Digging New Jersey’s Past: Historical Archaeology in the Garden State.

RICHARD VEIT

Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, NJ, 2002. 240 pp., 58 b&w illus., ref. $22.00 paper, $60.00 cloth.

Richard Veit has produced that rarest of manuscripts—a textbook that is a pleasure to read. Designed to appeal to a broad audience, the book is free of jargon, excessive theory, or workbook structure. Veit’s prose is concise, often humorous, and sometimes brutally honest. Despite his obvious love for field and lab work, Veit quickly pricks prospective archaeologists’ fantasies—“shovel bums” can anticipate more poor pay and “mind-numbing” monotony than romance and treasure (pp. 1, 59, 191).

In nine lean chapters (194 pp.), Veit takes the reader on a tour of New Jersey historical archaeology from A to U (archaeology to utopian village). In chapter 1, "History Underfoot: A Short Introduction to Historical Archaeology," he starts with basic definitions, sketches the contents of the book, and outlines the history of historical archaeology in New Jersey from its antiquary roots to construction mitigation. Here too, he introduces a theme oft repeated, the need for the careful preservation of archaeological sites, artifact collections, and site documentation.

Chapter 2, "In Search of New Jersey’s First Settlers," provides glimpses of three 17th-century sites—two residences and a Quaker meeting house. As with all of his chapters, Veit begins with a short but excellent historical background before developing his first case study—Charles Conrad Abbott’s 1890s excavation of a 1660s residence on Burlington Island. Abbott’s excavation and the subsequent history of his collections are loaded with lessons for archaeologists, especially the importance of collections management. Abbott’s field notes and many of the artifacts have disappeared, limiting what Veit and Charles Bello could accomplish when they reanalyzed the collection in the 1990s.

In chapters 3 through 8, Veit marches readers systematically through archaeological sites illustrating 18th-century ethnic settlements, the American Revolution, grave markers and cemeteries, transportation, industrial history, and 19th-century social change. In his last chapter, "What to Others Is Meaningless Rubbish: Some Concluding Thoughts," Veit eloquently pleads for a brighter archaeological future, a future possible only if we do a better job of involving the public, preserving sites, and sharing information. Huge gaps remain in our archaeological knowledge of New Jersey, ranging from the early settlements along the Hudson and Raritan Bay to the material circumstances of 19th-century immigrants and inventors. In his last paragraphs, Veit argues for more (and more responsible) archaeology, cautioning us that beginning an excavation is like taking vows—digging should inaugurate a long-term commitment to research and writing.

Veit’s coverage of New Jersey’s historic site excavations is not encyclopedic, nor could it be with only three to five sites in each thematic chapter. As he clearly states at the beginning, these are only a personal selection of some of the most interesting sites (p. 2). To a large extent, however, he has compensated through extensive references to other excavations and a marvelous bibliography. The illustrations are well selected, providing readers with samples of site plans, cross sections, feature drawings, artifacts, and architectural renderings. More illustrations would be appropriate. Missing from the selection is a table illustrating how artifact collections are compared between sites. Likewise, the inclusion of an artifact distribution map would help explain battlefield archaeology (pp. 86–87). In the paperback edition, the photographs are poorly reproduced.

As with any other general survey, the specialist will be able to find fault. In his chapter on the American Revolution, Veit confuses the 1777 Continental Army encampment at Morristown with the 1778 encampment at Valley Forge (pp. 63, 73), and he understates the size of the Crown forces at Monmouth (20,000, not 15,000). Quibbles like these, however, should not distract us from acknowledging an exceptional accomplishment. Veit, a former contract archaeologist turned university professor, has given us a text that is good history, good archaeology, and good reading. As Bob Schuyler points out in his introduction, historical archaeology has produced few such syntheses. It should sell well and reward Rutgers University Press for publishing it in paperback at a very reasonable price.

Hopefully, there will be a second edition giving Veit and Rutgers a chance to correct some embarrassing mistakes. The scale bars on all the site location maps are mislabeled as "feet" where "miles" is meant. The New Jersey Turnpike, the infamous road connecting New York City and Wilmington, Delaware, is described as connecting New York to Philadelphia (p. 115). Chapter 3 could use rewriting—the ceramic evidence for the development of a regional culture in the Raritan Valley is abbreviated to inadequacy (three sentences, p. 43) and appears to be contradicted by the evidence from another site (pp. 51–53). Once this is attended to, we should encourage Richard Veit to develop another course on New Jersey’s historical archaeology—perhaps on industrial archaeology—along with another text for us to enjoy.

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The Recovery of Meaning.

MARK P. LEONE AND PARKER B. POTTER, EDITORS


Since its debut in 1988, The Recovery of Meaning has emerged as essential reading for historical archaeologists. This book is important because it offers examples of how symbolic, structural, and Marxist approaches to archaeological interpretation address how the people of the past used material culture to reflect their perception of social reality. Each article emphasizes that historical archaeologists must construct an interpretive context for their material from the documented aspects of the sociocultural and political-economic context of the time period under study. Each section represents a major school of archaeological thought. The sections are frequently
related, and each chapter often builds upon ideas introduced in the one preceding it.

