Shells in general, and in particular species well-known across the world, such as spiny oysters Spondylus spp. Common ways of shell acquisition involved harvesting coastal areas, including diving trips by those groups who lived by the sea, or developing exchange networks for those inhabiting inland areas. There is also the recorded collection of fossil shells. Shell products sometimes might have signalled a specific local character of a particular group, or were similarly valued across a wider region, thus illustrating bonds, rather than differences between diverse social groups. This
sub-session focuses on patterns of acquisition and use of shell raw materials as well as on the production sequence of shell items in time and space. Discussions of these patterns will also relate to the question of economy, both understood as subsistence and industry.

Specific themes of interest include the exploitation of shells as raw materials in relation to their dietary functions, or choices made to use particular shells along with or as opposed to other raw materials. In this sub-session we seek to integrate archaeological, historical, anthropological and biological studies that give insight into relationships between human and molluscan communities with a specific focus upon gathering of molluscs for subsistence.

While many studies over the years have seen molluscs as a marginal resource of little overall importance, the testimony of shell middens as well as widespread information from historical and anthropological sources clearly tell us that shellfish-gathering was a regular and important activity. This importance is not limited to economics or dietary structure, but also forms a part of social and ritual practices. Shellfish gathering and midden creation has a larger social context. This sub-session provides a venue to explore the relationships between human groups and molluscan resources and especially encourages the combination of information derived from multiple disciplines, as well as studies that seek to contextualise shell-gathering in a wider socio-economic context. Shells, whether deliberately introduced to a site by humans or whether introduced through other natural processes, can give insight into aspects of the ancient environment as well as the formation and transformation of archaeological deposits.

In stratified sites, changes in the composition and structure of shell assemblages through time can give shed light on environmental change, whilst the comparison of various sites within an archaeological landscape can help us understand mosaic landscapes and the spread of different resources. The comparison of archaeological and modern shell assemblages can also provide an invaluable perspective to issues of resource management, modern environmental change and degradation, and the impact of invasive species. Molluscan remains can also be of great assistance in untangling patterns of site formation and transformation, through studies of taphonomic alteration, bioturbation, or fine-grained investigations of naturally — and culturally — introduced shells within deposits.

This sub-session aims to investigate the potential of archaeological shell to answer questions not directly related to subsistence or material culture and especially welcomes contributions which mobilise the study of archaeological shell in relation to modern resource management and environmental change. BAR International Series The study of invertebrate remains has traditionally been overshadowed by analysis of animal bones in the archaeological record.

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Archaeomalacology: Shells in the Archaeological Record

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