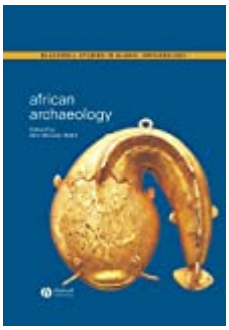
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Ann Brower Stahl, ed. *African Archaeology: A Critical Introduction.* Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2005. xiv + 490 pp. $39.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-4051-0156-1.

Reviewed by David Morris (Archaeology Department, McGregor Museum, Kimberley, South Africa)

Published on H-SAfrica (March, 2007)

Not very long ago Africa's history was considered short; and if "men existed" in the "dark centuries" preceding the advent of the Portuguese, it was felt that they fell more within the province of anthropology than of history. Such was the view of historian Hugh Trevor-Roper, cited in the preface to a work offered as a corrective, the groundbreaking 1969 *Oxford History of South Africa.*[1] As notoriously, the continent's pre-colonial past was characterized by Trevor-Roper as "the unrewarding gyrations of barbarous tribes in picturesque but irrelevant corners of the globe" (quoted, pp. 11, 24). Archaeologists could demonstrate a different view. Indeed, Thurston Shaw would respond to historians who were dubious about archaeology's role in writing African history, that "there is much more information about the African past waiting to be revealed by archaeological methods than historical"; and "there ought," he challenged, "to be more archaeologists in African universities than historians."[2]

African Archaeology: A Critical Introduction, edited by Ann Brower Stahl, is testimony to just how fundamentally wrong and prejudiced the Trevor-Ropers of this world had been; and it is also, no doubt, a vindication of Shaw's defense. Against the short-history view, there can be no question but that archaeology has served this continent well: from often intractable–and fragile–material traces, using methods and techniques now increasingly refined and reflexive, it constructs a past which is immensely rich, and a history which stretches back far further than was once imagined. In expanding our temporal and spatial frames of reference this is a discipline that has, as Bruce Trigger remarked, irretrievably altered the range and quality of human thought.[3] Alongside paleoanthropology, archeology now situates Africa center-stage, not as the forgotten *cul-de-sac* it once was, but as a place indeed of common human origins (however, see below).

The first of two stated objectives of this book are to give some account of the breadth of history revealed by archeology in Africa. The book does so admirably well, by way of eighteen chapters commissioned from specialists in their respective fields. Geographic coverage is not without certain gaps, which are acknowledged by the editor: publisher's page restrictions impose constraints, she pleads, and choices had to be made. The bias falls in favor of sub-Saharan Africa as against the Mediterranean, the Nile and the Horn (references are provided for those who would delve there). Each contribution (explicitly highlighting current debates at the editor's urging) is concluded with a comprehensive bibliography, so that readers have a means to read deeper. The editor has students in mind: the book is part of the Blackwell Studies in Global Archaeology series, which is designed "to cover

central areas of undergraduate archaeological teaching" (p. vii). I should think this book would be valued more widely, for example, it would be of the greatest interest to any student of Africa more generally.

The second goal of the book is arguably the more important one. As well as presenting current understandings and debates, the editor and contributors seek to foster a critical awareness of the contexts that have shaped archeological knowledge of Africa's pasts, and of the evidence and epistemologies, preoccupations and assumptions on which it is based. What were the impacts, for instance, of that view of timeless "dark centuries" more anthropological than historical, punted by the abovementioned Oxford historian? More pertinently, Stahl assesses the way–and by whom–archeological significance in Africa is valued today. In her introduction, she critiques current images of the African past relative to the conventional narrative, what she terms the project of world prehistory. This Enlightenment-inspired universal "human story" turns the spotlight to Africa, as it must, for human origins and our earliest history; but it then trails off as "our story" unfolds elsewhere in subsequent episodes on the origins of domestication, civilization, and so on. As the inclusive "we" of the narrative becomes more select, later periods in African prehistory become implicitly excluded; their relevance relegated to the status of a parochial "them"–no longer part of the "us" of universal human history. Insofar as archeologists had rallied to Africa's cause to demonstrate a proud history of innovation and social complexity–in the face of perspectives epitomized by that of Trevor-Roper–they were able to counter the negative images at the level of detail, Stahl argues; but not at the level of their underlying presumptions. The denial of Africa's role, to be sure, had been substituted with a positive insistence on its place in prehistory, but the broader framing of world prehistory has remained very much as the master script. This book should go some way towards motivating students to engage critically in the archeology and the pasts of this continent. For practicing archeologists, it issues this challenge "to use emerging knowledge of Africa's pasts in reformulating the project of world prehistory" (p. 16).

