

# BOOK REVIEW



*Archaeology of Asia*. Miriam T. Stark, ed. Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006. 364 pp.

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## IS THERE AN ARCHAEOLOGY OF ASIA?

The field of Asian archaeology has been transformed technologically, methodologically, and interpretationally over the past two decades. These developments cry out for a new synthesis in the tradition of Chang (1986) and Barnes (1993)—a single book that will introduce a student already conversant in the basics of archaeology to the archaeology of Asia. The series in which this book, *The Archaeology of Asia*, is published, Blackwell's Studies in Global Archaeology, aims to present volumes that are fundamentally books for teaching. The target audience is advanced undergraduate students who are prepared to tackle theoretically sophisticated concepts in archaeology. *The Archaeology of Asia* is not a new synthesis of Asian archaeology, but it is nevertheless a good complement to any already developed course on the archaeology of Asia.

The volume contains strong chapters on the emergence of the state in East and Inner Asia and on the position of archaeology in modern society. However, as a teaching tool it lacks unifying themes. Any teacher who wishes to use the book as the basis for a class will have to construct a thematic synthesis to tie the volume's articles together. On the one hand, this is a great drawback for the busy lecturer who must build a course on the archaeology of Asia and is looking for an "out of the box" course textbook. On the other hand, the lack of thematic structure offers many options for building one's own course

using chronology, topical issues, regional studies, or research methods as a basis.

This book is most interesting for the snapshot it offers of the state of archaeology in Asia in 2006. Stark's editorial introduction highlights the main theme of the volume, which is diversity in every possible aspect of archaeological data and approaches. As a whole, the chapters collected in *The Archaeology of Asia* exemplify the tension between any local archaeology (i.e., one that is Asia-oriented or has an even more specific regional focus) and the use of global models, methods, and theories. A synthesis emerges in the chapters by Underhill and Habu and Shelach and Pines, for example, but the most successful chapters are those taking a mainly global view, such as those by Bellwood and Liu and Chen. This raises the question, can there be an archaeology of Asia at all?

The volume itself is divided into four sections: the modern context of archaeology in Asia; the formative periods of Asian societies; the emergence of complex political systems; and a section entitled "Crossing Boundaries" that addresses the archaeology of regions beyond East and Southeast Asia.

In the lead chapter, Glover discusses the history of archaeology in Asia through the lens of political context. Though he touches upon the possible dangers of the political uses of archaeology, the main thrust of his chapter is on the value of a national archaeology. Archaeology, Glover argues, acts as a unifying force in modernizing nations through the roots that can be found in rediscovered

ancient greatness. The following chapter by Nelson illustrates Glover's thesis. This detailed study of Korean archaeology in its political context focuses on the elaborately shifting positions of Korea and Koreans as the nations of the Korean Peninsula emerged into the modern world.

Japan is perhaps the only nation on earth where a self-critical analysis of the intertwined relationship between archaeology, ethnicity, and national identity is possible. Such self-reflexivity has been possible because of the extensive and sophisticated archaeological fieldwork that has taken place there along with a public awareness of the archaeological past and perceived strong cultural connections between the modern population and the past. Though other nations covered in this volume may have one or two of these factors, Japan is the only country with all three. Mizoguchi's sophisticated and concise chapter discusses the centrality of modern Japanese archaeology to Japan's national identity. He covers two fascinating topics: the appeal of "Jomon-ness" in modern Japan and the foundations of Japanese society in the Yayoi and Kofun periods. In both examples, he brings the full force of the archaeology of Japanese pre- and proto-history into the present. Mizoguchi's contribution is an excellent example of a modern archaeological endeavor wrestling with the archaeology of a modern nation-state, its history, and its origin story.

