Big Histories, Human Lives: Tackling Problems of Scale in Archaeology

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Abstract
We may be due an Ice Age any day now as the earth wobbles through its complex long-term cycles of axial tilt, precession, and eccentricity. Not only are these cycles—on the scale of hundreds of thousands of years—poorly understood, but they intersect with other trends that could have an equally massive effect on our planet. It does not take an Ice Age, however, to change our lives; we are so accustomed to our present-day situation that even shorter term, relatively small changes may create havoc. Such fluctuations, no matter what their size, must be understood at broad scales of analysis similar to those contemplated in this book for human history generally. Big Histories, Human Lives is a re-theorizing of scale and change in human history as they are related to the big picture—the relationships between time, the environment, and all of human experience on earth.

The contributors consider something archaeologists seldom think about: the intersection of micro-scale human experience with large-scale and long-term histories. Did history unfold in different ways for different people? What are the central historical processes behind such unfoldings? How are we to understand these events and their relevance to us today?

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Contemporary archaeologists commonly acknowledge moral responsibilities to the descendants of the subjects whose remains they disturb. There has been comparatively little reflection within the professional community on whether they have duties to the dead themselves. I argue that doing wrong to the dead is not reducible to harming their successors; that there are ways in which archaeologists can wrong the dead qua the living persons they once were; and that nevertheless this may not have such radical implications for the practice of archaeology as might first suggest...

One lingering problem is the difficulty of bringing disparate datasets together into digital databases, and this is explored using an example from the Digital Archaeological Atlas of the Holy Land (DAAHL). This limitation suggests that while cyber-archaeology is not applicable to some archaeological questions, it is particularly well suited to questions concerning long-term change, or “grand narratives.” Following this example is a theoretical introduction to grand narratives in archaeological theory. (2013). Big histories, human lives: Tackling problems of scale in archaeology. Santa Fe: School for Advanced Research Press.