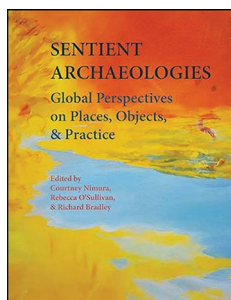


COURTNEY NIMURA, REBECCA O’SULLIVAN & RICHARD BRADLEY (ed.). 2023. *Sentient archaeologies: global perspectives on places, objects, and practice*. Oxford: Oxbow; 978-1-78925-932-2 hardback £49.50.



Although not explicitly stated on the front or back cover, this volume is dedicated to Chris Gosden from Oxford University. Courtney Nimura, Rebecca O’Sullivan and Richard Bradley edited this tribute to the man who “has greatly influenced the direction of global archaeology” (p.3), bringing together 40 contributors working in areas as different and distant as Oceania, Africa, Asia and Europe and whose careers were influenced in one way or another by the British archaeologist. “Friendships are essential for creative discussions” (Pollard p.121) and Gosden seems to have stimulated many of those discussions with theoretical concerns in his friends and colleagues,

whether that is walking in the rainforest of Borneo (Barker & Hunt, Chapter 5), travelling by bus through China (Pollard, Chapter 15) or supervising DPhil students at Oxford (Talbot, Chapter 14).

The book’s title alludes to the thought-provoking question posed by Gosden and Pollard in 2021: ‘Is the universe sentient? What implications might this have for archaeology?’; I also highly recommend their seminar on this question in podcast format (Gosden & Pollard 2016). One may wonder what such a ‘sentient archaeology’ would entail. The editors suggest that archaeology is a living discipline, constantly responsive to changes in its immediate environment and that *Sentient archaeologies* “acknowledges the significant number of researchers across the world who are integrating ideas informed by relational epistemologies and mutually constructive ontologies into their world, from the initial stage of project design all the way down to post-excavation interpretation” (p.1). The book’s wide-ranging content is somewhat uneven, despite the helpful organisation of 29 short chapters into three broad themes (People and places; Form and flow; History and heritage). And, despite its stated premise, not all of the contributions align with a sentient archaeology in those terms, as some approaches are more traditional (or less informed by relational epistemologies) than others. Their common denominator seems to be only the connection with Gosden.

Nevertheless, the book contains insightful discussions and cross-cutting themes that provide better guidelines for defining a sentient archaeology. It positions itself as a multi-scale archaeology, ranging from landscapes to objects. Additionally, several contributions focus on long-term processes (or *longe durée*), as explored by Amy Bogaard’s article in which she encourages us to see “Agricultural places as processes” (Chapter 7). Drawing on Alfred Whitehead’s philosophy and case studies such as Çatalhöyük (Türkiye) and Knossos (Crete), the author discusses progressive models applied to the development of agriculture based on the concept of abrupt and disruptive revolutions. I also recommend Laurent Olivier’s thorough analysis of salt extraction in the Seille Valley (France) and its impact on the landscape over time, a ‘Landscape’s memory’ (Chapter 9) dating to the Iron Age. Furthermore, it is

worth noting the significant contribution made by Howard and Frances Morphy in Chapter 21, which focuses on the survival of certain placenames through various memory social mechanisms, such as the songs of the Yulnu (Northern Australia). These ‘sung landscapes’ are factual representations that link places and lineages of the Yulnu complex society over time. This case study successfully combines archaeological, geomorphological, linguistic and anthropological data to demonstrate the interdisciplinary nature of a sentient archaeology.

Processes, such as trajectories or biographies, are also addressed at the object scale. The analysis of use traces of a China Iron Age’s Ding vessel (Li, Chapter 16) and the historicalisation of the collection of Aboriginal ground-stone tools collected by current farmers in the Murray Darling Basin (Australia) (Fullagar, Hayes & Pardoe, Chapter 18) are good examples of this. The book also provides an interesting analysis of a specific artwork (*In Dreams the Heart* by Mellor) that was acquired by the National Museums of Scotland. The piece of art is examined from its origin, including its material and ancestral history, to its current display and ‘impermanence’ in the institution (Knowles, Chapter 27).

In addition, a sentient archaeology necessitates a focus on materials based on their perceptible characteristics and a broader, relational perspective, as proposed by Sarah Downum and Duncan Garrow (Chapter 12) in their analysis of Celtic Art. Their approach surpasses traditional metal-centred methods by analysing motifs present in various materials, including antler-bone, ceramics, stone and wood. From an animistic perspective, Richard Bradley (Chapter 10) deepens these relationships by postulating that metals and bones—found in peat bogs and similar archaeological sites from the Mesolithic to the Viking Age—could have been conceived as living matter given in sacrifice to ensure fertility in a framework of restoration of vital balance.

It is important to acknowledge that, like all critical archaeologies, sentient archaeology is not naive. It has a memory, from a postcolonial perspective, of the colonialist processes and developments associated with the discipline and heritage (Chirikure, Chapter 17; Lilley, Chapter 24). In this vein, Lynn Meskell’s valuable reconstruction (Chapter 30, ‘Oxford intelligence’) sheds light on the disturbing involvement and espionage carried out by British archaeologists during the early part of the twentieth century in the Middle East—a political intervention that has critical consequences to this day.

Finally, the theoretical discussion of temporality and time in archaeology is undoubtedly significant in the book. The contributions of Lambros Malafouris and John Robb on this regard are indispensable (Chapters 22 & 23, respectively). Robb’s reflection, in my opinion, should be considered in all ‘ontologically oriented’ archaeologies: “people work fluidly with palettes of ontological possibilities” (p.187). In essence, we must avoid limiting our interpretations to rigid ontological frameworks. The world is perceived and inhabited in a more permeable way. Regarding permeability, it is evident that exploring other archaeologies can reveal new possibilities. These may include subtle intertextual connections, such as the one between Robb’s powerful concept of a ‘time palette’ (or ‘ontological palette’) and Creswell’s colourful oil painting ‘Waterland’ (2022) on the front and back covers of the book. Certainly, this intertextuality or subtle allusion—whether intentional or not—perfectly exemplifies the kind of relationalities to which, I infer, every thoughtful and sensitive archaeologist must be attentive.

Definitely, if I had to synthesise in a word what a sentient archaeology—or archaeologies, since it encompasses a variety of views—consists of, I would point to a common quality between that oil (as matter) and the spirit of most of the book's chapters: fluidity. That is, although not all contributions are open to relational epistemologies, most exhibit a fluidity that allows for crossing disciplinary, temporal and/or material boundaries. Each contribution does so in its own way, as all sentient things do.

## References

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