



**Extended Critical Book Review: E. H. Cline, *Three Stones Make a Wall: The Story of Archeology* (New Jersey, 2017)**

*Source: Midlands Historical Review, Book Review*

**Published: 04/03/2022**

**URL:**

**<http://www.midlandshistoricalreview.com/e-h-cline-three-stones-make-a-wall/>**

## **Extended Critical Book Review: E. H. Cline, *Three Stones Make a Wall: The Story of Archeology* (New Jersey, 2017)**

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### **Biography**

Charlotte has recently completed her PhD at the University of Manchester. Her research interests include the history of archaeology, material history and phenomenology in the nineteenth century.

As an archaeologist with decades of experience in the field and work focusing heavily on Biblical archaeology, American author and archaeologist Eric H. Cline tells a story of his discipline that is very personal. Today in the United Kingdom in the wake of what seems to be a constant barrage of bad news surrounding the British government's attitude towards archaeology and heritage, most recently the closure of Sheffield University's archaeology department, it seems we need the personal now more than ever. Voices that are at once accessible, but also knowing, remind us of the warmth and excitement behind an academic discipline at a time when 'expert' opinions are often the subject of suspicion. Cline's 2017 history of archaeology gives a reader this warmth and knowledge in a geographically wide-ranging text filled with vignettes and wonderful facts to pass on to anyone who will listen. Cline is no stranger to authoring popular works, having written accessible titles on Biblical history and ancient Egypt alongside pieces for a more academic audience. The book is divided into six themed parts and each part is in turn composed of accounts of archaeological sites, some famous to a lay reader, such as Pompeii and Troy, and some less famous such as Megiddo in Israel. Interspersed are four cameos on archaeological methods that balance technical details with accounts of this technology in action on subjects ranging from Otzi the Iceman to the Standing Stones at Durrington Walls: 'How Do You Know Where To Dig', 'How Do You Know How to Dig', 'How Old is This and Why is it Preserved', and 'Do You Get to Keep What You Find'.

The preface to this book sets out its purpose admirably. The history of archaeology is not short of documentation but still Cline sees space for what he calls 'a new introductory volume, meant for people of all ages' (p. xvii). Such a volume will be unavoidably "behind the times" should any ground-breaking discoveries be made after its publication, a fact that Cline alludes to at the end of several chapters when he notes the continuation of archaeological work at sites such as Nimrud and Ur in Iran, but with this in mind these books act as waypoints in the broader story of archaeology. They allow us to take stock of where we are at the moment they were written and to note what issues were pressing at the time. These

issues are not always transient either: Cline aims to address the continuing invocation of extra-terrestrial, supernatural or divine forces to account for seemingly unbelievable acts of human innovation (the pyramids and the Sphinx being examples) noting that this obscures 'real scientific progress' (p. xvi). This is still a salient point in today's climate of misinformation. However, Cline's main objective is to inspire his readers to remember their role in protecting our archaeological heritage from the ongoing, and increasing, looting and destruction seen across the world (pp. xvi-xvii). In a sense then this book is an exercise in community building, reminding readers of their shared history and uniting them around fantastic discoveries.

Cline begins this with Part 1, 'Early Archaeology and Archaeologists'. This is an impressive geographical journey, starting in Pompeii, Italy, and moving through Troy, Egypt and Mesopotamia before crossing the Atlantic to the Maya in the Central American jungle. Pompeii (and Herculaneum) gives Cline a chance to discuss nearly three hundred years of excavation at a single site, seeing individuals from Emmanuel Maurice de Lorraine to Giuseppe Fiorelli move through various excavation techniques including the 'looting' of de Lorraine and the far more sophisticated lost wax method of Fiorelli. Whilst this presentation could be considered overly linear, and attributes a lot to the individual, it shows that present archaeological practices did not simply appear in a vacuum.<sup>1</sup> In 'Digging up Troy' Cline covers the work of Heinrich Schliemann and the continued controversy surrounding the site which may or may not be Homer's famous city. 'From Egypt to Eternity' includes what will be the usual suspects for many (Lepsius, Mariette and Champollion), in addition to the pub-friendly fact that acid was sometimes used to dissolve the brain during mummification resulting in a 'gray gooey mass' running out of the nasal cavity (p. 51). Egyptology is also brought right up to date with the mention of muon radiography and its potential in investigating the Great pyramid. Chapters four and five, 'Mysteries in Mesopotamia' and 'Exploring the Jungles of Central America' respectively, play with chronology, starting with the more recent

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<sup>1</sup> O. M. Abadía, 'The History of Archaeology as Seen Through the Externalism-Internalism Debate: Historical Development and Current Challenges', *Bulletin of the History of Archaeology*, 19.2 (2009), p.13.

and working backwards. For Mesopotamia the reader is told first about Woolley and Mallowan of the early twentieth century, before being shepherded back to Austen Henry Layard, Henry Rawlinson, and Paul Botta. In the Central American jungle we first meet with LIDAR surveys before covering the work of John Lloyd Stephens and Frederick Catherwood in the nineteenth century. Unfortunately, there is a feeling that the discussion of the Maya civilisation is not as deep as it could, or indeed should, be. This is a trend that reappears in later chapters.

