

Review

Archaeologists as Activists

M. Jay Stottman (ed). Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2010. 216 pp.

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Archaeologists as Activists: Can Archaeologists Change the World? is comprised of papers edited by M. Jay Stottman—many of which were initially prepared for a session at the 2004 annual meeting of the Society for Historical Archaeology in St. Louis. The focus of this volume is “activist archaeology” as theorized and performed by archaeologists working in the last few decades in the United States. While the specific topics addressed are quite local, the questions raised and practices deployed are highly significant for archaeologists, anthropologists, and historians engaged in international settings. First, I must make a few disclaimers. This reviewer is neither a field archaeologist nor a specialist in American history. Instead, I am a historian of ancient religions with an expertise in the ethics of historical belief regularly working in Jerusalem. I am especially interested in the application of the authors’ various forms of “activist archaeology” in this alternative turbulent setting where the representation of the past is regularly a tool in the service of political, economic, religious, as well as other societal and human interests.

What is activist archaeology? To summarize the editor Stottman, it is a reframing of the relationship between: (1) the archaeologist’s professional obligations related to excavating the remains of the past and (2) the archaeologist’s

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moral obligations to society in the present. Whereas the “public archaeologist” of earlier decades in the United States oftentimes attempted to play the role of disinterested scientific scholar who advocated for the preservation of the past, “activist archaeologists” choose sides in the present. Archaeological work, according to the activist view, is never performed independently or irrespective of contemporary interests. Instead, archaeologists like historians in general, need to recognize not only the ways in which their own selections for historical inquiry are influenced by cultural prejudices but critically also the impact of their work on the world that they live in. Archaeologists should definitely “plan for and guide the effects they have on communities” (7). Stottman, while he does caution against archaeologists harming the communities that they live in either through not paying attention to the consequences of their actions in the present or as a result of risky alliances with stakeholders, repeatedly champions the ability of archaeologists “to benefit and change contemporary communities” for the better (15). Stottman writes:

I think an activist archaeology is more about intentionality and advocacy, which should be a focus for projects, not an aside....To use archaeology to affect change in and advocate for contemporary communities, not as the archaeologist sees it but as the community itself sees it, defines activist archaeology....It is about understanding a community and integrating its needs and wants into our work and using the process of archaeology and the knowledge it produces to help satisfy community needs. (8)

The articles collected in this volume provide us with multiple examples of “activist archaeology” as practiced in the United States during the last few decades. Taken as a whole, the book is an instructive compilation of strategies for aligning archaeological and political/community interests. The work of each contributing archaeologist is what Carol McDavid, following Anthony Giddens and Pierre Bourdieu, labels “reflexive.” They recognize like the American theorists Charles Beard and John Dewey before them, that the “past” is always the “past of the present.” Knowingly or not, according to Stottman and others like McDavid and Kim Christensen, archaeologists take sides in a world of competing interests when they excavate and represent the past. They simply suggest that archaeologists be upfront about this and choose their alliances carefully. In this book, we find many examples

of archaeologists working with and for the benefit of communities and interest groups of a variety of stripes—from 21st century elementary (Sarah Miller and A. Gwynn Henderson) and social studies (Patrice Jeppson) teachers to those with pro-labor (Daniel Gadsby and Jodi Barnes; Robert Chidester; Matthew Pryblyski and Stottman) and anti-racism/anti-discrimination (McDavid; Christensen; Lori Stahlgren; W. Stephen McBride and Kim McBride) agendas. Christensen, for example, in her work on the house of the 19th century abolitionist/suffragette Matilda Joslyn Gage, unabashedly describes herself as a “feminist” and as a “stakeholder” in her historical research. In contrast to twentieth century “new archaeologists” that she criticizes who modeled themselves as impartial scientific investigators, Christensen acknowledges that her selections for inquiry are impacted by political issues (for example, the abortion debate) in the present. She emphasizes the support (money, volunteers) that relationships with likeminded interest parties can provide the archaeologist’s project. In addition to acknowledging the impact of contemporary social realities on their historical work, activist archaeologists intend to make the local communities and/or states that they work in better places to live through their projects. Activist or “direct action” archaeology, in the words of Gadsby and Barnes who investigate the forgotten role of working people in the Baltimore Hampden Project and the displacement of an African American settlement and battle over water rights in the creation of the Appalachian Trail in Virginia, attempts to “explode the construction of contemporary ideology in the past” and “lead to human emancipation” (51). Historical archaeology should be an embodiment of praxis—“thoughtful action with world-transforming consequences” (53). As opposed to the conventions of public archaeologists from earlier decades who attempted to “open the door” for non-specialists to the past (as formulated by professionals), activist archaeologists wish to transfer the tools for “constructing their own past” to formerly and oftentimes presently disadvantaged classes. In the volume’s only article that compares activist archaeology in the United States with that practiced outside of the country, Jeppson shows how this should be done—by highlighting the rise of “people’s archaeology” in post-apartheid South Africa (67–68). More modestly, Miller and Henderson show how local involvement in archaeological efforts can bring about “positive social change”—specifically, “increased or renewed pride in community” (152–53).

