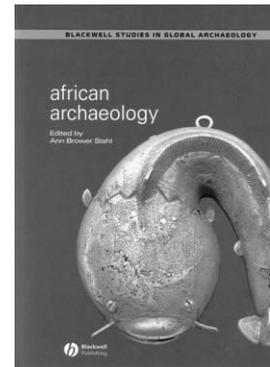


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## BOOK REVIEW

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**African Archaeology: A Critical Introduction.** By Ann Brower Stahl (ed.). Blackwell Studies in Global Archaeology 3. Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, 2005, 512 pp., 40 illustrations, index. ISBN 1-4051-0156-3 (paperback). Price \$ 36.95.

Ann Stahl has done Africanist archaeologists a service by bringing together such an exciting and varied group of scholars. “African Archaeology” is focused thoughtfully on ways in which African archaeology has been approached, as well as on current syntheses of the human past in Africa. This volume is intended for use as a text book, and the chronological and aerial coverage of the volume is broad. Thomas Plummer’s chapter on the Oldowan is a clear and balanced overview of the archaeological evidence for, and differing interpretations of, early hominin behavior in the African Oldowan. Curtis Marean, Zelalem Assefa, Hilary Deacon, Sarah Wurz and Peter Mitchell discuss aspects of life in Africa during the Acheulian, Middle and Later Stone Age and African contributions to global debates regarding the origins of modern humans. The Marean and Assefa chapter is a continent-wide survey with a discussion that emphasizes current discussions regarding archaeological correlates of modern behavior. The other two chapters focus on southern African case studies, Klasies River and Later Stone Age societies in southern Africa. These chapters provide an excellent overview of the topic by cutting-edge scholars. It is noticeable, however, that there are only four chapters on the entire Plio-Pleistocene.

With twelve of eighteen chapters devoted to Holocene topics coverage of the later periods is more complete and more multifaceted than that of the earlier periods. Augustin Holl and Diane Gifford-Gonzalez provide useful overviews and penetrating commentary on the theoretical frameworks for the study of “aquatic adaptations” and early pastoralism in northeastern Africa. Joanna Casey and Katharina Neumann continue this theme drawing on new West African case studies and a wealth of new palaeoethnobotanical data to re-

flect on the nature of, and reasons for, late and fragmented cultivation in the region. They focus on what it means to be a hunter-gatherer or early food producer in Africa, emphasizing the lack of opposition in the terms and abundance of “low level food producers” (*sensu* Bruce SMITH 2001). Early metallurgy in Africa, its social context, and changing approaches to the Bantu problem are discussed by Terry Childs, Eugenia Herbert and Manfred Eggert. Childs and Herbert provide an excellent discussion of the vexed questions of the origins and spread of metallurgy in Africa and a useful framework for thinking about variation in the social and political context of metal use. The relationship between linguistics and African archaeology has been a complex one and Eggert’s chapter on the Bantu problem is especially welcome as a balanced and thoughtful analysis of the dangers of circularity, and need for independent archaeological testing of linguistically based hypotheses. Adria LaViolette, Jeffrey Fleisher, Andrew Reid, Gilbert Pwiti, Chapurukha and Sibel Kusimba, Pierre de Maret and Scott MacEachern provide a fascinating counter-point to one another in their discussions of African urbanism, heterarchical and hierarchical societies, urban societies that have kings, others that have collective leadership, and interactions among these and relatively egalitarian, small scale agricultural and hunter-gatherer societies.

