

1998

## Book Review: Maritime Archaeology: A Reader of Substantive and Theoretical Contributions edited by Lawrence E. Babits and Hans Van Tilburg

David J. Stewart

Follow this and additional works at: <http://orb.binghamton.edu/neha>

 Part of the [Archaeological Anthropology Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Stewart, David J. (1998) "Book Review: Maritime Archaeology: A Reader of Substantive and Theoretical Contributions edited by Lawrence E. Babits and Hans Van Tilburg," *Northeast Historical Archaeology*: Vol. 27 27, Article 11.  
<https://doi.org/10.22191/neha/vol27/iss1/11> Available at: <http://orb.binghamton.edu/neha/vol27/iss1/11>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The ORB). It has been accepted for inclusion in Northeast Historical Archaeology by an authorized editor of The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The ORB). For more information, please contact [ORB@binghamton.edu](mailto:ORB@binghamton.edu).

## Book Reviews

**MARITIME ARCHAEOLOGY: A READER OF SUBSTANTIVE AND THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS, edited by Lawrence E. Babits and Hans Van Tilburg 1998, The Plenum Series in Underwater Archaeology, Plenum Press, New York and London, 590 pages, 87 illus., 49.50 (paper).**

Reviewed by David J. Stewart

Maritime archaeology has been an established field of study at the university level for over two decades. Florida State University, East Carolina University, and Texas A&M University were early pioneers in developing courses in maritime archaeology, while the latter became the first to grant advanced degrees in nautical archaeology in 1976. In recent years, these universities have been joined by a host of others; a casual search of the World Wide Web today yields over fifty institutions offering classes or degrees. In addition, maritime archaeological projects ranging from the study of submerged Palaeolithic sites off the coast of Florida to the excavation of English exploration vessels in Australia are being conducted throughout the world. The past decade has seen advances in technology that are allowing archaeologists to study shipwrecks in the deep ocean for the first time. This is an excellent record of accomplishment for a discipline that scholars only began studying seriously in the 1950s and 1960s. Yet, despite the explosive growth of maritime archaeology over the past few decades, there has been no really good textbook to introduce both students and the public to the field. This is one of the goals that the editors of *Maritime Archaeology: A Reader of Substantive and Theoretical Contributions* seek to accomplish.

To this end, Babits and Van Tilburg have selected a wide range of papers dealing with the history and development of maritime archaeology. The papers are grouped conveniently into sections such as Areal Studies, Research Design, and Interpretation and Exhibition. Within each section, readers should

not expect to find a collection of the most up-to-date writings on maritime archaeology. Rather, the editors have chosen articles from the early days of the discipline up to the present, allowing the reader to gain an understanding of the development of thought in particular areas of maritime archaeology. While some readers may wish for a more state of the art study, others will find the historical perspective on the growth of maritime archaeology extremely useful.

In general, the papers are well chosen, although there are some peculiarities. For instance, although the book is justifiably dedicated to George F. Bass, Keith Muckelroy, Reynold Ruppe, and Peter Throckmorton, it contains only a few examples of their work. Three selections from Muckelroy's 1978 book *Maritime Archaeology* are reprinted, along with a single article each by Ruppe and Throckmorton. No articles by Bass are included, a surprising omission given his standing in the field. On the other hand, the editors should be commended for providing so many out-of-print or otherwise difficult to find articles. An excellent example of this is René Baucaire's 1964 article "The Fos Underwater Excavations" (pp. 9–15), which describes one of the earliest underwater excavations conducted by archaeologists. Although Baucaire was one of the first archaeologists to learn to dive, his work has largely been forgotten by modern scholars. With the reprint of this article, Baucaire should finally receive more credit for his pioneering efforts in underwater archaeology.

The book's real strength is the insight that it gives into important issues facing maritime archaeology today. Certainly the most widely publicized issue, if not the most crucial, concerns treasure hunting. Anyone familiar with underwater work knows of the great rift between archaeologists and treasure hunters, characterized by mistrust and invective on both sides. Babits and Van Tilburg present both sides of the issue, although more space is devoted to the archaeological position. Peter Throckmorton's 1990 article entitled "The World's Worst Investment: The Economics of Treasure Hunting with Real-Life Compar-

isons" (pp. 75–83), presents a typical archaeological point of view, arguing against any form of treasure hunting. Rather than simply railing against treasure hunters, however, Throckmorton tries a different approach: he analyzes the cost of treasure hunting expeditions to show that most yield little or no return on the investment. Thus, Throckmorton concludes, people have no reason to put their money into treasure hunting, as it will almost certainly be lost. This approach, although eminently logical, overlooks a fundamental aspect of human behavior. Despite the odds, people are willing to put their money into projects that promise quick return: witness the money invested in lotteries, in spite of the millions-to-one odds of winning. Along with the possibility, however remote, of quick riches, the romantic appeal of searching for sunken treasure also enhances the image of treasure hunting, making people willing to invest money in such schemes.

