

The archaeology of intimacy in El Arenal

Janine Traber

In established practice, archaeology is used as a method to relate to former cultures of humanity by the excavation of their artifacts or dwelling structures. But the discipline itself has evolved to have an enormous effect on the history making of societies. It is usually conducted by an elite that would decide which cultures are relevant enough to be studied, whose graves shall be exhumed and how they would be presented to the public afterwards. Especially in postcolonial contexts, this is regarded as highly problematic and has led to public political discussions (see e.g. Shepherd 2013). The criticism against the discipline to school a selection of academics that is enabled to write down the former past of other social and ethnic groups led some researchers to a shifting approach towards time and place. Studies emerged on ethnological archaeology of the contemporary world. Not 'there', but 'here'

was studied and archaeological methods were probed on their efficiency to help understand societies as they exist right now (see e.g. White 2013). Following these ideas, in this paper, I will use archaeology as a term to name the (re)construction of a society with its cultural processes by its material remains, finds and features (including architecture) in order to understand its dynamics and developments. This will happen within a particular case, as I will focus on material connected to intimacy and sexuality in the mass tourism site of El Arenal. Further, I will present a study on the effects of a discipline out of context, or rather a new context: the report of a small-scale excavation on the beach in front of a drinking arena during the high touristic season by night.

Most tourists traveled to the Playa de Palma to find the opposite of their everyday lives. They wanted sunshine and sand instead

of rain and coldness, to party instead of to work, to drink and insult instead of to think about political correctness, to empower themselves instead of to feel inferior, to engage with friends instead of their bosses and to have sex instead of frowning and feeling not appreciated. To try to understand the meaning of intimacy in this context had resulted in some confusion, at first. Tourists made out wherever they found a partner to do so, had public sex at the beach or sneaked into each other's hotel room. According to numerous online blogs and tales that were shared at regulars' tables in small town bars, the prospect of engaging in intimacy was one of the main reasons tourists travel to El Arenal. How can archaeology help to understand what intimacy meant in this context, where it appeared that much out of hand, compared to normal life? How had it become so ultimately linked to the holiday experience, far more (or at least more obvious) than in other popular destinations?

In the introduction to her edited book, Joyce (2002) shows that a big amount of the discipline of archaeology is dedicated to story-telling. Although usually the first imagination of archaeological work is rather the fieldwork, mostly in excavations, she argues that it is impossible to document the finds and features of a site without interpretation. The latter, in turn, will have been influenced, again, by the theories the researcher has become familiar with before.

Regarding the topic of intimacy, the (so called) *Ballermann* was a highly contradictory place: Although extremely heteronormative, men would kiss other men and engaged in homosocial activities, in order to construct themselves as the ultimate male. On the other hand, sex workers in the street who had been

traveling to Europe under extreme circumstances would hold up their heads against violent customers and present themselves proud about their economic independence (see Traber 2017, 2020). In this environment, intimacy was, in contrast to the experience at home, not hidden or a private enterprise. It had become a great part of public interaction and constituted a big factor in the identity of the several actors of the touristic zone.

As a beginning point of study, I started locating the places in which intimacy and sexual encounters would take place, like the beach, the curb and the many sex clubs. Further on, I had been looking at material displays of intimacy around the party areas of El Arenal. This included the objects the tourists bought in the small shops along the promenade and those they left behind in the bins (or next to them), and analyzed why they were acquired, which purpose they had served and why they were disposed of.

Sex and settlement structures

Inspired by Rubin's (2000) idea, to use archaeological methods for ethnographic research by looking at settlement patterns, I created a map of El Arenal (see Figure 1). In May 2018, I walked every street in the touristic area twice. As some clubs only became apparent in the dark by switching on their lights, the mapping had to be carried out both during day- and nighttime.