Before presenting a few of my worries about the possible misuse of activist archaeological strategies described in this book, I want to be very clear about my fundamental agreements with the authors. Even though I am concerned with some of the effects of the downfall of the former “public archaeology” criticized by the authors such as the increasing “Balkanization” of the past, I do believe that the past is always the past of the present. Archaeologists’ selections for inquiry are undeniably colored by the socio-historical contexts in which they are trained and work. Like other anthropologists and historians, archaeologists must definitely be “reflexive.” Whether you believe that archaeology simply “changes” the world or can actually “save” it (something I presume M. Jay Stottman has reassessed considering the change of the title of the original conference from “Can Archaeology Save The World” to the subtitle of the volume “Can Archaeology Change the World”), the archaeologist’s inquiries are not accomplished in a vacuum. Archaeologists are influenced by and have an effect on the world around them. Obviously, it is best to take these interactions into account rather than to ignore them. Whether known or unknown to the archaeologist, their research often promotes and undercuts a variety of interests. Can archaeology “change” the world? This is clearly the case at least in some small local ways. Should archaeologists and other historians consider the effects of their work and make plans to ensure the desired effects on societies influenced by them? Yes. Certainly, as asserted by Gadsby and Barnes, many “statements about the past are political...and play an important part in shaping contemporary society” (50). I do not support their view, however, that this is the case “most” of the time. While the archaeologist’s activity is always informed by her socio-historical context, it is common for decisions to be made without considering or even while actively ignoring political, religious, and economic interests. Instead, archaeologists are influenced by what Dewey called “ends-in-view” (rather than “ideal ends”) like professional standards and ethical beliefs—though sometimes also by other less than rational motivations.

If the archaeologist decides to actively ally her professional obligations with those of other groups in the present, the big question then becomes with whom should one ally? In principle, is any interest group acceptable—say those of non-democratic states or business investors interested in raising local property values? It is very difficult to criticize the activist archaeologists in this book for wanting to

improve the communities and countries that they work in. As they have reported in this book, their projects by this measure have had some success. In any event, one can certainly sympathize with their attempts to bring archaeological projects to bear against the “powers of oppression” (Barbara Little)—opposing racism, gender bias, and other forms of discrimination. This is especially evident in the archaeological efforts of contributors like McDavid, Stahlgren, Chidester, and the McBrides who excavate clues to the often overlooked experiences of slaves and emancipated slaves in Texas, Kentucky, and Maryland. I closely identify with those who attempt to bring forgotten and suppressed pasts to light. As a historian, I have spent many hours examining clues to the really obscured lives of women in the ancient world. In the last several decades, there has been a very welcome and dramatic increase in attention paid to this formerly ignored topic.

Even more commendable is the goal of several of the activist archaeologists in this volume to include as many voices from a variety of different backgrounds in their projects. McDavid, Stahlgren, along with Prybylski and Stottman do excellent jobs of describing their relationships to multiple community and stakeholder interest groups. Here we begin to move in the direction of finding the best answer to the question, for whom should the archaeologist be an activist? By my view, however, the number of stakeholders and interest groups engaged by these archaeologists must be multiplied. While local and national interests must be reckoned with, the remains of the past—a single, common past—is our greater human inheritance. Just because a group has legal jurisdiction or military control over a cultural heritage site, doesn’t mean they have the moral right to do with it what they please. Unfortunately, it is not usual for human social groups to protect and preserve the cultural heritage of their rivals. This is why there is a need for international conventions and the establishing of “world heritage sites.” Namely, to ensure that the stakeholder rights of minority groups, and of the general public, are safeguarded as well. Due to the “destructive” nature of most contemporary archaeological work that generally allows for specific sites to be excavated only once, in simply choosing to dig the archaeologist accrues a debt to those for whom she acts not only in the present but tomorrow as well. The archaeologist’s selections should not serve only narrow—even if morally commendable—interests in the present. They should instead provide after careful excavation and analysis of the stratigraphy a reliable, accurate, and as far as possible