Part 2 covers the development of farming with two chapters titled 'Discovering our Earliest Ancestors' and 'First Farmers in the Fertile Crescent'. Perhaps understandably 'Earliest Ancestors' is not a comprehensive discussion of the Victorian intellectual chaos surrounding the origins of man such as can be found in A. B. Riper's *Men Among Mammoths*.<sup>2</sup> Instead it covers the work of Lee Berger in South Africa, pointing out the importance of caves in prehistoric archaeology as well as using the Chauvet, Lascaux and Altamira caves to discuss the difficulties in keeping such fragile heritage sites open to the public (pp. 112-14). Cline possibly considered these subjects a more tangible entry point to the topic. Chapter 7 unpacks Göbelen Tepe as well as Jericho and Çatalhöyük. Cline's take on Göbelen Tepe is especially no-nonsense, noting that the site has attracted outlandish interpretations 'like flies to honey' but firmly stating that it is *not* 'the Garden of Eden . . . an ancient site related to Watchers or ancient Nephilim from the Bible'. Instead, it is 'plain and simple, one of the most interesting Neolithic sites currently being investigated' (p. 118). This is pleasingly to the point given the sheer number of bizarre theories surrounding stone age material.<sup>3</sup>

Part 3, 'Excavating the Bronze Age Aegean', moves to Mycenae and includes Arthur Evans's restoration of the Dolphin Fresco at Knossos where he made the mistake of including five dolphins when he only found evidence of two. Cline highlights this as an interesting example of Occam's razor, in which the simplest solution is often correct (p. 141). Chapter 9 boldly takes on Atlantis in ten pages. Of

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<sup>2</sup> A. B. Riper, *Men among the Mammoths* (University of Chicago Press, 1993).

<sup>3</sup> J. J. Card, *Spooky Archaeology: Myth and the Science of the Past* (University of New Mexico Press, 2018).

particular focus are Santorini and Akrotiri, and Cline voices his own opinion that there is 'a kernel of truth lying at the bottom of many of the Greek myths and legends', but ultimately this chapter does not discuss many of the more outlandish claims about the city, focusing mainly on the prevalence of earthquakes and their part in the myth (p. 154). In context with the reference to pseudo-archaeology in the prologue this is disappointing, and an engaged reader might like to turn to Paul Jordan's *The Atlantis Syndrome* for in-depth discussion.<sup>4</sup> 'Enchantment Under the Sea' discusses George Bass, Cemal Pulak, and their work on the Uluburun shipwreck in the later twentieth century (p. 158). This seems like an overly brief cameo for the concept of underwater archaeology, itself a wonderfully rich and interesting area of study as evidenced by works such as Robert Marx's *The History of Underwater Exploration*.<sup>5</sup>

Part 4 ventures into what will be perhaps more familiar territory for many readers, the classical world. The first chapter, 'From Discus Throwing to Democracy', moves through three sites, Olympia, Delphi, and Athens, mixing history (over one hundred years of archaeological work at Olympia) with Cline's personal experience (his own time excavating in Athens at the Agora). Cline's enthusiasm shines through here as he explains the 'amazing feeling' of standing in Socrates's jail cell and Euripides's theatre (p. 187). Chapter 12, despite its name being directly lifted from Monty Python ('What Have the Romans Ever Done For Us'), takes a stab at a more serious topic to briefly bring up Mussolini's Italian nationalism and the considerable amount of archaeological work undertaken by the fascist regime, overseen by Corrado Ricci (pp. 191-192). Cline's final paragraph in this chapter notes that the combination of archaeology and nationalism has a 'dark side', such as when 'the past has been invoked . . . to support the superiority of one modern group over others'. His assurance that there is a 'concerted effort' to avoid such bias in archaeology today is worth making but one wonders if this oversimplifies our contemporary interactions with the archaeological past (p. 203).

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<sup>4</sup> P. Jordan, *The Atlantis Syndrome* (Sutton, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> R. F. Marx, *The History of Underwater Exploration* (Courier Corporation, 1990).

