

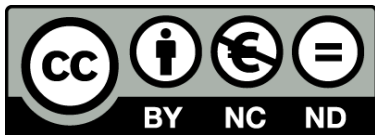
Unearthing Stratigraphies of Violence at Europe's Borders

Johannes Jungfleisch

Zitiervorschlag

Johannes Jungfleisch. 2026. Unearthing Stratigraphies of Violence at Europe's Borders. Forum Kritische Archäologie 15, Theme Issue: Orienting Archaeology towards Peace: 5–8.

URL <https://www.kritischearchaeologie.de>
DOI <http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/refubium-51888>
ISSN 2194-346X



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Unearthing Stratigraphies of Violence at Europe's Borders

Johannes Jungfleisch

johannes.jungfleisch@rub.de

When I initially received the call for contributions to *Orienting Archaeology towards Peace*, I was unsure how I could contribute to the challenging question of how archaeology and the heritage sector might promote peace and justice. Almost immediately, the persistent question of archaeology's contemporary relevance in a world characterized by ongoing crises, violence, and injustice came to mind. While I was conducting my PhD research, I observed the overthrow of an authoritarian regime, the subsequent hijacking of a revolution – first by conservative Islamic politicians and then by the military – and the rapid transformation of a once hopeful country into an even harsher yet stable dictatorship, all from the distant and strangely insulated microcosm of an excavation house in the Egyptian Nile Delta (Jungfleisch and Reali 2023).

These experiences led me to search for a way to align my interest in archaeology with research that would, at the very least, not remain indifferent to the present and its manifold injustices. With the *long summer of migration* (Kasperek and Speer 2015) in 2015, when countless people were fleeing the atrocities of the Syrian civil war, I, like many other heritage practitioners, felt the need to do something – particularly in light of my own daily PhD work on Bronze Age wall paintings, which increasingly seemed hollow. Two years later, a colleague and I initiated a small archaeological project on the materiality of contemporary undocumented migration. Since then, my research focus has shifted entirely to the study of modern migration in Greece, examining migrant journeys across the Eastern Mediterranean (Jungfleisch 2025a) and the lives and labor of migrants in Greece's intensive agricultural sector (Jungfleisch 2025b; DAAD PRIME Project: *Beyond Sweet Fruits: An Archaeology of Contemporary Intensive Agriculture in Vouprasia/Western Greece*).

In my understanding, an archaeology of undocumented and forced migration can play an essential role by providing a material perspective on the immediate consequences of the numerous crises unfolding across the globe. These often-neglected crises range from violent conflict and war to structural poverty, socioeconomic inequality, and the loss of livelihoods in the wake of climate change in marginalized regions. The migrant objects and materials left behind along Europe's external borders can, in this sense, be understood as unsettling material assemblages of these conflicts and crises – accumulating into a layered stratigraphy that reflects, and at times exposes, European obliviousness or indifference toward events taking place elsewhere. This is even more important given that, within many European societies, the very sense of what counts as war or peace has changed dramatically in response to a complex combination of socioeconomic anxieties, political self-interest, and a growing numbness in the face of horrific atrocities occurring at Europe's doorstep.

The material traces of migration are neither quantitatively nor qualitatively uniform. Instead, they vary considerably and depend on the nature, scale, and temporality of the specific crisis. For instance, the quantity and variety of objects at migrant sites along the Turkish west coast, primarily in use during 2015 and 2016, were overwhelming, mirroring the large-scale migratory movements driven by escalating armed conflicts in countries such as Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, as well as by reductions in international aid that had produced severe shortages in refugee camps across Southwest Asia. It often seemed as though people on the move had brought as many belongings as possible to the makeshift transit camps along the shore, only to abandon them there. At that time, people likely tried to hold on to the possessions they had managed to preserve from their former lives – whether from their original homes or from refugee camps – until they were ultimately forced to leave them behind due to the overcrowded conditions on the boats crossing the Aegean toward the Greek islands (Jungfleisch 2025a). Within the extensive accumulations of migrant materials from 2015/2016, personal documents were rare. The predominantly Syrian border crossers appear to have had little reason to conceal their identities, as the Dublin Regulation – which determines responsibility for processing an asylum request within Europe – had been suspended for Syrian citizens in August 2015.