On the other side of the issue, R. Duncan Mathewson, III provides an interesting point of view: that of an archaeologist who enlisted with a treasure hunting expedition. In Mathewson's case, the expedition turned out to be Mel Fisher's successful search for the *Nuestra Señora de Atocha*, a sunken Spanish galleon that yielded one of the most spectacular underwater treasure troves ever found. In his article "Archaeology on Trial" (pp. 97–104), Mathewson defends his decision to work with Fisher's group, claiming that otherwise no archaeological information would ever have been recorded during the excavation. Despite Mathewson's attempts to provide archaeological control, the fact that he worked with treasure hunters led him to be ostracized by the majority of the archaeological community. Mathewson makes some good points, but does not provide any evidence to back up his claim that the recording of artifacts in situ was done according to archaeological standards. The one map he provides is very schematic, showing only the general locations of the *Atocha* and the *Santa Margarita*, along with a few notations denoting the positions of larger objects such as cannon and anchors. Also, Mathewson justifies the salvage of these wrecks by repeating the common treasure hunter mantra that the wrecks were rapidly deteriorating and soon would have been lost entirely. This claim is open to debate; if so

many artifacts remained over 300 years after their sinking, the shipwreck sites had certainly attained some measure of equilibrium within their environment. Schiffer (1987) has shown that site formation processes are extremely complex, and that it is overly simplistic to assume that the longer an artifact remains in archaeological context the more deteriorated it becomes. Problems such as these weaken the force of Mathewson's argument in support of archaeologists working with treasure hunters, leaving him open to attacks by mainstream nautical archaeologists. This is in many ways a shame, as dialog and cooperation between archaeologists and treasure hunters is certainly needed. The simple fact is that treasure hunters are not going to go away. Archaeologists, whether they like it or not (and I personally oppose all looting of archaeological sites, whether on land or under water) are going to have to learn to compromise. This will also require, on the part of treasure hunters, a willingness to compromise as well.

The debate between archaeologists and treasure hunters brings up a second major issue in maritime archaeology, that of public responsibility. In his series preface, J. Barto Arnold III stresses the need for maritime archaeologists to work with sport divers, who are often interested in participating in archaeological projects (p. vii). Arnold also contends that maritime archaeologists must do a better job of publishing their finds in a timely manner. Both are valid points, as maritime archaeologists, like their terrestrial colleagues, have often done a poor job of reporting their work to the public. When the subject comes up on internet discussion lists such as Sub-Arch, a common complaint of treasure hunters and avocational archaeologists alike is that professional archaeologists simply do not publish anything that is interesting to the public. This is in many ways a valid complaint, and one that can be corrected. Maritime archaeologists are certainly capable of reaching out to the public, be it through articles in popular magazines, television programs, or the World Wide Web. This is not to argue that archaeologists should concentrate on popular publication to the exclusion of scholarship. Rather, they must find a way to do both. Archaeologists still need to produce highly detailed and

technical reports of their work—that is what scholarship is all about. At the same time, however, they must realize that such reports have a very limited audience. By providing more works aimed at a popular audience, maritime archaeologists can improve public understanding of their work, which can only benefit the field. At present, with so much government funding lost because of budget cutbacks, it is more important than ever that nautical archaeologists justify their existence to the public if they hope to raise money for projects. Fortunately, capturing the imagination, and thus the pocketbooks, of the public should be relatively easy for maritime archaeologists, as they deal with a subject that is inherently fascinating. Christopher F. Amer and Carl Steen's article "The South Carolina Hobby Diver Program" (pp. 65–69), provides an excellent example of how archaeologists can conduct public outreach.

The third major issue which comes to mind from reading the book concerns the theoretical development of maritime archaeology. In recent years, both terrestrial and maritime archaeologists have criticized the field because of its lack of theoretical development (e.g., Fenwick 1996). In the early days of maritime archaeology, many excavations were conducted with little consideration for how they contributed to the overall body of knowledge. Maritime archaeologists proved extremely adept at developing techniques for excavating underwater sites, but on the whole neglected to develop a coherent body of theory for their discipline. This period of growth is normal for any new scientific field; terrestrial archaeology itself went through just such a period, with early archaeologists seeking spectacular finds rather than developing theoretical paradigms. It is now approaching 40 years, however, since George Bass conducted the first true underwater archaeological shipwreck excavation at Cape Gelidonya, Turkey, and maritime archaeology still trails terrestrial archaeology in theoretical development. In the hopes of encouraging theoretical thinking in the minds of maritime archaeologists, Babits and Van Tilburg have included several articles on archaeological theory even though they do not deal specifically with maritime subjects. T. C. Chamberlin's classic article "The Method of

