



The Archaeological Journal

Book Reviews



ARCHAEOLOGY: THE DISCIPLINE OF THINGS. By Bjørnar Olsen, Michael Shanks, Timothy Webmoor, and Christopher Witmore. Pp. vii and 255, Illus 23. California University Press, 2012. Price: £24.95. ISBN 978 052027 417 4.

Symmetrical archaeology has been with us now for a decade. This book is the summation of that approach to archaeology; which argues for a balanced analysis of the relationship between human societies (past and present) and things. Interpretations cannot solely rely on society or culture as a mode of explanation; they must also consider the role things play in our interpretations. This book deals, in particular, with the role of things in the disciplinary character of archaeology. The book opens with several chapters of general theoretical introduction, and then focuses on museums, fieldwork, documentation and visualization, memory and digital translation, the timely character of things, making and design, with a final chapter on caring for things.

The general point that archaeology is an intrinsically thing-based discipline is well made, however some of the case studies deployed to make this argument are slight. Disappointingly, the chapter on museums appears to overlook the entire museums studies literature (Chapter 3). Drawing as it does on the science studies scholars cited by Olsen et al., museum studies scholarship is likely to have considerably enriched their argument and it is a shame that we see almost no discussion of it. More successfully, the chapters on fieldwork and documentation discuss, using a variety of case studies, the processes of translation that occur as things are encountered during fieldwork and documented in two-dimensional form (Chapters 4 and 5). The discussion of the mapping of Teotihuacan, and the significance of a series of metal points as fixed datum points, was fascinating (pp. 79–101). It is through these innocuous material methods that sites become documented, translated and circulated as scientific data. The chapters on memory continued with the theme of translation by favouring a digital metaphor for material practices of remembrance and documentation (Chapters 5 and 6). At times this seemed to stray dangerously close to cognitive models of memory-as-information, an area of research that runs counter to the aims of the authors. The material and mnemonic character of things is, however, re-emphasized in the following chapter dealing with ‘Timely Things’ (Chapter 7).

One of the disappointments of this book is that many of the case studies appear rather stale. A number are recycled from earlier works dealing with the symmetrical approach, and this is fine. However, several appeared to be recycled from very old material with little real revision. This is particularly apparent with the ‘re-analysis’ of Fussell’s Lodge long barrow, first studied by Mike Shanks (with Chris Tilley) some thirty years ago (*Ideology, Symbolic Power and Ritual Communication: a Reinterpretation of Neolithic*

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Mortuary Practices, 1982). Many of the points made in this book, relating to the comingled material character and building process of the long barrow, have been discussed in recent years by Lesley McFadyen, Colin Richards, Alasdair Whittle and many others. However, there was no reference to this literature here. Similarly, while I enjoyed the discussion of the Archaic Korinthian aryballos or perfume jar in 1992 (Style and Design of a Perfume Jar from an Archaic Greek City State, *J. European Archaeol.*, **1**, 77–106), the discussion of this again appears to add little to the original article (Chapter 8, pp. 157–95).

One of the problems this book faces is that several titles dealing with similar themes are now published, from Chantal Conneller's *An Archaeology of Materials* (2011), Ian Hodder's *Entangled* (2012), Gavin Lucas's *Understanding the Archaeological Record* (2012) and also Bjørnar Olsen's *In Defence of Things* (2010). Each of these tackles the question of human-thing relationships with intellectual rigour and verve. However, this book provides a good overview of these debates, and reminds us that we overlook the thingly character of the discipline to our detriment.

ANDREW MEIRION JONES