

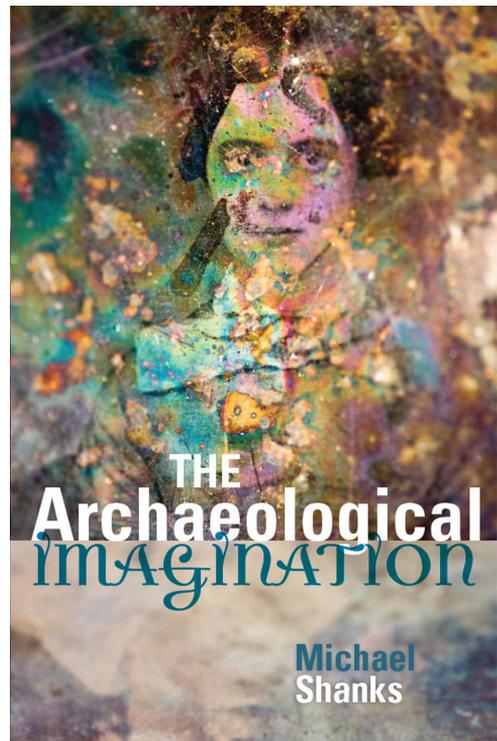
BOOK REVIEW

The Archaeological Imagination

The Archaeological Imagination, Shanks, M., Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2012.

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A study of the 'archaeological imagination' is an area of growing interest within archaeology and other fields (see, for example, Finn 2004; Wallace 2004; Schwyzer 2007), and Michael Shanks's book is a timely addition to this important and inspiring subject. Building on his *Experiencing the Past* (1992) and other collaborative works, the author makes a foray into the worlds that create and are created by archaeological remains and experiences of them, in a journey that is as much a personal reflection as a disciplinary one. He does, however, emphasise that he is expanding out from the disciplinary definition of archaeology, blending literature, current popular culture, historical texts, archaeological remains, antiquarian interpretation, philosophy, cultural geography, geology, photography, contemporary art and social theory. Shanks offers this book partly as an explanation for the popularity of archaeology in contemporary popular culture, and partly as a reworking of the history of archaeology, demonstrating that the archaeological imagination has not only pervaded modern society but is crucial to the shaping of it. Whilst it does not necessarily evoke the full extent of the archaeological imagination, it is worth reproducing Shanks's definition of it here for those unfamiliar with the concept:



To recreate the world behind the ruin in the land, to reanimate the people behind the sherd of antique pottery, a fragment of the past... a creative impulse and faculty at the heart of archaeology, but also embedded in many cultural dispositions, discourses and institutions commonly associated with modernity. The archaeological imagination is rooted in a sensibil-

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ity, a pervasive set of attitudes toward traces and remains, towards memory, time and temporality, the fabric of history (p.25).

Shanks thus greatly expands upon the realms of archaeology and of the archaeologist; indeed, as the title of the first chapter of his book states, 'we are all archaeologists now,' because of the fascination people have with the past and how this archaeological sensibility is integral to modern views and practices. This chapter, and the introduction, serve as a basic outline of the manifestation of the archaeological imagination, the social, cultural and philosophical contexts in which it is found and to which it has made a contribution, and the crossover of archaeology and other 'disciplines' noted above. This section of the book illustrates the excitement and varied nature of exploring the archaeological imagination, but Shanks presents this in such a way as to leave the reader feeling like they are in the midst of a random stream of consciousness with no real insight into the connectedness between ideas or the point or purpose of pursuing them. In order to extract the reader from this theoretical and observational deluge and demonstrate the manifestation of the archaeological imagination, Shanks's second chapter presents a case study of eighteenth and nineteenth century antiquarian explorations of the English-Scottish Border Region, particularly through the writings of Walter Scott, William Gell, Alexander Gordon and others. Close readings of antiquarian and other literary accounts unravel their meanings and how they represent the archaeological imagination at work. This is a refreshing exploration of such literature, which rejects histories of antiquarianism and archaeology that sees such endeavours as admirable in pursuit of scientific sophistication but disparaging about their romantic sensibilities. Instead, Shanks presents these works as key in the exploration of the melding of landscape, memory, identity and 'artistic' culture. Through these anti-

quaries, we are often transported between the Debatable Lands and the ruins of the Classical Mediterranean, demonstrating the expression of the archaeological imagination across place. Chapter 3 reflects upon the case study of the previous chapter by offering a semiotic and narratological reading of these antiquarian encounters (see Propp 1928). Here we see Shanks back to his usual theoretically dense discourse, which is not so much difficult to follow as leaves the reader uninterested and with the sense they have begun reading a completely different publication. Such an analysis would have benefited by being presented alongside the case study, in order to see its relevance and usefulness in examining and interpreting such materials. Chapter 4 concludes the book with a summary and identification of the predominant themes of the archaeological imagination and sensibility – *chora* (inhabited place), collection and metamorphosis. Whilst the bullet-point form of this chapter suggests Shanks ran out of time to fully discuss these themes, the reader nonetheless gets the sense of Shanks's interpretations.

