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The Oxford Handbook of African Archaeology

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Book Reviews

Peter Mitchell and Paul Lane, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of African Archaeology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, 1080pp., 242 figs., 21 tables, hbk, ISBN 978-0-19-956988-5)

African past as well as the history of archaeological research have been interwoven with that of Europe much more intimately than it might appear. In many ways, the archaeology of Africa provides a reflection for the archaeology of Europe. It also contributes with the latest arguments to the wider theoretical and methodological discussions in any inquiry concerned with the variety and implications of the human experience. *The Oxford Handbook of African Archaeology* offers both an introduction and a well-argued detail to demonstrate that African archaeology has gone far since it could be deemed to contain no data on origins of social complexity and state dynamics (Service, 1975: 137).

The volume represents the most detailed and comprehensive guide to the datasets, achievements, and debates which have resulted from more than half a century of serious research on the African continent. It significantly extends on the pioneering volume edited by Ann Stahl (2005), with which it perhaps could be compared. The *Oxford Handbook of African Archaeology* was also awarded the title *Best Book in African Archaeology 2014* by the Society of Africanist Archaeologists.

On over a thousand pages, the book brings together some of the most influential names in Africanist archaeological research, who present an overview of the themes, data, and practicalities of archaeological work on the continent. It is divided into seven parts, which are organized thematically rather than regionally, and hence help the reader consider ideas in their thematic

context without being tempted to skip to his/her region of interest. The book elegantly avoids the trap set by the ever-present heritage of past research, whose boundaries were more often than not suggested by linguistic and political borders rather than by the nature of the evidence. The book is divided into seven main sections. The contents take us from the theoretical and methodological background to African archaeology and from an overview of research on human origins to the varied experience of hunter-gatherer traditions and the archaeology of the pastoralist and farming communities. We then get to the most strongly represented part of the volume, dealing with towns and states. Lastly, we get to consider the advances archaeology has made in the study of more recent themes such as colonialism and the role of Africa in modern history.

The focus on complexity, statehood, and the many forms of power is perhaps justified, as research in this field has advanced greatly during recent decades. It demonstrates the variety of human experience relating to the issue of ‘complexity’ with which Africa can contribute to global archaeology. During the last millennium, when most of the African complex societies arose, intensified contact with the European world also took place. In this review, I will focus only on those aspects of the book which are the most relevant for European archaeology and should indeed be paid considerably more attention in Europe-oriented research. Specifically, I would like to comment on

four chapters, which are of interest in this respect. The first two chapters deal with broader theoretical issues of archaeological research and the other two treat the archaeology of European and African encounters.

Chapter 13 discusses 'Material Culture, Space, and Identity'. As opposed to Europe, Africanist research has always made use of its close ties with ethnology and Stephanie Wynne-Jones reveals here in what ways researchers explored these perspectives to find crossing points between ethnicity and identity. In this task, African archaeology has been comparatively successful, working from the more recent periods of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries back to a deeper past following the trait of material representations as active agents in identity building. Perhaps regrettably, European medieval archaeology has not sought so much inspiration in studies which could discuss identity from perspectives of other social sciences, although relevant studies are certainly available (Gurevich & Howlett, 1992). Wynne-Jones' chapter is also interesting for its description of the ways in which African archaeology has more recently challenged its culture-history-based research tradition, and accommodated practice-oriented approaches, which show themselves to be better suited for interpreting archaeology in terms of everyday realities. Although Wynne-Jones highlights the growing body of literature on social space, it perhaps should be noted that studies of 'space' as a concept are still limited in scope in many regions of Africa, especially in terms of studying the materiality of built environment and its capacity to (trans)form traditions and social standards.

In Chapter 14, 'Landscape Archaeology', Jeffrey Fleisher explores this lack of perspectives on space, although he does not specifically deal with the problem of natural

and built environment, as this theoretical dichotomy has not been given much voice in African archaeology. It has been recognized that in Europe a large part of the issue of why space matters was inspired by the realization that space is considered to be limited, the ultimate demonstration of which is the fact that wealth can be expressed through ownership of land. The recognition that space is charged with meaning and that we should seek it through past material representations such as monuments has formed the backbone of landscape studies in European archaeology, particularly with regard to prehistory (Bradley, 1998). In Africa, the concept of 'wealth in people' is much more useful for conceptualizing power relationships (e.g. Nyerges, 1992). However, it was landscape archaeology that demonstrated how abundant space also motivated efforts to materialize power and delimit boundaries through construction of vast earthworks.

