

*The Reconstructed Past: Reconstructions in the Public Interpretation of Archaeology and History*

Edited by John H. Jameson, Jr. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2003; 304 pp., illustrations, photographs, notes, index; cloth \$75.00; paper \$34.95.

“To reconstruct or not to reconstruct” is the dilemma pondered throughout *The Reconstructed Past*. These useful case studies address reconstructions that have been shaped by archeology. The studies draw on sites in the United States, Europe, and the Middle East. Together, the chapters mostly support the current thinking about archeologically grounded interpretations, namely that careful thinking and interdisciplinary research can produce authentic reconstructions.

The authors bring out a number of good points. Marley Brown and Edward Chappel note that time and practice—and presumably learning from mistakes—suggest that today’s reconstructions are better than those of our predecessors. With regard to Colonial Williamsburg, Brown and Chappel suggest that the past can be “brought back” because we are “better able” to present it. To some degree our improved ability involves a paradigm shift towards accepting multifaceted, broader interpretations. This is seen in Esther White’s discussion of a reconstructed blacksmith shop at Mount Vernon. The shop contributes to the overall story of the site, and demonstrates the commitment to present more than a narrow view of the past by interpreting everyday life and stories that would be otherwise untold. All of the chapters emphasize that reconstructions are a professional undertaking in the best interest of the public.

The book promotes the idea of authentic reconstructions as an achievable goal, but dissenting views could have been presented more fully. Numerous pro-reconstruction examples were somewhat balanced by the few counterarguments. Lynn Neal discusses a nonintrusive project at Homolovi Ruins in Arizona where emergency

preservation simply buried the remains. Ronald Williamson argues the impossibility of reconstructing Iroquois longhouses due to their diversity of type and function. Here, reconstruction is equated with creating an idealized, simplified view of Iroquois culture. Other authors note the fundamental conundrum of archeologically informed reconstructions. Some sites must be destroyed in order to build their interpretations.

The discussions of computer modeling are intriguing and would have benefited from additional examples or more alternatives. Karen Brush indicates that computer-generated models of Amarna in Egypt have many of the same problems as the more traditional graphic reconstructions, but computer models have an advantage of easy modification. Models can also help visitors to visualize immense operations on a scale that visitors can manage, while hypothesizing what might have been. Despite considerable challenges of cost and technology, this kind of reconstruction offers tantalizing possibilities, particularly in conjunction with a physical site.

Issues surrounding reconstruction are a vehicle for examining contested aspects of heritage. Several case studies explicitly discuss this theme from different angles. Ann Killbrew emphasizes simplification of the past through interpretation at Qasrin, Israel. Joe Distretti and Carl Kuttruff discuss Fort Loudoun in Britain, a site with none of the original site preserved where a reconstruction was built to satisfy political and economic interests. Reconstruction is thus a tool, albeit costly and semipermanent, for staging contemporary ideas about the past and why we care about it today.

In this light, it would have been useful for more authors to discuss the impact of site evaluations on their interpretation. If reconstructions offer a stage for broader programming, particularly for education, it seems reasonable that visitor needs or desires must influence interpretation. Interpretation today encourages people to connect

with archeological resources by finding personal resonance and relevance in them. Site evaluation offers a useful perspective for archeologists who undertake reconstructions; evaluations can document whether or not the archeologists' interpretation has meaning for visitors.

As Barry Mackintosh notes in his discussion of the National Park Service's policies on reconstructions, this issue cuts to the heart of the question, "What are we here to do?" Reconstruction has had opponents and allies, another theme of the book. Bureaucracy, personalities, and, frankly, the wrong people doing the job, are repeatedly shown to tax an otherwise promising project. In Donald Linebaugh's superb discussion of Roland Wells Robbins's work, we learn that politics and personalities ultimately damaged projects despite Robbins's best intentions. For others, as Peter Fowler and Susan Mills discuss, the process offers professionals an "open air laboratory" for understanding ancient construction methods and materials. Some reconstructions enable archeologists and the public to understand sites at human scale. Overall, reconstructions are a tool for attracting and educating visitors, and linking visitors with the past.

Because this book is written without jargon and tells behind-the-scenes stories about people and places, *The Reconstructed Past* will benefit both students and professionals. The case studies and the history of applied archeology are appropriate for university or college classrooms, particularly method and theory classes. The book's themes would also interest professionals making decisions about site interpretation. The provocative case studies illuminate the dilemma of reconstruction. The chapters play off each other in a debate that encourages reader participation as the authors jostle over simplifying sites, choosing a "most significant" story at the expense of others, the contested nature of heritage, and the flexibility of presentation as an interpretive tool. While authors disagree on the finer points and, perhaps, the ethics of

reconstruction, they seem to agree that reconstructions will not leave the interpretive toolbox in the foreseeable future.

Teresa S. Moyer  
*Society for American Archaeology*

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*Thinking about Significance*

Edited by Robert J. Austin, Kathleen S. Hoffman, and George R. Ballo. Special Publication Series No. 1, Riverview: Florida Archaeological Council, Inc., 2002; 242 pp.; paper \$15.00.

The issues discussed in *Thinking about Significance* are core to the policy and practice of historic preservation. The evaluation of a property in order to make decisions about preservation (or destruction) should never be routine, as the stakes are high. The contributors to this collection of papers and proceedings from a professional development workshop sponsored by the Florida Archaeological Council in 2001 include representatives of federal and state agencies, tribes, consulting firms, and academia.

In focusing on the big question of what we consider significant and why, the editors state that the most important result of the workshop—and the clear message of this book—is that current challenges "require us to change our thinking about almost everything—the goals of archaeology, how archaeology will be practiced, what is significant, and how to incorporate the views and opinions of other ethnic groups into the decision making process."

The National Register of Historic Places, the Florida Division of Historical Resources, the Florida Department of Transportation, and the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation provide agency perspectives on the topic. The issues that are emphasized in the papers and discussion

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