



# The Archaeological Journal

## Book Reviews



**UNDERSTANDING THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL RECORD.** By Gavin Lucas. Pp. 314, Illus 21. Cambridge University Press, 2012. Price: £19.99. ISBN 978 052127 969 7.

Lucas has already written two books that address fundamental aspects of archaeology: *Critical Approaches to Fieldwork* (2001), and *The Archaeology of Time* (2005). Now, he analyzes important aspects of the archaeological record, notably formation and material culture, and attempts to rebuild the connections between them by rethinking classification and fieldwork (termed ‘entities’ and ‘interventions’ respectively in the book). Lucas is well qualified for the task, having worked in a field unit before joining the Institute of Archaeology in Reykjavik, and having published excavation reports ranging from Roman pottery kilns to a Viking-age feasting hall. This book is not intended to be a guide to everyday practice, unlike J. Theodore Peña’s *Roman Pottery in the Archaeological Record* (2007) or Martin Carver’s *Archaeological Investigation* (2009). Indeed, only two of the book’s twenty illustrations feature photographs of archaeological sites. The rest are diagrams illustrating theoretical concepts.

Lucas writes clearly but densely, and each chapter demands sustained concentration in order to absorb its historiographical introduction, epistemological analysis of competing concepts, and carefully weighed conclusions. The following statement may help to epitomize his personal outlook:

‘...one could characterize much of archaeological epistemology since the late 1980s as under the influence of a constructivist turn — that is, that archaeological knowledge is not just discovered but made; that it is not simply about internal issues of evidence and testing but equally about external issues such as social and political conditions under which knowledge is created’ (p. 228).

This does not involve a relativist view of data:

‘...it is not a fiction of our minds or a social construction. However, neither is it just given. It is produced through the material interaction of an assemblage of bodies and/or objects which are mobilized by our interventions in or on the ground’ (p. 231).

The most important goal of Lucas’s work is an improved understanding of the processes of ‘dematerialization’ and ‘rematerialization’ that translate an archaeological site into an archive as the result of such interventions. The book’s concluding chapter, ‘A “New” Social Archaeology?’, is heavily influenced by contemporary thinkers such as Bruno Latour, and proposes that the whole debate should be shifted away from ‘conventional ideas of causation’ (p. 262).

The book is the considered result of wide reading and deep analysis, and takes a refreshingly long view back to the nineteenth century, combining an interest in the history of ideas with new thinking about archaeological theory. The meticulous historiographical and epistemological analyses alone are well worth the book's purchase price. For example, Chapter 4, 'Materialized Culture', explores the concept of material culture by analyzing the meaning of each term separately, and more important, the implications of placing them together. This chapter is typical of the book's detailed approach in its painstaking analysis of differing francophone and anglophone traditions; elsewhere Lucas also shows a willingness to explore German writing. The two preceding chapters, on the constitution of the archaeological record and on taphonomy, are equally interesting and thought-provoking. Many readers would find the whole book useful as a reference work, using the clear index of names and concepts to lead them straight to sections close to their own interests. While the conclusions of this re-theorization of the archaeological record are unlikely to provoke immediate changes in the *modus operandi* of working archaeologists, Lucas's new ideas about reconnecting its components should make them reflect deeply about what they are doing, how they are doing it, and why. New concepts may generate new practices in the future.

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