Multiple Working Hypotheses" (pp. 145–154), Fred T. Plog's "Archaeological Methods" (pp. 175–185), and "Middle-Range Theory in Archaeology: A Critical Review of Origins and Applications" (pp. 205–221), by L. Mark Raab and Albert C. Goodyear, are a few of the notable papers whose inclusion in this volume should stimulate the thinking of maritime archaeologists. In addition, several maritime-oriented papers that illustrate sound theoretical and methodological practices by practitioners within the field are included. One of the best of these is "Considerations for Research Design in Shipwreck Archaeology" (pp. 233–239), by Daniel J. Lenihan and Larry Murphy. Lenihan and Murphy note the lack of theoretical development within maritime archaeology, providing a study of their own as support. The authors studied articles in the 1978–1979 issues of the *International Journal of Nautical Archaeology*, along with CRM reports, and determined that maritime archaeologists almost never describe their research designs. Instead, most articles provided sections covering historical background, methods (typically diving technology), and descriptions of artifacts. Interpretation was often entirely lacking or limited to just a few sentences. In an effort to see if this situation has changed in the last decade, I duplicated parts of Lenihan and Murphy's study, looking through *International Journal of Nautical Archaeology* articles from 1996 and 1997. Out of almost 40 articles examined, not one specifically mentioned research design. Sections on interpretation, however, had been expanded, showing some progress. Nevertheless, it remains a valid criticism that maritime archaeologists do not typically take the time to describe formal research goals or tell how their projects contribute to the overall body of archaeological knowledge. This is a situation that needs to be remedied in the future, if maritime archaeology is to mature as a discipline.

Overall, *Maritime Archaeology: A Reader of Substantive and Theoretical Contributions* provides a welcome introduction to the field, useful to both serious students and the public alike. Maritime archaeology has indeed come a long way from its beginnings in antiquarian salvage efforts. This book provides a timely insight into the growth and present state of the

discipline. Most important, it allows the reader to understand the main issues and challenges facing maritime archaeology at this time. The future of the field will be determined by how the maritime archaeologists of today answer these questions before them.

## References

Fenwick, Valerie.

- 1996 Editorial. *International Journal of Nautical Archaeology* 25(1): 1-3.

Schiffer, Michael B.

- 1987 *Formation Processes of the Archaeological Record*. University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque.

David J. Stewart earned an M.A. from the Nautical Archaeology Program at Texas A&M University, and is currently a Ph.D. student at Boston University.

David J. Stewart

Department of Archaeology

Boston University

675 Commonwealth Avenue

Boston, MA 02215

djs1@bu.edu

**THE GREAT WARPATH: BRITISH MILITARY SITES FROM ALBANY TO CROWN POINT** by David Starbuck, 1999, University Press of New England, Hanover, NH, 224 pages, 100 illus., 50 figs., 19.95 (paper).

Reviewed by Charles L. Fisher

The celebration of the American Bicentennial had an enormous effect on historical scholarship of the Revolutionary War. Today, the important historical questions are no longer centered only on battlefield strategies but require investigating larger issues of colonial society (Royster 1979; Kim 1982; Higginbotham 1987). Military sites are products of

past societies and express the ideas of those societies, which are complex and often contradictory. Contemporary archaeologists interested in military sites are aware of the dangers of militarism, excessive nationalism, and the general "drums and guns" history of scholars of previous eras.

Archaeologists have argued that anthropological archaeology can provide new information about armed conflict, military sites, and colonial society through a detailed description of the ordinary soldier involved in these colonial conflicts. The daily life and material conditions of the soldiers; their huts, diet, clothing, camps, and forts have been areas where archaeology has contributed to our current understanding of this period (Poirier 1976; Rutsch and Peters 1977; Fisher 1983; Parrrington, Schenck, and Thibaut 1984; Seidel 1987; Howe 1991). Archaeology has provided information that may confirm or contradict historical accounts, but always results in a richer account of the past.

The archaeological orientation of *The Great Warpath* causes the author to ask a series of questions in the process of telling his story. Readers will find information regarding the different living conditions of officers and their men, the process of adapting European forts to the American landscape, the fit between the ideal, proscribed method and the real, archaeological evidence of camp life, and the construction methods employed in the impermanent military architecture that is largely undocumented through traditional sources.

The interpretation of the multiple meanings of artifacts to the people who made, acquired, used, and discarded them awaits future studies of the sites and collections presented here. The extensive sociological and ethnographic literature on excessive alcohol consumption and the development of work discipline needs to be applied to the large quantities of wine bottle glass found at military sites. The large numbers of these artifacts represent soldiers resistance to authority and the "total institution" of the military. While officer's social drinking was accepted, drinking among the soldiers was discouraged and punished. At the same time, strong drink