impartial record of what was excavated for future historians from diverse backgrounds. Indeed, this is the explicit goal of a large number of archaeologists conducting salvage excavations whose work is often overshadowed by their more famous colleagues who are focused over the long term on single sites. Archaeologists performing salvage digs are frequently unaware of the location and nature of their next excavation. Experts in one specific historical period often find themselves working on remains that they are unfamiliar with or even relatively uninterested in. Still these archaeologists, whose work accounts for 80–90% of all excavations conducted by the Israeli Antiquities Authority, are guided instead by professional standards and the results gained from their historical inquiries.

Personally, I think that the representation of the past has often been “activist” for one cause or another—for more than a couple thousand years! Plenty of the interests served, at least until the dawn of modern scientific historiographical methods, were those of political and religious leaders who wished to disseminate their preferred narratives about the past amongst societies while suppressing others. Since the work of Leopold von Ranke, historians have tried to shield themselves from such “conflicts of interests.” The practical guiding ideals of impartiality and objectivity were developed to curb the unjustified propaganda of those seeking to gain or maintain power. The integrity of the past itself and minority accounts of it are thereby possibly preserved. Critical historians, to use the title derived from the work of F. H. Bradley, unfortunately haven’t always lived up to their noble calling nor have they always been successful in being impartial and fair. But in many cases they have been. This is what makes some technically skilled archaeologists better than others. There is unfortunately and ironically little mention of impartiality by the activist archaeologists in this book, even though many of their projects rest upon the notion that they are “unsilencing” lost and/or concealed pasts. Just because archaeologists like other scientists are not epistemologically pure “disinterested observers” they know how to conduct impartial investigations by setting up controls, planning single and double blind experiments, etc. By downplaying the pursuit of impartiality in historical inquiry and advocating alliances between archaeologists and stakeholder interests, the activist archaeologists in this volume appear to open the door to the undermining of some of the gains made by their imperfect forebears.

One is forced to ask, like Barbara Little in the epilogue to *Archaeologists as Activists*, whether in this age of budget cuts in universities and the public sector in the United States if archaeology is worth the expense? - especially if excavations can find funding from partisan and private interest groups. Archaeology and cultural heritage management is not cheap. The question is whether we should entrust the remains of the past to those who have a narrowly defined political or economic stake in the historical work ultimately produced. Will, for example, excavations like McDavid's or others uncovering clues to the non-Christian religious practices of African diaspora groups or the indigenous peoples of North America (conspicuously absent in this book) find the necessary support? Of course, in places like Jerusalem, an even bigger problem emerges. What if sites are contested by multiple groups at odds with each other? Who gets preference? The rulers and powers of the day? The ones who can come up with the most money or political backing? Obviously, the answer to both of these questions in Jerusalem today is yes. While archaeologists working for and with the permission of the Israeli Antiquities Authority have oftentimes done their professional duty in excavating and documenting the remains of non-Jewish sites, this has seldom been for the benefit of local Palestinian communities. At best, heritage parks featuring the work of archaeologists have included finds from Islamic periods of settlement in their presentations to the public (for example, The Jerusalem Archaeological Park). At worst, archaeological excavations which are "activist" according to the most narrow definition of the authors in this book, have been notoriously conducted in places like Palestinian Silwan in East Jerusalem (aka: "the City of David") with the support of not only municipal and national authorities but extremist settler groups like the El'ad Association that openly advocates for the Judaization of the area. El'ad, which both funds the City of David excavations and the archaeological/heritage park, pays virtually no attention in their highly biased presentation of the unearthed remains to the history of Islamic Jerusalem. Unless the multi-vocality stressed by some of the archaeologists in this volume and hopefully magnified by my own arguments takes precedence over well-intentioned activism for narrow community interests in the present, then the advocacy promoted in this book is insupportable. In the least, the professional ethics of archaeologists must take precedence over state and community interests.

It is not naïve to call for the de-politicization, de-ethnicization, or secularization of archaeology whether in the United States, the Middle East, or elsewhere. This is a time-tested strategy used to protect and highlight the history of minority groups whose pasts are threatened by silence imposed by the cultural domination of others. If we are left with only activist archaeology in the service of partisan interests in the present, we—that is, those doing historical inquiries both today and in the future—will be much poorer.