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Bintliff, John, ed., *A Companion to Archaeology*

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correct in supposing that a discussion of information and its technologies implies a much larger subject.

William McGaughey

Bintliff, John, ed., *A Companion to Archaeology*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004.

The word archaeology conjures up images of people in pith helmets digging into the sandy earth of the desert or monumental buildings rising above jungle foliage. But archaeology is much more than that. It has a wide range of components and is interdisciplinary, as shown in this book which covers topics as diverse as art, ecology, gender, social theory, technology, landscape, museum studies, and politics. Archaeology is the study of past human life as derived from the remains/relics of early human cultures. The true domain of archaeology is the dynamic relationship between the material and sociality (135). It is a way to understand the past and its development, hence its connection to civilization (discussed further later in the review).

This book is a compilation of essays on various aspects of archaeology. It contains 27 chapters, each by a different author. It is a massive work of 544 pages providing both theoretical and practical insights that make it indeed a companion to the study of archaeology. It is a type of reference work that contains insights, inquiries, discussions and opinions on the varied topics. At the time of publication, John Bintliff, the main editor of this volume, was the Chair of Classical Archaeology in the Faculty of Archaeology at Leiden University. Advisory editors were Timothy Earl of Northwestern University and Christopher S. Peebles of Indiana University. Of the 27 contributors, 25 are connected to a university, one is a researcher and the other is self-employed in development anthropology; they are located throughout the world, including in the United Kingdom, the United States, Europe and Australia. Some chapters are mostly descriptive, while others are more theoretical, but all grapple with issues, some controversial, that over time have become integral to the discipline of archaeology.

The book is divided into four sections with chapters in each related by theme. Before describing each of these, it is useful to review the stages of academic archaeology as a discipline. It began and continued for some time as an activity concentrating on the actions of surveying, excavating, taking apart and putting back together, etc. In the 1960s, the new archaeology emphasized *thinking* about how all these things ought to be done. This eventually led to a postmodern archaeology, where we think about how we think about everything – the reflective mode (398).

Archaeology is not just an activity or interpretation, but it is a cultural production. “Archaeology is a process in which archaeologists, like many others, take up and make something of what is left of the past” (503).

Section One is titled “Thinking about Archaeology” and contains two chapters that discuss culture change and interpretation. “The most that we can do is to experience and interpret prehistoric artifacts and ancient landscapes through our own embodiment and own prejudices...but at the same time, the contingent position from where we take a stand on ourselves does provide a point from which we can engage with the past” (34). The challenge remains: appreciating the diversity of ways in which any past world must have been understood. Methods, challenges, opportunities, and theoretical approaches are covered in this section.

Section Two, entitled “Current Themes and Novel Departures,” contains eight chapters that cover concepts such as genetics, gender, dispersion (the language and agriculture connection), social theory, settlements (space, social, material), household archaeology, technology, and time, structure and agency. This section has broad coverage and investigates some new ideas and controversial issues. Section Three is called “Major Traditions in Contemporary Perspective”. The eleven essays in this part deal with some traditional, well-known aspects of archaeology. These include dating artifacts and sites, creating chronologies, determining art, discovering land use, analyzing animal and plant remains, considering indigenous interpretations, and using science as a method of inquiry.

Two chapters deal with types of archaeology, classical (Greek and Roman) and historical (where written accounts complement excavation). A chapter by Bintliff concludes this section with a discussion of the experience of doing archaeological fieldwork. In it he disagrees with the postmodern idea that we cannot adequately reconstruct past lifeways. According to Bintliff, the study of the past is not only eminently “do-able” but is also “knowable” through practical discovery and sensitive reconstruction from the collected evidence (404). He speaks to the excitement and uncertainty of physical encounters with the debris of lost communities and the pleasure of intuitively piecing together, from numerous fragments, the webs of human behavior over space and time that constitute the fabric of history (404).

Some insights and questions from Sections Two and Three provide a flavor of the book’s contents with its broad coverage.

