af Lone Claudi-Hansen, Museum Vestsjælland*

Hand me the hammer

On ceramics, compensation and classification

The excitement of ceramic sherds unearthed from a dark layer at a field site, is often replaced by a doubtful scepticism during registration at the museum. What can one more pile of sherds tell us?
In the article No Compensation Needed: On Archaeology and the Archaeological (Nativ 2017), Assaf Nativ argues, that there is no need to compensate for the fragmentation and deficiencies of the archaeological material. The different approaches to ceramics in archaeology through time, can be perceived as various forms of compensations of the deficiencies of the archaeological material. Contrary to this reasoning, within the current field of registering and dealing with ceramics at the museums, there rather seems to be an adoration of the fragment itself and very few attempts of compensation. Ceramics are often viewed as single objects of chronological statements, far from the unity of the vessels they once were a part of, which leaves little space for approaching questions of vessel use, consumption, traditions in pottery manufacture and the biography of the vessel. Moreover, it is difficult comparing the mainly fragmented ceramics from settlements with the often complete vessels from graves, without reaching for the hammer, and classifying the urn as sherds. By sorting the sherds into vessels, rather than elements, they can contribute to illustrate a much broader range of questions.

New theoretical perspectives engender new questions, and there will never be a perfect way to document and explore the archaeological material. Documentation and classification are part of the theoretical process, and both affects and are affected by the way we understand artefacts, features and the past. Therefore, it is important that we continuously reflect about the methods we use and why.