The material culture of sites dating to the early 2020s differs significantly from that of sites in the mid-2010s. The more recent sites are more concealed within the dense vegetation along the Turkish shoreline and tend to contain far fewer materials left behind. This change is likely the result not only of fewer people attempting the crossing but also of fewer objects being carried to the coast. At the same time, abandoned personal documents – such as passports, identity cards, and residence permits issued by so-called transit countries – are increasingly encountered, both at departure sites in Turkey and at arrival sites on the Greek islands. The increasingly restrictive and militarized European border regime has apparently pushed migration within the Aegean further into clandestinity, compelling people on the move to discard identifying documents and, with them, to some extent their identities in the hope of improving their chances of obtaining asylum. These discarded identification documents indicate that the migrants came predominantly from regions shattered by armed conflict, violent repression, and multidimensional precarity: first, Iraq, then Yemen and Afghanistan, and now Sudan and Egypt. This observation may seem self-evident; nevertheless, it is crucial for recognizing migration for what it is: a social movement emerging from crises and violent conflicts that European societies have often pushed out of view over time or, in some cases, overlooked from the outset.

The materiality of undocumented migration not only points to the atrocities committed in troubled areas that are geographically distant, but also constitutes evidence of the hardship and violence that migrants experience on their journeys. Despite the seemingly omnipresent coverage by global media, many stages of migratory trajectories occur beyond public view – whether concealed by the clandestine nature of the process or by state authorities' interventions. These blind spots within contemporary migration often coincide with instances of precarity, violence, and injustice. In this regard, archaeology can mobilize its methodological strengths – its practice of material attention and its capacity to infer past practices and events from fragments and residues – to detect, trace, and interrogate such episodes while maintaining an ethical temporal distance from their immediate unfolding. In doing so, the material traces can acquire objective evidentiary force, challenging state-sanctioned narratives and providing tangible support for the testimonies of marginalized eyewitnesses.

Although the number of researchers engaging with the material dimensions of contemporary undocumented migration – both archaeologists and heritage specialists – continues to grow, and numerous vital initiatives have emerged (see, e.g., Seitsonen et al. 2016; Kourelis 2019; Hamilakis 2022; Yi-Neumann et al. 2022; Martin 2023; Wilts 2023; Farina and Iacono 2024; Kiddey 2024; Arciero et al. 2025), the sheer scope of this materiality nonetheless exceeds the capacities of individual scholars and even of dedicated research teams, as is often the case in contemporary archaeology. Addressing this topic, therefore, requires extensive and close collaboration not only within archaeology and heritage studies but also beyond them – through partnerships with ethnographers, political, social, and cultural scientists, as well as with civil society actors and artists.

However, the materiality of contemporary migration is at risk from several directions. Along the shores and beaches of both Turkey and Greece, abandoned belongings, discarded food packaging, stranded boats, and personal flotation devices form extensive deposits. Because many of these coastal zones on both sides of the border are well-known tourist destinations, local communities seek to keep the beaches clean, particularly as the tourist season approaches. In addition, various initiatives focus on removing the material traces of migration from remote

coastal areas, as these accumulations – comprising metal fragments, plastic materials, and even fuel – pose ecological hazards to the local environment. Furthermore, in recent years, forest fires have devastated entire landscapes in Greece and Turkey, including migrant sites situated within them. During a wildfire in the wooded hinterland of the Evros River, just behind the Greek-Turkish land border, several migrants lost their lives in 2023. In a cynical turn, some actors in Greek politics and parts of the public blamed migrants for causing the fire. Finally, some former migrant sites located in abandoned buildings across Greece – such as the former Ellinikon airport in Athens and various industrial facilities along the harbor of Patras – have been, or soon will be, redeveloped as part of joint public–private investment projects.

Should these traces disappear, so, too, would the possibility of detecting injustices and acts of violence perpetrated not only by smuggling networks but also by state authorities. Their loss would also mean the disappearance of a potential heritage whose affective materiality renders perceptible – at least to some extent – what contemporary mobility means for people on the move. Unearthing the traces of undocumented migration through archaeology is therefore crucial for transforming them into a durable, affective form of tangible heritage – one that resists policies of forgetting and holds the potential to influence and reconfigure stereotypes and attitudes toward migration. Only in this way will future generations have the opportunity to engage with this materiality, which physically conveys the hardships and violence migrants endure as they risk their lives on their journeys to Europe. This becomes all the more important in view of the progressive hardening of European borders and societies, shaped by repeated experiences of crisis, anxieties about the future, and deeply ingrained xenophobia.

An archaeology of undocumented migration may not directly promote peace or justice. Nevertheless, it can materially foreground the often-overlooked reality that contemporary mobility arises from conditions of precarity, injustice, and violence in troubled regions – frequently exacerbated by short-sighted omissions, diplomatic expediency, or institutionalized indifference on the part of European countries. Moreover, this archaeological subdiscipline reveals that violence does not stop at the borders of conflict zones but accompanies people on the move as a constant companion throughout their unpredictable journeys. By documenting the transient material residues of these migrant realities and reclaiming them as a critical counter-archive, archaeology can help demand accountability and foster awareness and empathy, on which we can envision more just and peaceful futures.

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