The resulting map indicates in black letters the brothels and strip tease/lap dance bars, in black squares the areas in which sex work was offered on the curb and in red letters, for orientation, the two most popular beer halls. Looking at the settlement structure of sex-related



Figure 1: Settlement pattern of sold sex in El Arenal, May 2018.

establishments and locations, we can clearly see two clusters. One was close to the Balneario 6¹, the other one was nearby Balneario 2. When looking at the environment of these two agglomerations, it is striking that they were both located around separate party centers. The northern one blended into the area that was favored by German tourists for partying, while the southern agglomeration was located within the *Dutch zone*, which was the preferred domain for tourists from the Netherlands, but

other clubs would not let women as customers in, unless it was off season and no other male customer in sight. Sex as a commodity was predominantly offered for men. Although women were not less likely to engage in sexualizing language and self-representing social rituals in this environment (see Traber 2020), this map shows that the female participation was not marketable for club owners.

Two explanations for the local division of the separate clusters are on hand. At first, it

also other countries. Within the German “settlement”, there were sex clubs with German names as well as international ones (for a detailed analysis of writing errors in shop names in El Arenal see Mietzner 2017). However, the Dutch area presented more international names. In both centers, there was one club with a direct American reference.²

Additional to the local separation, there was a gender diversion: The *Wildhouse* in the German area was the only club offering dances by men for women. Within one season, it had been shut down again. The

¹ The beach was paralleled and sectioned by a chain of restaurants, which was the only one that was allowed to locate itself between the beach promenade and the street. All regular shops had to be found on the alternate side of the road, away from the water. Those restaurants along the beach were named *Balneario* and they were numbered, beginning close to the harbor in the south and stretching to the north of the Playa until *Balneario 15*.

² The clubs might open and close within one season or change their names very often. Some of the listed examples had vanished by 2019 already.

seems as if the German and Dutch were preferring to go to separate sex clubs, specialized on their nationality. Certainly, tourists in the German dominated party zones did find it convenient to remain speaking German when strolling over to the sex club next door to their *schlager* bar. But interestingly, in 2015, the number of bars and clubs offering sexual services was much higher.³ In former times, the range of sexualized holiday adventures was even broader, as some infamous discotheques used to host shows in which the customers themselves were encouraged to perform sex on stage. In the beginning of the evening, paid sex workers were put in place to initiate the event, but in the later night they were not needed anymore as the tourists would enthusiastically engage with each other. The most well-known location for this practice was probably the *Paradies*, which was located at a very prominent position right at the beginning of the German party zone. Later in 2015, it was turned into a restaurant, as a new law banned such practices to clubs with closed doors and a doorman in front of them. Hereby, the party zone was supposed to become more decent, attract customers of a different clientele and minors⁴ would not be in danger of seeing inappropriate behavior. Many other clubs with similar business models had to shut down as well. For the visitors, on the other hand, going to a sex club was just not the same as going to the *Paradies* was before. By lawful prohibition, the old discotheques with such customer-involving events could not profitably be replaced by new

ones, and only the regular sex clubs in the most central locations directly in the party zones were able to maintain themselves. Following this chain of thought, the separation between the two clusters of sold sex on the map appears to be rather the product of new local policies, which are trying to raise moral standards, than to national segregation.

Insights into material culture relating to intimacy

The impact of the new political regulations extended to the material culture of the party zone, as well. As extensively described in Traber (2017), the advertisements of the bars and clubs along the beach were using sexualized language and imagery to attract customers and create the sense of a liminal atmosphere (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Sexy bottle openers in a supermarket (May 2018).



³ According to hotel and restaurant staff, as well as one landlady of a holiday apartment.

⁴ This refers both to teenagers and to younger children, as many families visited the beach with their kids and the open standing clubs were visible even from there.

Therefore, the tourist was enabled to experience an adventure within a safe space. Social taboos were broken in an environment that meanwhile was as good as possible just like home, offering German sausages for food, Schlager music to listen to and the hotel managers made sure their staff spoke perfect German. But besides these marketing concepts, one was able to see that with the steady introduction of the new moral policy the material culture was influenced as well.

