

*An Introduction to Museum Archaeology*

Hedley Swain

Cambridge University Press

2007

ISBN 978-0-521-67796-7

This book provides a comprehensive survey of the key themes of museum archaeology, ranging from the history of archaeological collections and museums to future trends, and from collections management to exhibition design and interpretation. It is full of interesting and useful information, clear definitions of key terms and concepts, and critical discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of museums, of archaeology and of museum archaeology, all supported by plentiful references to the relevant published literature and to a wide variety of examples of archaeology museums and exhibitions from around the world. The book is based on a combination of wide reading of the extensive published literature on museum archaeology, and Swain's significant experience and contacts gained in the museum profession, notably as (former) Head of Early London History and Collections at the innovative Museum of London. It is written in an engaging and accessible style, with plenty of sign-posting and well-chosen quotations throughout. My only criticism here is the almost complete absence of illustrations in all but one of the chapters, and the evident failure of proof-readers to spot the numerous spelling, punctuation and grammatical errors (the variants on Pierre Bourdieu's name being just one example).

The poetics and politics of contemporary museum archaeology that emerge from this carefully negotiated survey are characterised by a series paradoxes. On the one hand, there is plenty for museum archaeology to be proud of. Many museums

with archaeological collections now aim to serve diverse audiences, who enjoy accessible and stimulating presentations of old things held carefully in trust for society (including exciting new discoveries), find out more about their own histories and those of others (even to the extent of reclaiming the bones and sacred objects of their ancestors), learn about the work of archaeologists, conservators and metal detectorists, and undertake significant new scientific research. On the other hand, museum archaeology still faces a long list of problems. Many museum archaeologists continue to service prolific field archaeologists and then struggle to store under-utilized excavation archives in perpetuity at tax-payers' expense, but with insufficient resources and coordination. Overtly critical post-modern museum displays can confuse visitors, while inherently conservative visual displays of re-contextualized and over-restored cultural remains, appropriated and dispersed by representatives of former colonial powers, can perpetuate politically-biased views of ancient civilizations, and hero-myths about early archaeologists. Furthermore, such displays can render mass audiences passive viewers of authoritative, homogenized and commoditized pasts that bear limited relation to the concerns of contemporary society or archaeology, and do little to shift the negative preconceptions of non-museum-goers. These problems make the future of museum archaeology unsustainable, and in serious need of further adaptation to the dynamic economic and multicultural context of the twenty-first century.

By introducing the reader to these and other contemporary issues, Swain's book finally replaces Susan Pearce's (1990) *Archaeological Curatorship* as a key text for museum studies students and others considering a career in museum archaeology, and should be regarded as a benchmark against which to measure future developments in the profession.

Robin Skeates

Department of Archaeology, Durham University

Robin.Skeates@durham.ac.uk