

**Catherine J. Frieman, *Archaeology as History. Telling Stories from a Fragmented Past*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2023, pp. 75, € 19.84, ISBN 9781009055567**

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*Archaeology as History: Telling Stories from a Fragmented Past (Elements in Historical Theory and Practice)* is the latest volume by the Australian archaeologist Catherine Frieman.

From its very title, the work makes explicit the two poles around which the discussion will revolve: on the one hand, how archaeology gathers information and extracts meaning from a complex and fragmented past; and on the other hand, how it constructs ‘narratives of humanity’ that influence the present. This volume provides a historical overview of the theoretical and research techniques developed within the discipline of archaeology since its inception and delves into the state-of-the-art of methodologies, excavation techniques, and material analysis available today. The author extensively discusses the necessity for archaeology, a now mature discipline, to assume ethical and civil responsibilities regarding its primary research objective, namely the reconstruction of humanity’s pasts. Much importance is given to research lines and “engaged archaeologies” (p. 68), which have emerged in recent decades. These latter approaches, by giving value both to the study of marginalized and minority communities and social groups and gender and environmental issues, demonstrate how archaeology can and should be a tool for a collective and alternative history of the past, diverging from the dominant narrative. The volume, organized according to “[...] the journalist’s standard set of who, what, where, when, how and why [...]” (p. 1) provides an overview of the development of archaeological thought and scientific methodologies through which archaeology, since its inception, has sought to answer the questions it has asked over time. The first chapter, *Telling Stories about Places*, is dedicated to field research, namely, the identification and collection of archaeological information through survey and excavation. Emerging archaeology

recognized the importance of reconstructing the geological and environmental context in which archaeological data are immersed and from which they are extracted during excavation, moving beyond an initial phase of almost antiquarian interest in ancient objects. A brief description of the most important methodologies and techniques for reconstructing the paleoenvironment is provided. The author further explores a typical characteristic that has shaped the broad array of methods and technologies now at archaeology's disposal, notably the adoption of analytical tools and methodologies from geological, and natural sciences, and, since the latter half of the last century, from informatics, starting with the stratigraphic method borrowed from geology. The second chapter, *Telling Stories about Things*, addresses the artifact: studying its meaning through the analysis of its material characteristics, understanding its associations within the archaeological context, its functions, and its cultural value. The perspective shifted notably from a primarily antiquarian interest phase between the 18th and 19th centuries to viewing the artifact within its geographic and chronological context, organized into classes and typologies, gaining momentum from the mid-20th century onwards. The use of new analytical methodologies and collaboration with natural and geological disciplines has allowed the formulation of new, more precise, and complex questions and answers. The third chapter, *Telling Stories about Time*, delves into the theme of dating in archaeology, illustrating both relative and absolute dating methods. The fourth chapter, *Telling Stories about People*, focuses on the importance of the analysis of human remains, particularly the study of funerary contexts, capable of providing valuable biological, physiological, and cultural information at both individual and population levels. An emphasis is placed on the importance of reflecting on the excavation, recovery, analysis, conservation, and potential museum exhibition of human remains. In fact, until a few decades ago, little attention was paid to the recovery and subsequent preservation of human remains, and there was little sensitivity to the religious and communal value that descendants or members of local communities could attribute to the remnants of their ancestors. The final chapter, *Telling Stories that Change the World*, concentrates on reflecting on the very meaning of archaeology, emphasizing its profound ethical and social responsibilities.

The sentence “[...] the assertion that the past holds power, that our interpretations have resonance in the present, and that this can be operationalized to achieve tangible changes in the contemporary world has been widely accepted” (p. 61) perhaps exemplifies the second pole around which this volume revolves. How archaeology can and should construct narratives of the past in contrast with the dominant one, characterized by nationalist and neocolonial tendencies that seek to flatten and silence local perspectives belonging to minority social groups and problematize economic and environmental issues. The author describes the instrumentalization, whether conscious or not, of archaeology for the creation of historical-scientific legitimacy in favor of ideologies and economic thoughts to impose a singular narrative of the past, attempting to propagate it into the present and future. The chapter accounts for contemporary archaeological subdisciplines that move in the opposite direction of this narrative of history: the multiplicity of approaches and movements of engaged archaeologists is described, working with and for ethnic, cultural, and sexually discriminated minorities, and addressing the dynamics between humans and the environment in relation to ongoing climate change. With these words: “[...] archaeological narratives do not just tell us how things once were but help us understand how they are now and might be in years to come. With an uncertain future before us, these sorts of stories are more important than ever” (p. 75), the author proposes a reflection on how archaeology has been and is narrating the past, emphasizing the need to move away from the dominant narrative towards a multiplicity of complementary stories. These narratives not only help us understand the history of humanity and societies but also contribute to building better ones. This text is undoubtedly an important resource, accompanied by rich iconographic and bibliographic materials, for those who wish to approach the discipline of archaeology. The text undoubtedly serves as a significant resource, complemented by rich iconographic and bibliographic materials, for those seeking to delve into the discipline of archaeology. It offers a comprehensive and nuanced overview of both the evolution of archaeological thought and the methodological advancements that have shaped archaeology into what it is today. Through this, it vividly portrays the dynamism and multiplicity of perspectives characterizing the

field. Moreover, it illuminates archaeology's relevance not only within its research domain but also in the contemporary political and cultural landscape. As a discipline, archaeology fosters awareness by reconstructing the diverse pasts of human history, thereby highlighting the ecological and social responsibilities, risks, and opportunities facing modern communities.

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