The section on the formative periods in Asia centers on the origins of agriculture in Asia and the Pacific. Crawford's chapter opens this section by tantalizing us with the possibility that it might be a discussion of the very interesting and complex issues central to the study of plant domestication. Unfortunately, this chapter is a catalog of sites and the newest dates for the first appearance of a long list of food and utility plants; it ends with an appeal to develop a yet longer list. This section lacks discussion of the domestication process itself and the question of food, diet, and identity that usually looms like Godzilla over every discussion of the origins of Asian agriculture. What is needed is not a longer catalog, but rather a discussion of the origins of agriculture in Asia and powerful and fearless

models that the new data Crawford calls for will feed.

Bellwood's contribution offers a model for the dispersion of agricultural subsistence strategies. The model features a linguistic skeleton onto which archaeological data is attached. In a counterpoint to Crawford, Bellwood mainly discusses his preferred methods and the general issues under consideration, rather than focusing on the data underlying his argument. As a whole, this chapter works as an example of an integrated anthropological approach to subsistence change.

The next section on "Complex Asian Systems" hits the high points of early complex polities before focusing on specific and detailed examples of the archaeology of early states in the Chinese Central Plain. Underhill and Habu's chapter entitled "Early Communities in East Asia" offers a quick tour around the Holocene settlement of East Asia on through the emergence of agriculture and societal inequality there. Though this article offers fine general coverage, two flaws in its presentation would make it problematic to teach from. First, regional borders are strongly drawn in the map figures, suggesting that there are distinct, known, Neolithic entities spread across East Asia that can be defined by their subsistence strategies and centered in particular sites in each region. This could be remedied in the teaching environment by a discussion of what makes up an archaeological culture or region in Neolithic East Asia and why such strong boundaries might be drawn. Central to that discussion, and to this article, is a focus on ceramic designs and forms. However, the authors offer no images of the designs and forms that define the early communities of East Asia and that dominate the discussions in the article.

Liu and Chen offer one of the strongest chapters in the volume. They trace the emergence of the complex (state level and regionally integrated) polity at Erlitou by looking at the antecedents of its social structure and its innovations and sphere of influence. Their chapter is a fine balance between wide synthetic evidence and details as well as elite cultural item-based interpretation and broad archaeological analysis of common materials and resources. The authors make a convinc-

ing case for the unique character of the Yilou region and provide a good example of integrating data on many levels to address major questions. If you read only one chapter in this volume, read this one.

Keightley offers a thought-provoking chapter fitting oracle bones into the context of the early Shang state. Though the chapter title offers “Neolithic” and “early” writing systems, evidence for those and for writing from the Middle Shang are discussed only briefly in the first couple of pages before Keightley focuses upon the full-blown glory of Late Shang writing. He is not concerned with what was recorded when or by whom (i.e., the specifics of history), but with the material culture of early writing, the context of its use, and the practice of writing and reading. This is the most interpretive chapter in the volume. It dwells upon the symbolizing power of words through their existence and their place in elite society of the (both living and spiritual) Late Shang. Keightley gives life to the oracle bones and life to the Shang themselves.

The following two chapters take similar approaches to the discussion of states and empires in ancient China. Allard discusses the southern periphery of the Han Empire and compares how different regions along its borders were incorporated into the empire. Shelach and Pines discuss the transition from Zhou ideology to Qin identity. Both are examples of a classic approach used in Asian archaeology, combining coarse archaeological data with historical texts that offer a finer resolution picture of the motivations of individual actors. Both concentrate on elite architecture and tombs. As a study of available data, Shelach and Pines’ chapter is elegantly done, but the deployment of theory on state origins, ethnicity, and identity is not so smoothly carried out. The authors isolate local mortuary practices and contrast them with major architecture and burials of the Zhou world to describe the emergence of a Qin identity that is itself the foundation of the Qin conquests. However, keeping the target audience of the volume in mind, the authors should be chided for their over-reliance on a single, oft-cited, unpublished manuscript as the main framework of the work. How is an

enthusiastic undergraduate going to be able to follow up the citation to learn more?

