Trading Archaeology’s Past: The Historiography of Archaeology

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Main content

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In the past decade archeologists have become increasingly concerned with the history of their own discipline—with the origin and evolution of archeological concepts, with records of past archeological research programs, and with the sociopolitical contexts in which specific ideas either flourished or were negated. This volume is regarded by its editor as a "sampler" of the problems and issues that researchers both from within the discipline of archeology and from other disciplines (history, philosophy) deem of importance to the historiography of archeology. In 17 essays, 15 of which are written by American scholars, the book successfully conveys the complexity of the relevant issues.

Archeologists have a clear bias in favor of dealing with the recently published and the newly excavated. Archeologists dig in the ground, they rarely dig into any archives and too seldom study the documents of earlier excavations. Jonathan E. Reyman informs us that the published record of Chaco Canyon in fact places limits on our understanding of the area. His study of the unpublished materials not only casts a wholly new light on the area but reveals findings at times contradictory to the published record. Marvin D. Jeter detailing the archeology of Arkansas and Michael Tarabulski reviewing a 50-year-old film on an archeological project in Algeria reiterate the same theme. Christenson observes that perhaps 90% of all archeologists who have ever lived are alive today. How does one write a contemporary history of the field without being offensive to the living? Lester Embree, a philosopher, suggests in his essay that he has an answer. Using what he refers to as social...

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