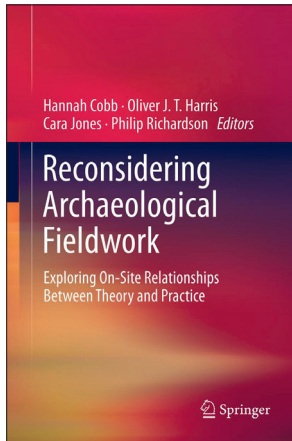


## BRIDGING THEORY AND PRACTICE



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*Reconsidering Archaeological Fieldwork: Exploring On-Site Relationships Between Theory and Practice*

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*Reconsidering Archaeological Fieldwork* is about theory and practice. Theory and practice in archaeology are often two separated entities and one needs to pick between them as attempts to integrate those two often create schizophrenic situations, ending up with a need to choose one over the other. The book in question is about that kind of dichotomous way of looking at the world – how fieldwork in archaeology is about dividing things into objects and subjects. It stems from the anxiety that something important may have slipped between the cracks during archaeological fieldwork. How to record when you are being submersed into the material reality and are facing with the problem of how to capture it all? How to distinguish between what is important and what is not?

The book in question is a collection of articles that consists of eleven chapters including 20 contributors mainly from Europe (mostly the UK), but also from the USA. It is based on sessions in two conferences that took place in 2007: the European Association of Archaeologists meeting in Croatia and the Theoretical Archaeology Group conference in the UK. The authors are mainly archaeologists actively engaged in fieldwork, mainly salvage excavations. It is a cross-section of archaeological fieldwork as the articles have wide temporal range, handling topics from the Stone Age to the 19th century excavations.

Introduction is the first of the book's eleven chapters. It is written by the editors – Hannah Cobb from the University of Manchester; Oliver J. T. Harris from the University of Leicester; Cara Jones and Phil Richardson from Archaeology Scotland. The last chapter is a sort of a reflection/conclusion written by Sarah May, who is also closely connected to fieldwork, by being one of the developers of a digital system to help document archaeological fieldwork. The rest of the chapters in the book can roughly be divided into four parts based on the topic.

The first two chapters are devoted to the history and present state of archaeological field practice in the United Kingdom and Ireland. Using the example of Brix-

ham cave, the first stratigraphical excavations in the history of archaeology, Geoff Carver points out how the divide between practice and theory dates back to the very root of archaeology. In the third chapter Reuben Thorpe discusses rescue archaeology in the UK analysing how reflexivity, which was a part of archaeological practice in the 1970s and 80s has now been lost as post-processualism has failed to engage with fieldwork within consumer capitalism. Brendon Wilkins, in the fourth chapter, compares the current state of Irish archaeology with the situation in the UK. He also addresses the contradictions that arise from applying consumer capitalism models to archaeological fieldwork – the case where developers have no interest in the quality of archaeological product they are purchasing, which in turn results in low value of archaeological work. In these conditions the divide between private sector and the academia is inevitable, producing two very different archaeologies where one is unaware of the latest interpretive ideas and the other is clueless about the latest excavation results (see also Bradley 2006).

The next part is dedicated to the way knowledge emerges in the practice of fieldwork. Marianne Lönn, in the fifth chapter, addresses archaeological fieldwork in the context of Swedish construction archaeology drawing examples from the prehistoric sites. Her article addresses the way in which new knowledge emerges from the practice of fieldwork and how it eventually becomes common knowledge. Even though at first glance theory and practice do not fit together as material reality and the world of social models seem far apart, one is to discover that the connection between the two is deeper. In the sixth chapter Cara Jones and Philip Richardson reflect upon how unfamiliar features at archaeological excavations cause great discomfort and how one seeks to find familiar and therefore safe features. As rescue excavations are extremely pressured by time and finance issues, there is an almost subconscious wish to find easy answers which in turn results in overlooking actual complexities. They exemplify their claim by using an example of field drains dating from the 18th – 19th century in the UK.

The last articles centre on how to overcome or rather how to take into account the divide between theory and practice. John and Patricia Carman find a way to overcome the theory/practice divide by applying phenomenology to their research of historic battlefields in the UK. Members of the Ardnamurchan Transitions Project explored how context sheets can be improved in order to take into account different narratives and the way these narratives change and develop at a single excavation site in Scotland. Rebecca Yamin's piece of writing is an interesting collection of vignettes written by the members of a field team that excavated historic lots at New Jersey dating from the 19th century. Vignettes are a way to give more value to the field report and also a way to have different viewpoints incorporated into what otherwise would be a one sided account. In the last chapter Mark Leone *et al.* give an example of how engaging non-archaeologist into archaeological practice through public excavations and display of artefacts in public spaces in the USA can be mutually beneficial and valuable.

The main strength of this book lies in the personal views of experienced fieldworkers to the state of (salvage) excavations practice in their countries and also the way it has developed. What makes *Reconsidering archaeological fieldwork* special is the authors' strong interest in improving fieldwork in every aspect that is reflected on each page. That interest binds separate articles into one single enjoyable whole.

There are few writings where theory and practice are examined in correlation. As May in her chapter states: fieldwork is a topic archaeologists hardly ever get tired of discussing, at the same time books on that topic are rarely published as those qualified are busy doing fieldwork and have no time to write about their everyday practices. Another issue is that too often field archaeologists take the stance that they need to record, while interpreting is left for the users (mainly academic archaeologists) of 'facts' collected (Bradley 1997). That stance is misguided because theory and practice are the two sides of the same coin and one does not work without the other. The only question is whether one acknowledges the theoretical underpinnings of actions or these are subconscious. *Reconsidering archaeological fieldwork* tries to understand and find ways to acknowledge practice/theory divide from the viewpoint of practitioners in order to improve archaeological fieldwork under the pressure of consumer capitalism.

The main weakness of the book is that too many complex topics are addressed in a short format. The book historicises the problems of theory and practice, also addressing the current situation on a larger scale. Furthermore, case studies of how theory/practice divides works on the level of specific excavations are discussed. At the same time it is also a strength as it allows to address different aspects of the theory/practice divide together in a logical narrative where articles are not just independent pieces of writing, but rather form a whole.

To conclude, *Reconsidering archaeological fieldwork* is a one of a kind look on archaeological fieldwork that addresses the way in which fieldwork can both define, and, in turn, be defined by theory. It raises valid questions about the nature of archaeological documentation – the way in which material realities get translated. Therefore, the audience addressed is all of those who are passionate about the practice of fieldwork. Even if the book in question does not offer solutions, at the very least it offers the joy of recognition as the problem of being underfunded, pressed for time and still trying to do the very best is a universal problem of development-led archaeology.

## REFERENCES

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