The five chapters of Part 5, 'Discoveries in the Holy Land and Beyond', are some of the most personal for Cline. Chapter 13, 'Excavating Armageddon' discusses the site of Megiddo where he spent ten seasons. It hints at transformations in the archaeological method, bringing in stratigraphy and pottery seriation, and the evidence, or lack of evidence, that 'Solomon's Stables' are a structure from a Biblical story (the spoiler that they are not will be of no surprise) (pp. 225-27). This touches on a far broader issue which is not at all unpacked; the politics and culture behind the beginnings of Biblical archaeology, its continuation, and potential to risk defining a large swathe of land and society using one book. Calling back again to the prologue, it seems a wasted opportunity not to discuss this phenomenon in the context of how archaeology can be both misused and misleading.<sup>6</sup> Chapters 14 and 15 cover the Dead Sea Scrolls and Masada respectively. The description of how the Copper Scroll could not be unrolled but instead had to be 'cut up' is especially evocative. Israeli archaeologist Yigael Yadin's work at Masada is highlighted in the context of the controversy surrounding the combination of archaeological evidence and Israeli nationalism but this is not explored in any depth and the reader is left to extrapolate what the causes and effects of this might be (pp. 249-51). Chapter 16 covers Palmyra, Petra, and Ebla and ends with the somewhat haunting reminder that these sites are not eternal and can quickly be lost to conflict or looting (p. 268). As always it seems Cline stops short of fully engaging with controversial notions; a good deal of antiquities are lost to Western collectors, both individuals and groups, reinforcing a power imbalance that is particularly pertinent considering that many of the countries Cline refers to have a history of being under colonial control.<sup>7</sup>

The final part of this epic odyssey seems somewhat anticlimactic considering it covers many archaeological sites that are lesser known than their classical

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<sup>6</sup> H. J. Franken, 'The Problem of Identification in Biblical Archaeology', *Palestine Exploration Quarterly*, 108.1 (1976), pp.3–11; D. Gange, 'Religion and Science in Late Nineteenth-Century British Egyptology', *The Historical Journal*, 49 (2006), pp.1083–1103; T. W. Davis, *Shifting Sands: The Rise and Fall of Biblical Archaeology* (Oxford University Press, 2004); H. Barnard, 'In Search of Biblical Lands: From Jerusalem to Jordan in Nineteenth-Century Photography', *Near Eastern Archaeology*, 74.2 (2011), pp.120–23.

<sup>7</sup> N. Brodie, 'Restorative Justice? Questions Arising out of the Hobby Lobby Return of Cuneiform Tablets to Iraq', *Revista Memória Em Rede*, 12 (2020), pp.87–109.

counterparts and thus also subject to a large amount of misinterpretation. Each chapter is more of a whirlwind tour than the last and it feels incredibly rushed in contrast with Part 5. Sites and civilisations discussed in Chapter 17 include the Nazca lines, the Moche, and Machu Picchu. Chapter 18 moves on to Teotihuacán, the Olmec sites of San Lorenzo, Tres Zapotes, and La Venta and the Aztec Templo Mayor with its famous rack of human skulls carved in stone. Chapter 19 is the most whirlwind-like of them all, looking at historical archaeology and veering from the discovery of a Confederate submarine called the Hunley in 1995 off the coast of South Carolina to a rather gruesome discovery of seventeenth century cannibalised remains in Jamestown to Chaco Canyon in New Mexico and then to the Chacoan culture. Finally, this chapter moves to Cahokia Mounds, built by the Mississippian culture in what is now Missouri for a mere three paragraphs on ‘the largest pre-Columbian archaeological site in the United States’ (p. 324). It is perhaps a little out of line with Cline’s discussion of other prehistoric remains throughout the text that in this instance, for this site, he states that with written records ‘we would undoubtedly be even more impressed by the Native American inhabitants responsible for these remains’ (p. 325). When so much of this book has been occupied with discussing material evidence and how archaeological sites are interpreted without written sources, to state this in reference to an entire culture and area of archaeology Cline barely covers is incredibly dismissive. This dismissal is especially problematic considering the challenges indigenous archaeology and archaeologists face in legitimising their work.<sup>8</sup>

It is in many ways hard to fault a book for a popular audience that tells compelling stories with fascinating details and carefully sets out plenty of factual information behind a discipline whose material can lend itself to some truly bizarre interpretations. However, there are things that this book does not do, or does not do enough of, that may discourage someone looking for a more critical account of archaeology’s history. In the same way that many elements of Cline’s work are welcome in the present circumstances, there are other angles that would also have

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<sup>8</sup> R. M. Van Dyke, ‘Indigenous Archaeology in a Settler-Colonist State: A View from the North American Southwest’, *Norwegian Archaeological Review*, 53.1 (2020), pp.41–58.

been welcome. There is material missing and its absence is problematic; certain archaeological areas are given a precedence that reinforces nineteenth-century narratives of Western and Mediterranean historical supremacy whereas other areas, such as South and North America, labelled as 'New World Archaeology', are left overly subsumed in tales from the Holy Land, Greece, and Rome.

