlights their function in linking different worlds and realities.

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