Paul Lane's chapter, on "Barbarous Tribes and Unrewarding Gyrations? The Changing Role of Ethnographic Imagination in African Archaeology," presents an assessment of analogical modeling and reasoning (ethnographic as well as taphonomic, i.e., site formation processes) as one of the key interpretive methods used by archeologists. At worst, in this respect, Africa had been mined for "primitives" as "living fossils" to illustrate evolutionary stages; and Lane shows that the ghosts of such earlier perceptions may still haunt some of the recent applications. One might have expected here some assessment of the use of ethnography in the study of rock art, which has made for something of a paradigm shift with ramifications well beyond rock art itself in South Africa since the 1970s.[4] It is often not so much new evidence but new questions and perspectives, Stahl suggests, that has brought about change in the way Africa's past is known.

The sixteen remaining chapters form the substance of this book, variously engaging with the state of knowledge in a region or in a subject area. Thomas Plummer looks into the archeology of our oldest known technology in a chapter on "Discord after Discard: Reconstructing Aspects of Oldowan Hominin Behavior." The archeology of Pleistocene Africa, and the emergence here of one species, Homo sapiens, is a focus of chapters by Curtis Marean and Zelalem Assefa ("The Middle and Upper Pleistocene African Record for the Biological and Behavioral Origins of Modern Humans") and Hilary Deacon and Sarah Wurz ("A Late Pleistocene Archive of Life at the Coast, Klasies River"). A series of chapters follow that focus on subsistence strategies, and trends towards intensification, through the Holocene. Here are Peter Mitchell's "Modeling Later Stone Age Societies in Southern Africa," Augustin Holl's "Holocene 'Aquatic' Adaptations in North Tropical Africa," Diane Gifford-Gonzalez on "Pastoralism and Its Consequences," Joanna Casey's chapter "Holocene Occupations of the Forest and Savanna," and Katharina Neumann's thoughts as an archeobotanist on "The Romance of Farming: Plant Cultivation and Domestication in Africa."

Specific topics, more than regions or periods, are the subject of a succeeding set of chapters, including "Metallurgy and Its Consequences," by Terry Childs and Eugenia Herbert, and "The Bantu Problem and African Archaeology," an essay on historical linguistic modeling by Manfred Eggert, along with Adria LaViolette and Jeffrey Fleisher's "The Archaeology of Sub-Saharan Urbanism: Cities and Their Countrysides." These chapters establish some of the framing issues against which particular regional debates have been transacted. One of the most hotly contested of them is the Kalahari debate, reviewed by Andrew Reid ("Interaction, Marginalisation and the Archaeology of the Kalahari"). Gilbert Pwiti examines a multi-causal framework for discussing the period of state formation in "Southern Africa and the East African Coast," while complex trajectories of change and continuity, unsettling older conceptions of ethnic-

ity or evolutionary cultural transitions, are themes in the chapters by Chapurukha Kusimba and Sibel Kusimba ("Mosaics and Interactions: East Africa 2000 B.P. to the Present"), by Pierre de Maret ("From Pottery Groups to Ethnic Groups in Central Africa"), and by Scott MacEachern ("Two Thousand Years of West African History").

Several authors refer, one way or another, to the contribution archeology could make towards (as de Maret puts it) "relativizing ethnicity and autochthony and its many manipulations that fuel hate and exclusion instead of stressing the common background shared by most" (p. 436). And rejecting the sort of simplistic progressive scheme of cultural evolution that preoccupied earlier scholars, MacEachern remarks, "reality–like archaeology–is messier, and more interesting, than that" (p. 458).

If there is a missing chapter, for me it is one on rock art in Africa. A few relevant references are to be found scattered through the book, such as in Mitchell's chapter on the Southern African Later Stone Age (but surprisingly, again, not in the chapter on "The Role of Ethnographic Imagination"). A recent continental overview such as David Coulson and Alec Campbell's *African Rock Art: Paintings and Engravings on Stone* (2001) was perhaps too general to be included in any of the detailed regional/subject summaries.

On the whole, this book lives up to its editor's claim that this is "an exciting time to be involved [in] African archaeology" (p. 16). Recognizing that archaeological knowledge extends beyond the academy (and, one could add, to other disciplines within it), Stahl urges that those engaged in this work should be concerned about "the kinds of questions we ask, the answers we seek, and the effects of our successive approximations of Africa's pasts on her present and future" (p. 16). *African Archaeology: A Critical Introduction* will no doubt play its role in these quests.

Notes

[1]. Monica Wilson and Leonard Thompson, *The Oxford History of South Africa*, vol. 1, *South Africa to 1870* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), vii.

[2]. Cited in Ken Smith, *The Changing Past: Trends in South African Historical Writing* (Johannesburg: Southern Book Publishers, 1988), 141.

[3]. Bruce G. Trigger, *A History of Archaeological Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 410.

[4]. J. David Lewis-Williams, "The Evolution of Theory, Method and Technique in Southern Africa Rock Art Research," *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory* 13 (2006), 343-377.