

REVIEW

Book Reviews

Artefacts of History. Archaeology, Historiography and Indian Pasts, by Sudeshna Guha. Sage: New Delhi, 2014. £47.50 (hard cover). ISBN: 9789351501640

Greece and Rome at the Crystal Palace. Classical Sculpture and Modern Britain, 1854–1936, by Kate Nicholls. Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2014. £70.00 (hard cover). ISBN: 9780199596461

Carl W. Blegen. Personal and Archaeological Narratives, edited by Natalia Vogeikoff-Brogan, Jack L. Davis and Vasiliki Florou. Lockwood Press: Atlanta, GA, 2015. \$34.95 (hard cover). ISBN: 9781937040239

Tim Murray

The history of archaeology in India has been particularly well-served in recent years with several path-breaking publications revisiting old stories (such as the ‘discovery’ of the Indus Civilization) and newer ones – particularly discussions of the implications of partition for the archaeology of the sub-continent. Given the very long and indeed very complex history of the region, we have every right to expect that further research into the treasure-trove of sub-continental historiography will reveal more.

Artefacts of History. Archaeology, Historiography and Indian Pasts is a strong contribution to this ongoing process. Guha, who has already made a substantial contribution to the historiography of archaeology in India through her research into Marshall’s photographic images, takes that discourse in new directions with a focus on the practices and governance of Indian archaeology as they have evolved. Guha’s stance is unashamedly post-colonial and mostly post-processual, as she unravels the cultural and political context of archaeology since colonization by the British through what is effectively a linked series of case studies. Here the focus is on the fascinating iterative process of Indian archaeology as linked to the concerns of western archaeology (particularly those of origins and connections between East and west) and philology, and those of a more local nature which reflect a concern with demonstrating the autochthonous origins of civilization in South Asia.

But there is also a useful concentration on the evolving epistemology of archaeology in India, particularly that practiced by Indian archaeologists. The core of Guha’s approach is laid out in an introductory chapter (Histories, Historiography, Archaeology) which covers what is now pretty familiar ground in an even-handed kind of way.

Very sensibly, Guha’s account seeks to demonstrate the importance of the history of archaeology for understanding the genesis and subsequent development of both archaeology and what is glossed as ‘heritage’. In this she is generally successful, the more so in the sense that she has a clear vision of the social responsibilities of archaeologists as purveyors of socially and culturally important information.

The book steadily evolves over five chapters which deal with (in succession) a history of antiquarianism in South Asia (especially a concern with understanding the origins of Indian civilization); the connections between India and the search for the origins of civilization in Western Asia (with a focus on the curation of Assyrian antiquities in India, a fascinating subject of its own); a re-investigation of the links between archaeology and philology (but with a significant expansion of conventional accounts in histories of archaeology by incorporating a focus on the perspectives of contemporary Indian scholars); an interesting discussion of Childe, Wheeler and Piggott on the nature and meaning of the Indus Civilization (incorporating a very successful integration of archival evidence with the material ‘facts on the ground’); an insightful chapter on the more recent historiography of archaeology in India, with a particular focus on the theoretical contexts of the work of both Indian archaeologists and what Guha considers to be the manifest shortcomings of western approaches to the archaeology of India.

Guha closes this interesting book with a personal vision for the archaeology of India that incorporates the values of a historical perspective on the sociology of archaeological knowledge, that charts a way between the poles of objectivism and relativism in archaeological epistemology.

This is an ambitious book, which for the most part succeeds pretty well. Its impact is lessened by a surprising limitation

in her engagement with contemporary historiography (there being more to this than the work of the late Bruce Trigger and the foundational studies of antiquarianism by Alain Schnapp). Also the production values of the book are uneven – poor quality paper, photographic illustrations that are difficult to discern, and the occasional error of fact: Childe taught at Maryborough Grammar School, not Marlborough! But in the end these shortcomings are more than outweighed by Guha's scholarship. This is a book to regularly return to in the expectation of finding more insights into the history of archaeology.

Nicholls' book is part of the very interesting Classical Presences series published by OUP. As such it presents an enlightening discussion of the 'presence' of reproductions of famous pieces of classical sculpture at the Crystal Palace after its relocation to Sydenham, South London (1854–1936). Nichols is very clear about the core concern of the book: "the preposterous relationships forged with the material remains of classical antiquity by people in the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century, under the glass roof of this self-proclaimed 'modern' venue" (1). Nicholls seeks answers to two questions: "What did displays to a mass audience at the Crystal Palace do to the status and understanding of classical sculpture and architecture? And what impact did classical culture have on the Crystal Palace" (1). The substance of her answers is found in the first two Parts of the book. Part I explores the genesis of a new audience for the classical world (and the development of display technologies to 'connect' with them. Part II considers the marvelously rich and complex interactions between a reconstructed classical past and the society and culture of nineteenth-century Britain. Key to Nicholls' approach is her understanding of the importance of this new 'mass' audience in charting the reception of knowledge about the classical world in modern societies. This fascinating study draws on a very broad assemblage of documents about the place and the recollections of visitors and commentators to provide a window on how the British people responded to nearly 80 years of tumultuous social, cultural and political change through the prism of the classical world. Strongly recommended.

The volume by Vogeikoff-Brogan et al. opens with a very big claim: "Carl William Blegen (1887–1971), archaeologist and Professor of Classics at the University of Cincinnati (1927–1957), is arguably, after Heinrich Schliemann, the most famous foreign archaeologist ever to work in Greece" (1). While this is contestable (refer to Arthur Evans among others), there is little doubt that he was the standard-bearer for American archaeology in the region and was justly honored for being so. Given this fame, it is indeed curious that he has not, until this book, been the subject of a biography. Perhaps not so strange is that he left no autobiography, despite being an assiduous diarist and keeper of his personal records.

The editors have gathered ten narratives that touch on a great many aspects of Blegen's life, not least his personality and the influence he brought to bear on family, friends, colleagues and students. Blegen was a complicated, ambiguous person, at once a passionate American and a philhellene, a very public and a very private man. The ten narratives are structured chronologically covering Blegen's early life in America through to his life-long love affair with Greece. We find out about his time at Yale, his learning of the archaeologist's craft in early work in Corinthia, his fundamental contributions to the archaeology of the Mycenaean world (especially at Troy and Pylos), and the institutional framework for his research. Reading the results of all this research into rich archives and oral histories made me wonder again why Blegen had escaped his biographers before now. It also made me wonder about the extent of the untapped riches that remain and how much more there is to learn about the history of archaeology in Greece.

That said, the editors have done Blegen proud. This is more than a festschrift compiled by former students (indeed none of the editors were taught by him). It is a reflection about the social and cultural context of classical archaeology during a major period of its growth and development. Strongly recommended.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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