Figure 3 represents one good example. While the ideal *Ballermann*-schedule consisted of over-drinking, over-eating and over-“sexing”, the club that for years had made profits from these activities now had to print behavior regu-

Figure 3: Daily advert brochure of the Mega Park from May 2018.



lations on its daily event brochure. This paper was distributed for free along the promenade to advert the shows and events in the huge beer hall. No drinks from other bars, no being barefoot, no nakedness (at least no beach wear), responsible drinking behavior and the control of bags (probably to check for drugs) were the newly claimed standards. Historically, the club represented itself in monolingual German, but these rules of conduct were now headed by a comparably big Spanish headline and written in German, Spanish and English as well. Nevertheless, above these guidelines the club would still present the buttocks of table dancers for promotion. This leads to the conclusion that intimacy, or more specific sex and connected transgressive social behavior was once much more common among the customer behavior and less restricted. The apparent need of a sentence of prohibition against these practices attests their existence in the past. Although the parties and the behavior of the customers did, in my experience, not notably change within the beer halls, the outside representation in adverts did show at least minor changes from 2015 on.

Another aspect of material culture appeared to be more resistant against the introduction of the new moral standards. The abundance of souvenirs in the shops in El Arenal that were presenting genitalia, naked bodies or body parts in any form (from straw caps to kitchen aprons) had reduced, or damped its graphic presentations, by no means. Such souvenirs are not an unusual phenomenon in other touristic contexts either (see e.g. Zavaree 2019), but Mallorca offered an extent of sexual accessories that appeared to be far beyond what other destinations could maintain. From 2016 to 2018, there was almost no shop that did not offer penis shaped balloons or ash trays. This

abundance was clearly striking and led to the question, why tourists in El Arenal demanded this kind of engagement with intimacy? In their article, Fisher et al. (2016) show that by exposing students to historical objects dealing with sexuality, they were able to gain a distance to their own sexuality and to discuss about it more openly. “[V]isually stimulating objects provide a sense of immediacy and non-linguistic engagement with the past (making them useful for students who are less confident with written or highly verbal materials)” (Fisher et al. 2016: 31). Using this perspective, one can see that the confrontation with objects that are directly entangled with a distant culture and its practices can lead to a re-negotiation of one’s personal standards. A first-time visitor of El Arenal will be flooded with images of penises and vaginas the moment s/he enters a supermarket to buy a soda. The feeling of being exposed to a culture that is just like home, as s/he can speak his/her language, but that has much nicer weather and a specifically graphic way of dealing with sexuality in public displays, will most likely result in curiosity and a feeling of slight social dislocation. The sentence of not being culturally adjusted creates room for the re-discussion of values. By entering the *Ballermann* culture, the mass of impressions by the abundance of sexualized material in combination with the tourist’s ignorance of the place will have made her/him more likely to overcome his/her inhibitions, if s/he wanted to blend in. In this case, this could well have meant wearing a face mask in the shape of a penis. The other tourists along the beach promenade or in the clubs will certainly not have regarded such as shocking. Instead they were more likely to compliment each other on such accessories. What first seemed as intimate

objects during a vacation was resultingly rather a tool for cultural adaptation.

Excavating the evolution of party tourism

In addition to the objects found in shops and on tourists, I wanted to learn more about the historical depth of the relation between them and their users. For this purpose, I aimed at conducting the most classical method of archaeology: an excavation. During daytime, it was obvious to see which items the visitors brought to the beach and that many of them would be left there, mindless of the numerous available trash cans. The same was expected to happen during nighttime, when the party people would go skinny dipping or meet for intimate encounters at the beach.

In May 2018, during the high touristic season, I went to the beach in between of *Balneario 5* and *Balneario 6* (approximately the beach strip between *Bierkönig* and *Megapark* on the map in Figure 1). Around 12 to 2 o’clock at night was the time when most people were expected to be around either partying or taking a break from it sitting on the low wall dividing the sand from the promenade. Artists were using the chance to play guitar in front of the resting party goers, other groups would be chanting their own versions of the Schlager hits they were listening to in the clubs, and fresh couples would lure around the stapled sunbeds to exchange kisses and more. My aim was to gain insight into the material culture of this setting that was known to be a ritual-like happening to complete the holiday experience for the tourists.

