Rosetta

Daniël van Helden and Robert Witcher, (eds.). *Researching the Archaeological Past Through Imagined Narratives.* **Abingdon: Routledge, 2019. Pp. 312, Figs. 37. £36.99 hardback. ISBN 9781032081939.**

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This collection of papers provides a novel and explicit introduction to the use of fiction for archaeological research as a valid and informative methodology. Daniël van Helden and Robert Witcher have presented a series of academic works employing, what could be described as, a post-processual methodology to a processual topic; that is, using an explicitly subjective methodology to reach objective conclusions. The use of this subjectivity allows for more detailed discussions and allows for a multiplicity of opinions. This has already been demonstrated as useful and has provided interesting conclusions in areas linked to archaeology: Classical and Egyptian literature. Examples of this include performances of Greek theatre investigating how texts were originally supposed to be performed to get a better sense of the piece and within Egyptology, Richard B. Parkinson collaborated with actress Barbara Ewing on a performance of the *Tale of Sinuhe*.[1] The authors touch on a large number of ways in which fiction can assist archaeological discourse: fiction within research to demonstrate an argument or the practical use of something; the use of fiction to explore a new concept or idea with no explicit engagement with academia; seeing gaps because of fiction. Those new to this field may profit more from its content than those who are more experienced, as some of the uses are rudimentary. In spite of some shortcomings, this is nonetheless a significant publication to archaeological discourse and serves to catch archaeology up to other fields, what are more developed in their theoretical and practical use of fiction for research. This book can be split in two sections: Chapters 1-6 focusing on how fiction can generally help research and Chapters 7-14 on how different forms of fiction have already been used to inform research.

In Chapter 1, 'Historical Fiction and Archaeological Interpretation', van Helden and Witcher ask readers to remember that archaeology is not solely objective, but is

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[1] Foley 1999; British Museum 2017.

inherently a subjective area which employs objective methodologies to reach subjective interpretations. Mortimer Wheeler's 1943 excavation report of Maiden Castle in Dorset is highlighted as one of the most important papers in this area.[2] The examples presented here show the different ways that fiction can be used in research, and presents some similarities to the theories of the Classical Receptionist, Lorna Hardwick, in its two-way nature.[3] This provides an important introduction to this volume as it reminds the reader of the value of using both processualist (a more objective and scientific approach) and post-processualist (a more subjective and interpretive approach) approaches for researching archaeology. In Chapter 2, 'The Cornflakes of Prehistory: Fact, Fiction and Imagination', Caroline Wickham-Jones focuses on the blurring of academic and fictive archaeology and the issues with modern archaeological research. She sees a flaw in modern archaeology: the de-personalisation with the past and how a focus on 'superfluous' rituals distract from the main aim of research – the humans. Wickham-Jones raises the point that all interpretations are fictive in their nature, differing from person to person and changing over time, so making claims that there is no space for subjectivity is simply farcical. Fiction has the power to bring back the people of the past in archaeological discourse. Accordingly, its uses cannot be understated.

Along similar lines and based on their previous partnership with Caroline Wickham-Jones, Margaret Elphinstone writes next about her experience of writing fiction based solely on the archaeology in Chapter 3, 'Voices from the Silence'.[4] She talks about how she has constructed lives in time periods where voices are not heard. Her heavy reliance on experimental archaeology to reconstruct life accurately is surprising but sensible. This is the first of the articles which takes more of an anecdotal way of writing. A similar 'anecdotal' piece by Mark Patton in Chapter 4, who writes 'Beyond Archaeological Narrative: Imagines World of Neolithic Europe', which focuses on his 'translation' of archaeological research into his fictional work. Further highlighting his use of experimental archaeology to provide a fuller view of past worlds - Patton turned to cheese-making and investigated the practicalities of maritime travels to and from Jersey to understand mobility and exchange.

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[2] Wheeler 1943.
[3] Hardwick 2020.
[4] Elphinstone and Wickham-Jones 2012.

In Chapter 5, Don Henson, presents an abbreviated version of his PhD thesis on 'Imagined Realities in Academic and Fictional Accounts of the British Mesolithic'.[5] This fantastic piece of research shows how effectively fiction can and has been used in the past to provide information, whether accurate or not, to non-specialists. He focuses in on Sutton Hoo, a site he is very familiar with, and demonstrates the difficulties around explaining something that is not fully understood by academics to those who expect academics to know all. He also highlights the colonialist, imperialist and gender biases in research in this area, which has manifested itself in fiction. Henson further brings to therefore the dramatized nature of the past in fiction, which can be a hindrance but also can provide nuanced and new perspectives around a period, practice or place.

Chapter 6 provides an interesting yet questionable discussion of empathy in research by van Helden and Witcher, entitled 'Walking in Someone Else's Shoes: Archaeology, Empathy and Fiction'. They rightly point out that there is seemingly a lack of empathy in mainstream research with regards to archaeology. The confused structure within this chapter, with a definition for empathy coming after an exploration of empathy in research, is detrimental to its effectiveness – how can one explore how an idea is used in research without defining what that idea is in the first place. It would have been interesting to have a specialist in empathy from psychology to co-author this chapter, allowing a collaboration of minds to create a paper covering all areas and providing the most thorough overview. Additionally, an engagement with how to conduct empathetic research would have been useful, providing more detailed guidelines and an example to show best practice. Despite these flaws, van Helden and Witcher do highlight something that needs to always be in researchers' minds: does this speak to the people I am researching. or is it, as Wickham-Jones calls, a 'superfluous ritual'? This is something that using fiction as a methodology can ensure: that historical people are the central part of any narrative.