The first section contains articles by Stanley South and David Hurst Thomas. Each author offers a functionalist interpretation for a Spanish colonial site. South uses written history to construct testable premises and applies his pattern recognition methodology to determine the demographic characteristics of the Santa Elena community to establish where it fit into the Spanish colonial system. Thomas’s article goes a step beyond South by noting that Spanish colonial laws regulated the design and demographic characteristics of their settlements. Thomas uses this information to suggest that European artifacts found in native contexts at Santa Catalina symbolized processes of conversion and acculturation. Both of these articles rely on history and ethnography to assign etic meanings to the material remains of the past, but neither attempts to discern the indigenous viewpoint.

The second section makes the leap to the emic viewpoint by examining how indigenous people used European goods symbolically. Elise M. Brenner’s article expands on Thomas’s ideas by suggesting that native use of European material culture in contact period New England was dictated by previously established native practices that utilized exotic goods and materials in status displays. Constance A. Crosby extends Brenner’s ideas by proposing that Native Americans chose European goods selectively and fit them into their existing worldview according to uniquely native cosmological precepts. These articles demonstrate that extant indigenous values and practices accommodated European material culture in ways that symbolically reflected native systems of social ranking and belief, indicating that the presence of European goods in native contexts may do more than simply reflect processes of acculturation.

The third section of the book moves away from indigenous concerns and into the Anglo-American world. It employs different approaches to identifying and analyzing ideology through the study of material culture. James Deetz’s article is basically a summary of his previous work in Anglo-America. Deetz identified the ideas of order, symmetry, separation, individualism, and standardization that structured the Georgian worldview and recognized them in many forms of material culture. His work implies that meaning is derived from artifacts by identifying similarities in different forms of material culture that reflect the principles that people in particular times and places used to organize the way they see the world. In chapter 7, Mark Leone extends Deetz’s argument to show that this Georgian ideal was incorporated into the spread of industrial capitalism and that acceptance of these ideals varied according to social class and occupation. Leone effectively demonstrates that Georgian ideals became the basis for modern American values. Barbara Little’s article casts Georgian values as an ideology and uses the concepts of standardization and segmentation in the printing industry to show that material culture shapes and creates cultural mores. Little adds the idea of recursivity to structuralist analysis and implies that people actively use artifacts to indicate acceptance of the ideological system. Ann Palkovich adds the idea of resistance to the discussion of ideology by indicating that an uncharacteristically small and asymmetrical house belonging to a small-scale immigrant planter demonstrates a rejection of the dominant Georgian ideology proffered by a southern Anglo plantocracy.

Domination and resistance are the central themes in the fourth section of book, which deals with African American archaeology. Charles Orser’s chapter injects the idea of power relations into ideological analyses of material culture, casting space as a political instrument and noting that house style and location was a function of wealth and social position in plantation contexts. Theresa Singleton’s article contrasts the lifestyles of enslaved and emancipated African Americans by noting that freedom meant a decline in living standards for most former slaves, which downplays the idea that freedom equated to an increase in wealth and prosperity. In addition, Singleton provides an example of critical archaeology when she examines the political statements made by museums that deal with slavery. She thinks museums may reflect either a willingness to address the inequities of slavery or a more dangerous viewpoint that suggests that modernity mitigated racial inequality, an idea that separates contemporary black Americans from their enslaved ancestors rather than creating a past that is relevant to their lives in the modern world.

Analyzing ideology is the focus of the last section of the book. Recursivity is a weakly unifying theme for the articles presented. Texas B. Anderson and Roger A. Moore take a symbolic approach to architecture by utilizing the individual fitness concept in social Darwinist thought to cast the replacement of Georgian symmetry and plainness with Italianate asymmetry and grandeur at Ashton Villa as a political statement that recursively legitimated and recreated social discourse about individual achievement and prosperity in mid-19th-century Texas. Randall McGuire also utilizes recursivity to examine the changes in gravestone styles in Broome County, New York, to suggest that grave markers communicated an ideology of individual achievement that naturalized class differences at the turn of the 20th century and masked class differences during the Depression era. McGuire exposes ideology as an integrative mechanism for the upper classes that either justified their prosperity or attempted to downplay it, depending on circumstances of the times. Robert Paynter employs class analysis to discern material correlates of ideologies by indicating that political and economic circumstances affect commodity availability and structure social relations between people. Paynter describes a recursive connection between class ideology and economic cycles, lending context to the articles by Deetz and Leone in section three.