A survey on the surface on the beach (Figure 4) was promising massive findings in one area between wooden sunshades and in vicinity to the stairway from the promenade. Surveying



Figure 4: Surface finds.

Figure 5: The excavation enthusiast.



is in traditional archaeology one of the methods to choose an excavation site. Many surface finds in one area indicate a high possibility of a site underneath, as modern tools of agriculture and bioturbation move them upwards. Therefore, it was suggested that if the people of that night were likely to dump their trash especially in this area, they would probably have done the same in the nights before and such remains could be found underneath the surface. Huge amounts of emptied bottles and cans as well as cigarette butts were placed in the named location, while their users had already vanished.

To create a local measurement system, I noted the distance of my supposed trench to the umbrellas, the stairway, the approximate water line of the sea and the promenade wall. As the measurement pins were very unstable in the loose sand, I turned to some of the party people sitting on the wall for their help. Although the three men were very drunk already, they were friendly holding the meter and interestedly asking what the purpose of this venture was. Then they went back to drinking.

The excavation method that should be used was the layer method. Contemporary surface sand was removed until another sediment was traced.

I opened a pit that was 61 x 58 cm large and removed 86 cm in depth of sand. This surface sand was apart from the very upper finds of cans, bottles, etc. completely empty. A young man approached the ongoing situation and kept asking what we (Anne Storch photographing everything and me digging in the sand) were doing. He introduced himself, stated his interest in the excavation and offered his help. He told us he had been spending his holidays in El Arenal for years and returned every season to party with a group of (male)

friends. After some time of enthusiastic shoveling, he received a call by them and went back to the club, thanking us for adding an "informative experience" to his holiday.

With the exception of a few larger pebbles, there was no content. After these 86 cm of depth, another layer could be identified that included mollusks and harder stones. I had already hit the layer of the original beach, before the tourism industry started to add prepared soft sand to make the beach more attractive for visitors.

Instead of condoms, bottle seals, the leftovers from costumes and so on, there was nothing in the ground from the touristic period for an archaeologist to document. Disappointed by the result, I sat on the wall and watched what would happen to the pit. The partying around was going on and some people asked me what my intention was with that weird activity. I told them I wanted to find the garbage of tourism. As in that moment a group of drunk young men stumbled over the pit, my random conversation partner asked me whether that included "human garbage" as well, and if so, I would probably be happy to see the project succeeding by those people falling into the hole. Although they were tourists themselves, judging other visitors as "human garbage" was quite a statement. Then, also this group of young women left to go on partying.

After about one hour, around 4 a.m., a tractor with a big attached rake appeared on the beach (Figure 7). It effectively fetched all the beer cans, bottles and all other material from the sand. Although it was no surprise that a touristic site like this would be cleaned in order to be still attractive for visitors on the next day, this massive tool made absolutely sure that no material deposit would testify to the happenings of this location. By this intention to preserve the eye-appealing cleanliness of the beach, the machine became simultaneously the eraser of its history. It made it a place artificially frozen in time, unable to change by the nature of its events. Furthermore, the practice of massive cleaning can be interpreted as an attempt to actively influence the fate of a site. By (artificially) presenting it as fresh every day, the local stakeholders were trying to stimulate the next visitors not to reproduce the behavior of the last day, but to behave well, not drink alcohol and not have sex on the beach. As Jay (2000: 117) writes, parents, at least in his American context, would use the washing of a child's mouth with soap as a punishment for cursing. The unwanted behavior is reacted to with the physical



Figure 6: Empty pit.



Figure 7:
The destroyer of stratigraphy.



cleansing of the one, who has done badly. In a Chinese study, Tang et al. (2017: 1149-1150) found “evidence for the embodied moral purity metaphor [...] in which [we] gained consistent findings that immorality such as recalling or performing an unethical action increased the preference of cleanliness related products”. As a bar of soap and a bucket full of water are neither enough to clean out the mouths of all the tourists (despite the legal issues) nor the whole beach, the tractor becomes the tool to reinstall the moral purity of the place. Instead of allowing the place to resemble its heavy use for partying, it seemed to be forced in the dress of a moral instrument. However, the party went on the next day just as it ended and the tractor had to come back night after night.