Additionally, the ongoing discussion and awareness of the place of archaeological objects in the problematic structures of imperial subjugation means it is a little uncomfortable that the chapter 'Do You Get To Keep What You Find' does not fully address the cultural and historical context of colonial looting. On the other hand, this chapter does draw attention to some aspects of the present illegal trade in antiquities including the very real ethical dilemma faced by those who do not wish to encourage looting but who are often compelled to buy important or rare artefacts from dubious sources in order to avoid losing them entirely (pp. 328-29). This interlude also mentions the British museum, the Louvre, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York) as being embroiled in debates over returning 'items that they obtained in the period of European colonialism', specifically the Elgin Marbles, the Bust of Nefertiti, and the Rosetta Stone (p. 327). It is of course welcome that these big names are included in the discussion, but here the discussion is rather short. For a longer evaluation the reader will have to turn elsewhere to books such as David Hicks' *The Brutish Museums* (2020), but even with this option Cline could have woven the controversy a little deeper into his narrative. It would also have been a simple task to include at least some of the names of those who discovered the Terracotta Army in 1974: the archaeologist who named the site and realised its significance, Zhao Kangmin, and maybe the Chinese farmers, including Yang Zhifa and Wang Puzhi, who first found fragments of the terracotta warriors (pp. 275-77). As plenty of other archaeologists are named this absence stands out, especially alongside the still larger absences of many important East Asian archaeological finds and historical moments.

Although the prologue on Tutankhamun is an obvious starting point to prompt engagement with the rest of the book, a slightly deeper examination of the cultural

context behind the widespread interest in the tomb would have been welcome, rather than repeating the familiar narrative. Alternatively, the boost that Egyptian nationalism, and the country's process of reclaiming its pharaonic past, received from the tomb could also have been an interesting story to give a public audience a more unusual take.<sup>9</sup> As it stands this prologue is representative of the book as a whole; it is the story of archaeology from a mostly Western perspective and misses many of the complicated power dynamics at play.

However, it is difficult to know whether every single book squarely aimed at a popular audience has a responsibility to delve into matters of colonialism, nationalism and power comprehensively. Some readers may already be familiar with the issues, for some a few brief mentions will inspire them to seek out further material. Although it is not a book that will be actively detrimental to the cause of archaeology, there are major pieces of the puzzle missing and this should be acknowledged.

Ultimately, I side with Brian Fagan when I say that this is a hard book to review, but not for his reasons. Fagan notes he does not see who Cline has aimed this book at, but I see its audience as broad as it covers material that a western public are quite familiar with (such as the opening salvo on Tutankhamun), answers some of the basic questions on methods and theory (those four interludes that for brevity I have not covered) and includes many headline archaeological discoveries.<sup>10</sup> That there are problematic elements is certain and given that Cline sets himself up as somewhat of a polymath it would have been nice to see him tackle these with more gusto. This text does not challenge the reader to think about inequalities within archaeological practice and theory, such as the difficulties in decolonizing archaeological practice.<sup>11</sup> It is also extremely obvious where Cline's own interests are centred; the final part of the book on the 'New World' suffers for this in a way

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<sup>9</sup> D. M. Reid, *Whose Pharaohs?: Archaeology, Museums, and Egyptian National Identity from Napoleon to World War I* (London: University of California Press, 2003), pp. 16–18.

<sup>10</sup> B. Fagan, 'Review: Three Stones Make a Wall. The Story of Archaeology by E. H. Cline', *Journal of Eastern Mediterranean Archaeology and Heritage Studies*, 5 (2017), pp.454–56.

<sup>11</sup> *Indigenous Archaeologies: A Reader on Decolonization*, ed. by M. Bruchac, S. Hart, and H. M. Wobst (New York: Routledge, 2010).

that could sadly reinforce historical notions of the importance of classical and Mediterranean archaeological histories over and above alternative narratives.

Despite these not inconsiderable caveats I will end on a positive note; this is a warm and welcome overview of a vast and often impenetrable disciplinary history that gives the lay reader so much opportunity to take their own next steps into deeper, richer, literature.

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