The final chapters of the volume leave the confines of the Han Empire and explore regions of Asia outside of the East Asian core. Honeychurch and Amartuvshin present a study of the structure of “states on horseback,” advancing the idea that factors of control of space and mobility are instructive variables for understanding the emergence and structure of complex polities in historic and proto-historic Inner Asia. This article is clear and well written. When a theoretical model is used, it is both clearly summarized and supported by citations, a welcome feature in a study directed at students.

Like Japan, South Asia (which occupies the last three chapters of the volume) is a region where archaeology and modern national identities are closely connected. None of the authors go as far as Mizoguchi in discussing this, but the active role of archaeology in modern India is present in both Morrison’s and Sinopoli’s chapters. Morrison’s chapter is the most theoretical and model-oriented work in the volume. She uses South Asia as a laboratory to critique evolutionary subsistence models through a discussion of the interdigitation of sedentary farming and hunting and gathering populations. Morrison uses ethnographic accounts and trade records to position hunter-gatherers as a historical force in themselves and as an active part of the raw material and preciousness extraction systems. Central to her argument is the idea that foragers are foragers by choice, not out of an inability to climb an evolutionary ladder. They are continually taking part in interactions with their sedentary farming neighbors.

Historical accounts are also central to the following chapter, Himanshu Prabha Ray’s “The Axial Age in Asia.” The expansion and adoption of early Buddhism in South and Southeast Asia is traced using historical religious and trade documents and complementary archaeological finds. This chapter serves to contrast the position of historical sources in South Asian and East Asian archaeology. In East Asia, as we have seen in the chapters by Allard and Shelach and Pines, historical sources are primarily political documents focused on elite culture. In South Asia, the

sources that Morrison and Ray employ are primarily non-elite and concerned with the practice of religion and the actions of merchants. They provide a varied and vibrant contrast to the easily segmented and dry political histories of East Asia.

The final article in the book, Sinopoli's survey of the structure of South Asian empires and issues of ethnicity and organization that relate to them, contrasts the Satavahana and Kushan empires. Taking a more contemporary anthropological turn, Sinopoli provides a fitting closing article for the book by coming back to the discussion of nationalist archaeology. In an example far from Glover's relatively positive picture of nationalist archaeology as a unifying force, Sinopoli reminds us of the chilling communal violence surrounding the destruction of the Babri Masjid and its archaeological foundations. She closes, however, with an inspiring summary of the past two decades of work on the Vijayanagara Empire, which has been diverse, multi-disciplinary, multi-national, and anthropological in character. This work can serve as a model for all of us working in Asia.

As Stark writes in her introduction, taken as a whole, this volume offers a view of the great diversity of Asian anthropology, history, and archaeology. Almost every region of Asia is touched upon in some way except the Indus Valley and Tibet. Thematically, it addresses such interesting topics as ethnicity, the position of archaeologists as interlocutors between the past and the present, and diversity and regionalism in the archaeological record, in addition to unifying cultural trends and static traits.

I would like to return to the initial question posed by the title of this review, is there

an archaeology of Asia? There is certainly archaeology that takes place in Asia, but does *The Archaeology of Asia* contain a distinctly Asian approach to archaeology? The answer is no, at least to the extent that the best work being done in Asia is archaeology in an international tradition. The most successful chapters in the book are those that are strongly rooted in anthropological archaeology, rather than in specifically regional archaeologies. An example of this can be seen in the section entitled "Complex Asian Systems," a title that begs the question: What is distinctively Asian here? For the most part, these chapters about state formation and empires draw from and contribute to global models of ancient state structure and growth, a pattern continued by Honeychurch and Amartuvshin and to some extent Morrison.

In closing, I must reiterate that *The Archaeology of Asia* is an interesting and enlightening collection of papers. It is not, however, a synthetic volume on the archaeology of Asia that could form the backbone of a course on the topic for advanced undergraduate students. Although its chapters and thematic segments provide a big picture of Asian archaeology, they must be contextualized if the book is to be successfully used as a teaching tool.

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