Figure 8: Artificially traditional wall drawing in the Bierkönig with chewing gum and graffiti.



The pit, nevertheless, could not be run over by the tractor because of its location between the wooden sun shades. I left it open and returned the next day. Maybe it would be used by the tourists who were happy about a change in this never changing ‘leisure park’-like beach, I thought. They could playfully use it to bury a friend’s torso (indeed a popular game along the beach) or fill it up as a garbage pit. At 9 a.m. it was still intact, with the exception of the sandy profile becoming slightly unstable due to drying out by being exposed to the sun. No filling or intentional use was notable. At 11 a.m., I documented a 17 cm thick layer of sand in it, without any recognizable purpose. Shortly before 6 p.m., though, the pit was completely filled up. Nothing even marked its position anymore, it was all just sand by then. Summing up, it took approximately 12 hours to erase the traces of my excavation, although there were not even signs of intentional interaction with it. Probably the flow of the beach visitors moved the sand in it.

Although the excavation did not uncover any objects at all that would help to reconstruct the concept of mass tourism and intimacy, it delivered some very interesting insights into the general notion of historicity at El Arenal’s party zone. Many places, including the biggest beer halls, made a huge effort to build drinking environments that looked like stereotypical German or Bavarian hunting lodges. Although in Germany itself, this kind of style was mostly regarded as old fashioned. In El Arenal, it was very effectively used to construct a feeling of home and tradition, though (see Figure 8). Every year the wall paintings and wooden barns had to be renovated to make them look traditional again. Furniture was renewed and new layers of wallpaper and paint were added, because the visitors would draw faces or stick chewing gum

on them. By renovation, everything was made looking as old and historic as it never was.

The evidence of how the *Ballermann*-culture was dealing with its affiliation markers of intimate displays on objects was apparently not to be found in the material traces in garbage on the beach. Rather, the traits of this culture could be documented in how it actively erased its remains.

It had been constructing its own fake history for the tourists, and the clubs and bars demanded the participants to engage in transgression that was erased from public knowledge once returned back home. In order to come back the next year and to enjoy the memories of a night out in El Arenal, the moral self-experience of the visitor needed to remain unaffected. This was enforced by the widely practiced mentality of “what happens in Mallorca stays in Mallorca”⁵ and was materially paralleled by the cleansing of the beach.

Politicized history

Just like the new regulations forced the beer halls to forbid unmoral behavior, further changes were noticed that aimed at gentrifying the mass tourism zone. Figure 9 shows a table that was installed at the promenade near *Balneario 5*, which was as mentioned before the center of the party area. It presented information on the island Sa Galera, which is located approximately 100 m away from the shore of the northernmost *Balneario*. Instead of placing it on the beach there, it was set up 5 km to the south. The area in the vicinity of the island was still a very touristic one, so the reason for the odd placement must be another one than just to attract general tourists. Most likely, it was espe-

cially set up in the party area to declare a statement against the liminal tourists who liked to overdrink, and to make a point which kind of tourism was the one more appreciated: the historically interested visitors who would want to see an archaeological site. By these means, the sign embodied the negative feelings of the local public towards the ignorant party tourists who did not care about those parts of Mallorca’s history which they found relevant. Research on websites and the visit of bars and restaurants that were close to Sa Galera had shown that despite her appearance on this info table, it was incredibly hard to actually go visit it. The only scheduled boats going there departed in late October, when the touristic season was already over, so the only way to reach the island was by swimming. On arrival, there was no infrastructure like paths (which would have been helpful not to step on archaeologically relevant areas) ready to guide the visit of the very small island, except for a little larger version of the same table as at *Balneario 5*. Even from a scientific point of view, the published literature about the site is not easily accessible and rather points at not too spectacular finds and features. It was hard to imagine, that if a regular tourist of El Arenal wanted to learn more about the site because s/he saw the plate, s/he would satisfyingly have succeeded in it. Therefore, the reason for the placement of the information was obviously not a serious wish to inform the visitors about history. Instead, it was an open statement against the form of tourism that was practiced by the visitors of the party zone.

