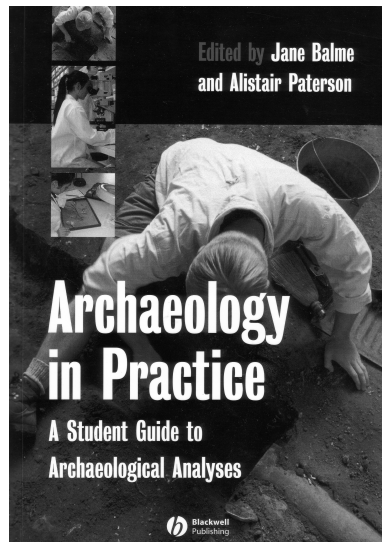


BOOK REVIEW



Jane Balme and Alistair Paterson, editors. *Archaeology in Practice: A Student Guide to Archaeological Analyses*. 2006. Oxford: Blackwell. ISBN: 0631235744. 438 pages. List price \$39.95 US (trade paperback).

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As one who has taught archaeological analysis, I have long felt the need for a general textbook that introduced principles, methods, and techniques. The editors of *Archaeology in Practice* intend this book “for archaeology students who are learning how to analyze archaeological materials” (xx). They were especially concerned “to demonstrate the link between research question, analysis, and conclusion” (xxi). Regrettably, these goals are not fully met, in part because too many chapters conflate description and analysis—and neglect the latter, which would require consistent presentation of qualitative and quantitative methods for treating specific categories of materials in relation to well-defined research problems.

The book contains 15 chapters, covering predictable topics such as Stratigraphy, Absolute Dating, Ceramics, and Animal Bone, but there are also some surprises, such as Consulting Stakeholders, Artifacts of the Modern World, Historical Sources, and Producing the Record (i.e. writing up archaeology). These timely subjects introduce students to issues that are increasingly being faced by archaeologists around the globe.

The editors and 10 of the 18 authors (some chapters are coauthored) are from Australia. This geographic concentration has produced, perhaps inevitably, a book that is most appropriate for teaching in Australian universities. The problems lie in the varying emphases accorded basic topics as well as topics left out, as several examples illustrate. Rock art, an important category of evidence in Australia, is treated in 37 pages, while ceramics is cursorily handled in only 24 pages—less than 6 percent of the book. Despite chapters on Stratigraphy and Sediments, there is no guidance for analyzing

the formation processes—environmental and cultural—of specific deposits. Nor are there chapters on architecture, a category of evidence plentiful in many sites beyond Australia, or on the analysis of the regional archaeological record. Curiously, the only *general* discussion of archaeological classification is tucked into the chapter on stone (which, by the way, neglects ground stone).

Chapters vary in organization, level of sophistication, degree of detailed coverage, pertinence and depth of case studies, and comprehensiveness of bibliographies. This unevenness might be attributed to the lack of a strong editorial hand, but my own experience suggests that asking archaeologists to follow a standard format is like trying to herd cats. The editors can take comfort from the fact that, despite the book's lack of uniform presentations, some chapters are excellent.

What I miss most in this book, apart from a meaty and up-to-date chapter on ceramics, is a comprehensive introduction to the theory of archaeological analysis (actually, the book has no introduction at all). Since the early 1960s, scientifically oriented archaeologists have crafted a reasonably coherent analytical theory that crosscuts all lines of evidence. Although general analytic theory, which is grounded in the life-history framework and acknowledges the diverse sources of archaeological variability, informs many chapters, the subject deserves a separate section at the beginning of the book. In this way, students can be oriented immediately to the foundational ideas that competent analysts employ when approaching any category of evidence. Another theoretical topic that should have been singled out for general discussion, perhaps at the end of the book, is how we integrate low-level behavioral inferences, derived from individual analyses of flora, fauna, chipped stone, and so on, into high-level behavioral inferences such as social inequality, subsistence, and ritual.

Readers of *Radiocarbon* may be most interested in the chapter on Absolute Dating by Simon Holdaway. This chapter makes telegraphic mention of many chronometric techniques, but only radiocarbon dating is extensively treated, both in principles and case studies. Curiously, the lengthy case studies on Australian sites deal with recondite issues of temporal measurement scales, whereas the presentation of ^{14}C principles is watered down to the point of at times being misleading (e.g. perpetuating the idea that charcoal is the most appropriate dating material). Although this chapter contains many useful ideas and insights that could be studied with profit by graduate students and professionals, the unevenness of level and idiosyncratic coverage render it less than ideal for students trying to fathom the process of building chronological inferences from chronometric dates.

Archaeology in Practice has serious shortcomings for archaeologists who work outside Australia, yet it is an earnest effort to bridge the gap between introductory textbooks and specialized volumes devoted to specific material classes.