- 1) Art is visual communication which can be aesthetic, practical, imaginative or real. But who determines what art is or was to people of the past?
- 2) Is there a difference between feminist archaeology and gender archaeology and how does each interpret gender roles? How do we interpret material culture in a gendered fashion?
- 3) The use of technology can be considered in two ways: how we use it to explore and understand archaeological sites today, and what technology was used and how it was employed by peoples of the past.
- 4) The key to interpretation is the relationship between material components or evidence and social life; this can be challenging because of the versatile expressions of action and verbal meaning. Interpretation involves our own **background and understanding** and requires great insight. How do we do it **without excessive bias?**

- 5) Language shift is one of the key processes of cultural change. It has been established that there is a firm connection between language, agriculture and the dispersion of people but there are varying versions of this story and how it all works out over time and space.
- 6) Genetics is a useful tool in human evolutionary studies and especially for the study of diversity, but it does have limitations. One is the challenge of different levels of scale from individuals to communities to “populations” and on to global patterns; can relationships really be determined?
- 7) Bone and plant archaeologists have major contributions to make to almost all areas of archaeology. Archaeologists now realize that bone and plant remains, once the purview of zoologists and botanists, play important roles in interpretation and in connecting physical remains with social life.
- 8) Ecological landscape is the relationship between people and their habitats (328). How have various groups modified their environments and why? How much does environment affect lifeways?
- 9) Human agency is a key element in cultural change and civilizational development. This theme is included in several of the chapters. Humans do not mechanically exactly reproduce their culture but are constantly using and modifying resources to their own ends. Agency provides for unpredictability so it is best to focus on the local rather than grand models (See p. 10, 186).
- 10) Theory enables those interested in archaeology to communicate and make links between historical observations, artifacts and anthropological concepts. Through theory we can write better versions of the past that are more coherent as difference disciplines approach and interpret the data.

The fourth and last section in the book is “Archaeology and the Public.” It delves into issues of public archaeology, cultural resource management, museum studies, the politics of archaeology, and green issues. These are the more controversial problems faced by archaeologists today and relate to both the doing of and the thinking about archaeology. Politics involves mobilizing resources, managing workers and materials, organizing, and persuading. How do we do archaeology in a responsible way? What about approvals, forms and funding? How do we display and make public, both in the written word and in presentations, materials of the past? And the ultimate question – who owns the past? These are dilemmas with consequences, but the interest in our past urges us to continue its study through performing archaeology and presenting the results.

So how does all this relate to the study of civilization? The chapter that discusses the connection between anthropology and archaeology provides some answers. In it, Michael Rowlands states that anthropology and archaeology share a common origin in the Victorian preoccupation with the evolution of civilization. Both became academic subjects in the attempt to measure the progress of civilization from primitive to modern societies.

The Anglo-American traditions of the twentieth century shifted towards a more behaviorist orientation which rejected evolutionary studies of the past as “conjectural history” lacking an empirical foundation. Archaeology from the 1920s to 1960s emphasized excavation of cultural material as a technique for studying regional developments in human cultures. Excavations of cities, waterways, houses, fields, waste piles, etc. all provide information about the remote past and its inhabitants, which contributes to our understanding of various past civilizations.

Archaeology helps define and substantiate civilization (373-74).

In some way, all discussion topics in this book can relate to civilization (writ large or small). For example: gender, art, communities, relationships, language, government, environment, economics, labor specialization, religion, technology, stratification are all a part of archaeology and add to our understanding of lands and people of past civilization(s).

Set in the context of a broad literature review, this compilation appears to be quite unique in its approach.

- A reference work, titled *Companion Encyclopedia of Archaeology* is also a grouping of essays in two volumes. It was published by Routledge in 1999 and is organized into three sections: origins/purposes; themes and approaches; and writing archaeological history. There is some overlap of topics but not extensive.
- The *Oxford Companion to Archaeology*, edited by Brian M. Fagan, is more of an encyclopedia than the first title in that it is arranged alphabetically by subject with individual authors and references for each entry.
- The book in hand, *A Companion to Archaeology*, deals more with controversial issues and theoretical aspects than these other books. Each chapter stands alone and there is no overarching introduction or summary at the end. The writing and organization varies by individual author and references are provided with each chapter. The index is good though not detailed.

The *Companion* book edited by Bintliff is a good read for practicing archaeologists because of its broad coverage of important contemporary issues. Others interested in particular aspects within the disciplines of anthropology and archaeology such as politics, gender, environmentalism, genetics, art, etc. will find valuable discussions and insights, as will those interested in human chronology, human development, and civilization.

Connie Lamb