I can offer few criticisms about the content of the second edition other than the fact that it differs very little from the first. Leone authored a new preface for this edition describing his epistemological debts to his various contemporaries. This reads like an homage to the great names of historical archaeology and includes an in-depth discussion of critical archaeology that was largely absent from the first edition. Although several articles could have been edited or revised to make them shorter and more to the point, this did not occur. The articles by Brenner, Crosby, Palkovich, and Orser remain effective examples of using symbolic analyses in archaeology. The chapters by Leone and Paynter remain valuable as introductions to the archaeology of capitalism. Aesthetically, the typeface remains very small, while the black and white photographs lack the resolution they had in the first edition.
The Recovery of Meaning remains as useful to historical archaeologists today as it was in 1988. Throughout the 1990s, this book was instrumental in encouraging historical archaeologists to focus on questions of ideology and inequality through symbolic, structuralist, Marxist, and critical approaches. It also forced archaeologists to question the symbolic aspects of material culture and how people use it to reify social discourse or challenge it. The Recovery of Meaning maintains its relevance to the field because it is instrumental in bringing issues of meaning to the forefront of research in historical archaeology. The book stands today as an effective introduction to the major theoretical approaches that archaeologists can use to address the themes of recursivity, ideology, agency, and critique, while it has greatly aided in establishing these issues as vital avenues of inquiry in historical archaeology.

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Maharani’s Misery: Narratives of a Passage from India to the Caribbean.
VERENE A. SHEPHERD
The University of the West Indies Press, Barbados, 2002. 160 pp., 4 illus., 8 tables, 26 appendices, ref., index. $20.00 paper.

Verene Shepherd has been a leading voice in the development of feminist Caribbean histories, and this book is an addition to that scholarly discourse. Maharani, the subject of the book’s title, was one of 660 Indians embarking from Calcutta on the Allenshaw in 1885. The contract laborers were just a small number of the 238,909 Indians who would make the trek between their homeland and the Caribbean (1838–1917). This particular ship’s destination was British Guyana. Maharani never reached the final destination but died following a short, intense illness after confiding in several female shipmates the cause of her condition—a rape. It is the investigation of this alleged crime—and the intersecting oppressions of class, race, and gender illuminated therein—that is the focus of this brief case study.

Although the rape case was dismissed, Shepherd’s intent is not so much to right the historical record and “prove” who should bear historical blame for Maharani’s suffering and death. Instead, her focus is directed upon understanding the perspectives of those involved in the case, and how their respective social positions shaped the authority of their competing narratives in the legal proceedings. Maharani’s rape investigation becomes for Shepherd, and the reader, a performance in miniature of colonial racial, gender, economic, and political entanglements. To illustrate just a few: a ship’s doctor allows his biases regarding the sexual behaviors of lower caste women to shape his interpretation of physical data recovered during autopsy; although evidence suggests as many as three men were involved in the rape, including two white men, it is an African American who alone becomes the main suspect. Too often, twists and turns in the investigation mirror absurdities we have seen in our own time as aspects of celebrity cases. At one point, evidence of the suspect’s guilt turns upon another man’s description of his “chafed penis.” Most poignant about this work is that Maharani, although the subject of the work, is left voiceless. The documentation regarding the crime against her is gathered after her death. Maharani’s own words proclaiming what was done to her come to us through the translated texts of her female confidants. It is exactly this voicelessness of the female subject that makes this particular case an ideal centerpiece for exploring the “sexploitation” of Indian women that regularly occurred on the labor vessels.

Shepherd is an historian of the experiences of the subaltern, those persons whose experiences are dismissed and misrepresented in the public discourses of their times, those same people that historical archaeologists often lay claim to studying as well. What makes Shepherd’s present book particularly appealing for historical archaeologists is her approach to and presentation of the documentary record. In her preface, Shepherd describes what she is doing as seeking to “contribute to the ongoing archaeological project of excavating gender-differentiated data on the 19th-century movement of Indians to the colonial Caribbean in order to understand better the nature of the indentured Indians’ experiences, especially as they undertook the passage from India” (p. xiii). To that end, Shepherd divides the book into two parts. The first is a historical narrative, where she contextualizes the trade in Indian labor to the Caribbean on a global level, with a specific focus on the place of women within that trade. She then constructs a narrative of the Allenshaw’s journey and the contested events surrounding Maharani’s attack and death, as derived from court records. What makes the court records so rich is that the records include the testimony of all witnesses, ranging from the ship’s officers and crew to the members of the Indian community being transported. Shepherd expertly interrogates these records for evidence of contradictions and biases. Shepherd concludes her historical narrative by restituting the case in its social context. Although done in only 80 pages, it is a rich and nuanced presentation.

The second part of the book is a collection of 26 appendices, each containing the transcript of a witness. The inclusion of these transcripts is brilliant. In true feminist fashion, Shepherd challenges the reader to evaluate her interpretations and to come to one’s own conclusions based on the texts. More importantly, to me, the multitude of voices that the reader encounters retelling variations of the same events draws our attention even more boldly to the profound silence of the victim.

While Shepherd’s work is not based in the kind of material evidence that drives archaeological research, I believe that this book will be valuable to anyone engaged in feminist-inspired or postmodernist archaeologies. The scale that Shepherd works with in this book is not unlike that encountered in archaeological work, where we often encounter a small number of people sharing a particular place at a particular time. Shepherd’s work underscores the importance of multiscalar and multivocal perspectives in our attempts to understand the past.

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