Several themes that appear distinctive of Africa, or especially well documented in Africa, run through this volume: one is environmental, social, cultural and political heterogeneity. Continued use of wild resources is emphasized by chapters on the beginnings of food production (Gifford-Gonzalez, Casey, Neumann), and those that discuss Iron Age archaeology, the Later Stone Age, and the last few thousand years (Mitchell,

de Maret, Kusimba and Kusimba, MacEachern). The difficult question of archaeological treatment of ethnicity, and issues of interaction among such disparate social and economic groups is also treated thoughtfully by many authors (Eggert, Reid, MacEachern). Highlighting the way in which the Africa archaeological record counters progressivist assumptions about the nature of archaeological change through time, especially simple progressions from hunting and gathering to farming (Casey, Neumann), or from less to more egalitarian societies (de Maret, Stahl) is a significant contribution of this volume. Finally, there is interesting treatment by several authors of diffusion as a mechanism for technical or cultural change in Africa. Neumann notes the need for serious consideration of diffusion of crops, or ideas regarding agriculture, between ancient Egypt and adjacent regions, as well as in evaluation of the origins of Ethiopian agriculture. On the other hand Childs and Herbert writing on ancient metallurgy and LaViolette and Fleisher on Sub-Saharan urbanism focus on the decrease of the role of diffusion in archaeological interpretation. This seems a healthy balance away from the extremes of emphasis on migration, diffusion, or indigenous development that have characterized African archaeology in the past.

On another note, there are hints in this volume of increasing divergence of approaches between scholars of the Plio-Pleistocene and those of more recent periods. This is naturally reflected in greater orientation towards natural sciences in the earlier periods and towards the humanities in recent times. Given recent theoretical trends, however, this gulf is wider than it has been for some time. This is evident in the orientation of this volume towards more recent periods. Because they cover so much ground, the earlier chapters are necessarily more about what we think we know than they are about how we know it. But nowhere in this volume is the gulf more evident than in Lane's discussion of the Khalahari debate (also Mitchell). In this controversial, but highly stimulating chapter, Lane points out that archaeologists with a prehistoric orientation and those with historic focus have remained on opposing sides of this issue. Because I think that ethnoarchaeology is central to the archaeological endeavor, but subject to much misunderstanding, and because Africa has contributed greatly to ethnoarchaeological research, I follow up on this point here.

As I see it, one of the great contributions of ethnoarchaeology is the recognition that all archaeological interpretation is necessarily analogical (WATSON in

GOULD & WATSON 1982, WYLIE, 1982, 2002, Lane's chapter in this volume, *cf.* GOULD in GOULD & WATSON 1982, *cf.* FAHLANDER 2004). Rigorous ethnoarchaeological approaches are, however, one of the few sources of analogy, even including FAHLANDER's (2004) science-fiction approach, that has an explicit framework for developing less urban, or less western (or whatever differs from the background of the archaeologist) approaches to archaeological interpretation. If one follows WATSON's (GOULD & WATSON 1982) views regarding the use of ethnoarchaeological information as the basis of hypotheses to explore archaeologically, any source is valid, as long as one pays careful attention to testing and confirmation of knowledge claims. Following Alison WYLIE's (1982, 2002) carefully reasoned discussion of "relational analogies", the importance of "relevance" or structural relationship between ethnographic source and archaeological subject is critical. According to this view, it should be possible to accommodate both prehistoric and historic perspectives on hunter-gatherer ethnoarchaeology.

Straw-men aside, no one concerned in the Khalahari research in the 1960's really thought of the San as prehistoric people. Ethnoarchaeologists have long assumed that only a tiny fraction of what people do in the modern world might be relevant, not the same as, but relevant, to the past. The question for debate is, as Ann STAHL (1993) has pointed out, the extent to which "relevance" is affected by historic experience. All hunter-gatherers in the world at this point have been exposed to more varied social and political experiences than would have been possible prior to the beginnings of food-production, or of the contemporary industrialized world. The question is, does it matter ethnoarchaeologically whether a hunter-gatherer family were formerly pastoralists, clients of agricultural families or even had relations of equal power with immigrating herders, as one must assume that many hunter-gatherers in northeastern Africa did? I do not think so, as long as the very specific relations between actions and material culture that one is studying in a contemporary setting are "relevant" to the archaeological question and as long as knowledge claims are rigorously made.

If you are trying to understand ways in which people might do things or the specifics of how humans without elaborate technology can subsist on the basis of wild plants and animals in a given landscape, then, as long as the people that you are studying are successfully hunting and gathering, it does not matter whether they were pastoralists in the past. If you want