Though this book is not laden with images, the majority of those provided sufficiently support the text, although it would have been better served if they were in colour, bringing to life and underscoring the vividness of the subject. The accompanying open and editable website, *archaeopaedia.com*, which is supposed to provide further resources, including a glossary, images and stories (pp.39–40), might have served as a means of expanding upon the confines of the book, but, at the time of writing this review (April 2013), it has no content and was last 'edited' in June 2012.

This book hits upon key points in the area of the archaeological imagination, demonstrating the role of archaeology in the development of modern culture, and of the importance of extending or even dismantling disciplinary boundaries. It not only serves as a case study for earlier antiquarian endeavours but also illustrates that such

antiquarian modes and media of archaeological representation have their analogues in contemporary technologies and popular culture (see, for example, pp.110–1), as part of the on-going reinvention of iterations of the archaeological imagination, thus underscoring reflexive positions in archaeological investigation today. However, there are a number of issues with Shanks's text which cause it to fall short of the exciting narrative it might have been. Firstly, it is curious that Shanks should choose to consider the specific 'origins' of the archaeological imagination through the 'discourse of threat and loss' (p.29) of the Industrial Revolution of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when such a discourse is obvious in responses to, for example, the Dissolution and Reformation in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (cf. Gerrard, 2003: 5–6; Walsham 2011), which profoundly influenced, and were influenced by, the archaeological imagination. A reference to earlier manifestations of the archaeological imagination in past societies might have also demonstrated its pervading nature and role, whilst also referring to the particularities of the archaeological imagination in various historical and geographical contexts. This would have also fulfilled Shanks's '*genealogical* quest for affinities and relationships' (p.13, original emphasis). The literature from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries considered here is relevant and well-chosen, but there is not even a cursory glance towards that bastion of the archaeological imagination: the eighteenth century Gothic novel. Nineteenth century writers Shelley and Poe are briefly referred to (p.91), and revivalist Gothic architecture does get a mention (pp.119–22).

On the subject of socio-political contextual lacunae, Shanks bizarrely overlooks, or chooses to exclude, narratives of colonial actions and ideologies that were built upon, and inherent in parts of, the archaeological imagination during the period he explores. In this vein, whilst he notes the roots of professional archaeological prac-

tice in administrative procedure (p.35), he appears insensible to its militaristic background suggestive, for example, in the language of archaeological fieldwork ('campaigns,' 'trenches,' etc.). The political identities and contexts of the antiquaries presented (male, wealthy, northern European) are somewhat of an afterthought noted in the final paragraph of the book. This could have received more attention in assessing motivations and wider implications of the archaeological imagination, as well as understanding the specificity of aspects of the archaeological sensibility, which is at times treated as a universality.

The author is, clearly, very well-versed in cross-disciplinarily literature, which he is generally able to bring to the table to make his case in examining the archaeological imagination. However, readers interested in this field cannot fail to notice the distinct absence of key references in areas he not only touches upon, but claims to examine in depth. The most obvious is, astonishingly, Hugh Trevor-Roper's (1983; 2008) seminal work on the invention of Scottish tradition and identity, despite Shanks's treatment of James Macpherson's invention of Ossianic tradition (pp.52–63) and the creation of such identities. There is no mention of Schwyzer's (2007) excellent publication on archaeology and Renaissance literature, despite its exploration of themes fundamental to Shanks's thesis. Works on the bridging of ruins of the past and ideologies of the present (e.g. Zerubavel 2003; and see many relevant papers in Fugelso 2006) are similarly overlooked, as are significant publications on themes such as the archaeological uncanny (Moshenska 2006), despite explicit reference to this phenomenon (pp.90–4). Those who are not familiar with the subject of the archaeological imagination would be advised to seek out these texts to enrich their experience of the topic, and not rely solely on Shanks's bibliography.

Whilst it is appreciated that not all facets of the archaeological imagination can be

scrutinised in what is essentially an extended essay such as this, the above points could have easily been considered within what is discussed, particularly considering Shanks's introductory claims of what he will examine, had Shanks thought a little more systematically about his presentation. Shanks does well to touch upon essentials of the subject, but if he had actually fully explored 'the archaeological imagination that *explains* as well as outlines its origin and the forms it takes' (p.27, original emphasis), we would have a much larger and richer book than the one in front of us. It is hoped, however, that this publication might go some way in furthering interests in, and the investigation of, a fascinating subject.

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