This sentiment seemed to have been delivered quite well, as only three months after the taking of the photo presented in Figure 9, it

⁵ This slogan is also sold as a popular slogan on T-Shirts in El Arenal.



Figure 9: Info board on a Mallorquin archaeological site (February 2018).

had been completely scratched (see Figure 10). When I visited the beach again in October 2018, the table had apparently been renewed, but was already missing half of it again. Whether the vandals had done the same research as me is unclear, but apparently, they felt the need to revolt against the infiltration of the party zone by markers of tourist classes that were unusual in El Arenal until then. The only culture worth preserving to them seemed to be the party culture with its artificially reconstructed tradition of the home nation.

Figure 10: Refused indoctrination (May 2018).



Conclusion

If there can be a conclusion at all, the result of my research on the concept of intimacy in El Arenals tourism is a contradictory one. A historical tracing back of it is hardly possible, as the place was erasing its own remains over and over again, in order to construct an artificial state. This neglect of history happens by both the officials, who are trying to improve upon the moral standard by cleaning the beach, placing upscale tourism information and demanding respectable clothing, as well as from the established party society, who prefers clubs in traditional German style and refuses information on traditional Spanish culture. Both perspectives excluded each other and with that again neglected several periods of El Arenal's and Mallorca's history, as the mass tourism period was clearly one with major influence, too. The material culture represents this drifting apart, as shown above in the brochures handed out within the party zone. Other objects like the sexualized souvenirs appear to have been more stable under political conflicts. As they are popular in other, less liminal tourist destinations, too, they might be expected to decrease in number but rather not to disappear. The excavation report above showed, that the visibility of intimacy related objects in the historical frame is negative. This results from the extensive regular cleaning activities of the government which are not unlikely to have been connected to the wish for a moral cleansing of the area as well. Although the classical archaeological method of field work produced no new insights by finds, the activity itself led to valuable ethnographical data. Conversations stimulated by it as well as the general reactions to it revealed a quite open dealing with the unexpected by the actors of

the party zone, as well as the self-reflection as lower-class tourists that spent holidays without a cultural interest. This is arguably true, as it has been shown in other papers⁶ that a clear knowledge about the place, its rules and how to adapt to the liminal culture was needed to be accepted as part of the event (and not to be publicly offended in some cases). The tool that had proven to be the most informative in regard to the evolution of the concept of intimacy in the area was the mapping of its settlement pattern. It showed that neither the place, nor the concept of intimacy could be understood without untangling the local historical development. Although national identities were very important for the tourist's self-constructions along the beach and their effect on business clusters shall not be underestimated, the political and social developments had changed quite significantly over the last decade. They have had a substantial impact on the sex industry and potentially even made room for street prostitution itself.

Further, the pattern has shown that the public display of commercial intimacy still had a strong stand in the touristic zones by then, but was clustered around the core centers of night life, had developed the selling of sex on the curb of the promenade itself (bearing, of course, a much higher potential for precariousness for the workers than a guarded club) and had in general a declining tendency. For future research, it will be interesting to see whether the established tourism practices of drinking and partying were able to resist the gentrification of the area, and if no, how patterns of intimacy will be influenced by it. As already suggested, the penis shaped bottle openers will probably prevail. The liminal character of El

Arenal, though, with its excessive sex parties and drinking halls constituted a big part of its typical culture and myth. For many visitors, the exciting stories told by their friends (and sometimes relatives) created a feeling of tradition when visiting Mallorca. A phrase I heard very often was "the *Ballermann* is not what it used to be" (due to the emerging upscaling), followed by nostalgic sharing of memories about former times. Although the place neglected its own history in so many aspects, the tourists had been able to create their own tradition that will turn into a historical tale as soon as it will be lost. It will probably tell stories about nights of excess and community. Most likely, these stories will be shared among bowling club members, high-school graduates, soccer fans and on their social media. Hereby, they might be able to create research material for heritage studies in the near future. Until then, this kind of culture with an arguable tradition will probably not go down without a fight and the damage of many further plates on historical sites like the one of Sa Galera.

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