The next section, which focuses on different types of fiction that can be used, ranges from film to poetry to playwriting. The first of these articles, Chapter 7, by Francesco Ripanti and Guilia Osti on 'The Multiverse of Fiction: Exploring Interpretation through Community Archaeology'. this article takes outreach and engaging with the local

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[5] Henson 2016.

community and incorporates it in to research in two ways: docudramas/live performances and writing competitions. This novel and inclusive approach provides a model which is easily replicated with relative ease to engage a local community in excavations. In Chapter 8, 'Entering Undocumented Pasts through Playwriting', James Gibb writes a patronising piece attempting to decolonise Indigenous American archaeology through playwriting, but in doing so perpetuates Eurocentric history of research. Gibb has no ancestral connection to this group of people and is employing a white Western technique to researching them, something he critiques in the rest of his paper. He comes to the conclusion, using this methodology, that more research needs to be done – a relatively obvious conclusion that seems to add little to the field of fiction narratives in archaeology and in this book.

In Chapter 9, Michael Given presents a moving article on 'Encountering the Past through Slag and Storytelling', a story of one of his archaeological excavations on which a local resident shared their experience, in an emotional and starting way, about people behind the slag. It highlights how stories from the local community can shed light on the people behind the archaeology, their own trauma and lives not being so different from those in the past. In Chapter 10 'Writing Wonders: Poetry as Archaeological Method?' by Erin Kavanaugh draws parallels in poetry and archaeology – both having a conceptual yet scientific nature. In a confusing and inaccessible piece, she provides three frames for this methodology: bringing new and outside voices; thematic analyses of evidence; and original ideas that goes above and beyond traditional thinking. Giacomo Savani and Victoria Thompson write in Chapter 11, 'Ambiguity and Omission: Creative Mediation of the Unknowable Past', continue discussions of fiction already present in archaeological research, resulting in their short vignette at the end of the article. They combine their skills, one as a specialist in visual art and the other in textual narrative, to demonstrate further the kind of decisions that are made in the creative process. They modelled this off archaeological reports – the utilization of a combination of different specialities from a wide range to areas to paint a picture of the site.

Following on from this, Fiona Hobden in Chapter 12 writes a fascinating piece on 'Spartacus: Blood and Sand (STARZ, 2010): A Necessary Fiction?', in which she plays with the dichotomy of accuracy and entertainment – how being too accurate removed

the entertaining aspect of the fiction, and visa versa. Pop culture plays with misconceptions related to archaeology frequently, for example, the reputation of Romans and their lack of sex being quite the opposite in reality. Continuing on from this reception theme, Joanna Paul, a well renowned Classical Receptionist, writes about the potential archaeology has to offer her field in Chapter 13, 'Archaeology, Historical Fiction and Classical Reception Studies'. There does seem to be a focus on more traditional classical reception – with mention of literature and Margaret Atwood's 2005 novel *The Penelopiad* and not enough attention paid to the archaeology of Pompeii in Paul's writing. Nonetheless, Paul provides a position for archaeology in reception studies: an improver of the record, or to fill the gaps. Here, more focus could have been paid to prehistoric archaeology and its exploration in pop culture. Andrew Elliott challenges the vitalness of the accuracy that academics believe is so important for modern conceptions of their field in his article 'Imagining the Past Through Film and Cultural Studies' in Chapter 14. He posits that because historical narratives are so heavily debated in academia, the expectations on non-specialist directors, screenwriters and producers to accurately portray a period is almost impossible. Even when details are confirmed by academics, these ideas often come from contemporary elitist perspectives, making them inherently flawed. Elliott provides a valid point here, but the intrinsically subjective nature of history and archaeology, as stated multiple times throughout this book, challenges his critique. A collaboration between academics and non-specialists is vital for accurate and entertaining pieces of media and a lack of collaboration is a weakness on both sides that needs fixing.

Adrian Praetzellis writes the conclusionary article for this edited volume in Chapter 15, 'Archaeological Narrative and Humour in a Post-Truth World: The Obligatory Sum-Up Article'. He correctly picking out multiple themes that run throughout: narrative as method, empathy whilst keeping objective, artistic expression and the risks and advantages of using imagined narratives. This book will be the first of many publications discussing the use of fiction in archaeological research and discourse. Henson, Ripanti, Osti and Given are particular credits to this volume, providing novel and exciting approaches to studying the past accompanied by strong examples and methodologies. Despite the several flaws present in this edited book, it provides an interesting starting point for using fiction as a method for archaeological investigation. One would hope broader and more detailed discussions will flourish from this book,

with even newer and more novel approaches appearing. In future volumes, these themes could have been split into two separate books – one on using fiction in archaeology and another using fiction for archaeology. In the former, introducing fiction as an archaeological methodology into different geographical centres of archaeology and different kinds of archaeology – environmental, anthropological, landscape – more explicitly could be an interesting way to introduce this methodology to the field more, as well as providing clear ways to do put it into practice. In the latter, more engagement could be made with classical reception theories and other areas of culture which can present gaps in research or in the dissemination of archaeological research. For example, engaging with children's literature and media could highlight some key areas that need improvement in research and also see some of the ways authors and content creators get past these barriers.

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