Fleisher further clarifies that the big questions in African landscape archaeology have rested in contrasting various concepts of landscape, as they seem to have been used by past peoples across the vast continent. It is shown how landscape approaches opened new research avenues in hominin studies, which have in practice tested a range of theories from the foraging models of New Archaeology to environmental aesthetics. We may also find African case studies which explore the interaction between rural and urban areas and most of the latest research, including the cutting-edge theme of historical ecology which makes use of abundant African data to understand human-environmental dynamics.

In Chapter 67, 'Contexts of Interaction', Natalie Swanepoel considers the first aspect of Euro-African encounters in a paper on the archaeology of European exploration and expansion. Similar to the studies of the European Middle Ages and

the Modern Era, a number of disciplines before archaeology have joined in the debates on this theme working with the abundant written, oral, and often pictorial evidence. Hence, the value of archaeology's contribution might be questioned. However, as the author demonstrates on case studies from West and South Africa, archaeological approaches represent an important perspective in piecing together histories of continuity and change and unravelling the meaning of various aspects of material life, as it preserves or undergoes major alterations. Looking at how imported goods and ideas deeply impacted local craft production while food consumption and ritual behaviour remained largely unchanged can be very instructive for thinking about the many roles and facets of identity.

The chapter specifically highlights where significant advances have been made, including the study of European outposts in Africa and the associated reality of everyday life, the scale and nature of Euro-African range of interaction, and the unveiling of the defining characteristics of societies which were created in the context of this intensive and specific form of cultural contact. Swanepoel also shows how the European and African life conditions and nature of interaction were characterized by striking variations along the Atlantic coast. Last, but not least, the chapter reviews the achievements of archaeological research on slavery, slave raiding, and slave trading, which demonstrates well the potential of archaeology to offer data and perspectives on the lives of the enslaved as well as of the slave traders and owners. However, a more exhaustive review of archaeological knowledge on this topic is now available, which is not included in the bibliography of Swanepoel's chapter (Lane & MacDonald, 2011).

In Chapter 70, 'The Archaeology of Colonial Encounters in Eastern Africa',

Sarah Croucher deals with several aspects of this fast growing field of interest. The East African coast experienced periods of European and Islamic colonialism, which allow us to study, contrast, and reflect on the experience of both. As Croucher summarizes, the earliest studies of colonialism focused directly on the sites associated with the colonizers rather than analysing the dispersed, less apparent material evidence of their presence. These were mainly represented by European outposts in the form of forts. Although information from these sites may be of little relevance for a balanced picture of European and African interaction, they certainly offer information about the European diaspora, similar to European outposts in Australia or the Americas.

The last two decades have been characterized by a growing number of studies extended in their scope to produce more inclusive perspectives on colonial landscapes of power. Research on this theme has shown how fortifications of varied size in the landscape served to negotiate and proclaim power relationships not only between the colonizers and the colonized, but on many more levels of local political and economic power. For the use of fortifications and forts as tools for demonstrating and exercising power over a delimited landscape, we can find many comparisons in prehistoric and historical periods in Europe (Parkinson & Duffy, 2007). Another theme which might serve to reflect on European experience is the study of changes in settlement patterns. Croucher singles out several phenomena typical for the colonial era, such as intensified trade (higher density of outposts and temporary settlements along the trade routes), changes in preference for particular locations for settlement in response to slave raiding (move to defensible sites), and plantation agriculture.

Currently, the East African coast is becoming a more and more popular laboratory for the study of globalization phenomena, such as mass production and consumption (mainly beads and cloth), long distance trade, intensive cultural interaction, and the impact of these patterns on local identities. In the world of new ideas, high mobility and commodity-oriented environment, all of these factors might have contributed to apparently fluid incorporation of foreigners to coastal communities. Croucher argues that East African archaeological evidence also speaks for a deep-seeded continuity of ceramic traditions which might have been important for local identities throughout the colonial era. Interestingly, quite the opposite phenomenon has been observed in colonial Senegambia in West Africa (Thiaw, 2012). These debates might help us reveal new perspectives on issues which, as Croucher recognizes, have been discussed using mainly evidence limited to the Atlantic world.

Overall, the *Oxford Handbook of African Archaeology* is a great source of reference to work with. Especially for a professional who specializes in regions outside Africa, it represents a useful starting point to gain a comprehensive, though necessarily selective, overview of key topics. Also, each chapter directs the reader to abundant additional literature. As such, the book is also a valuable resource for students. While African ethnoarchaeological and ethnographic data have been extensively used as models and case studies for generating theories about prehistoric development in Europe, we may finally ask why African data on issues like power negotiations, social complexity, or trade networks, have been used so little in

studies that conceptualize the general nature of human cultural experience.

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