

Shackleton, J.C. 1988 Reconstructing past shorelines as an approach to determining factors affecting shellfish collecting in the prehistoric past. In G. Bailey and J. Parkington (eds), *The Archaeology of Prehistoric Coastlines*, pp.11–21. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.

THE USES OF STYLE IN ARCHAEOLOGY, by **Margaret W. Conkey and Christine A. Hastorf** (eds). Cambridge University Press: Cambridge (1990). 124 pp., 23 figures, 3 maps, 2 tables, bibliography and index. ISBN 0 521 35061 1 (hard cover).

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The volume edited by Conkey and Hastorf is a result of a small weekend conference held at the University of Minnesota in 1985. It contains five papers by conference participants, as well as four solicited chapters providing additional views on the subject. They are preceded by a brief introduction by the editors, and the last chapter, by Wiessner, is a commentary summing up aspects of the preceding chapters that seem to relate to her own work.

A significant development in archaeology has been the realisation, during recent decades, that style, traditionally seen as an analytical tool of the discipline, also determines the way archaeology is conducted. Archaeology is generally about style, the perceived styles of artefacts, or of archaeologically perceived classes of data generally. Yet most archaeologists seem unaware of the fundamental dual role of style in their field of study, and of the effects of not adequately differentiating between the different concepts of style. On the one hand, style is perceived by the investigator, who manipulates apparent stylistic variables in order to determine what may have constituted a style, or, as Wiessner suggests in this volume, what was communicated in the past — the purpose usually being to reveal social or cultural units in the archaeological record. On the other hand, there is style as an aspect of the cultural dynamics of a living society. This book is a timely and most welcome attempt to untangle the perceptions of the roles of style in archaeology.

Conkey's competent exposition of the historical and theoretical issues of experimenting with style establishes a useful baseline for the book, but one which most authors fail to refer to effectively. Her perceptive analysis of the shortcomings of the New Archaeology is as clear as her academic candour (in admitting the accommodative nature of her own adaptationist thinking of some years ago) is impressive.

Davis, appropriately, offers an art-historical perspective, expressing a preference for descriptive flexibility to the

check-list approach of the materialist archaeologist, and rejects perceived correlation between stylistic description and archaeological entities. The 'happy ambiguity' of style is also supported by Sackett, who presents a re-appraisal of his earlier concepts of isochrestic style. His dialectic with Binford remains unresolved, but the debate with Wiessner has led to constructive re-examination on both sides.

Among the difficulties to contend with are the definitions of style by specialists of differing inclinations and preoccupations. Hodder's definition, 'a way of doing', seems of little help in this book, irrespective of its actual merits. It merely provides for Wiessner the opportunity to note that such a definition would embrace all behaviour and thus be meaningless. Hodder does indeed include genetically encoded forms of plant life (one might presume that plants lack the ability to 'do' things), so his concept of style differs significantly from that of other contributors. Since he is basically right in crediting the use of a scientific style of discourse with revealing archaeology's lack of scientific status, it would have been of benefit to archaeologists if he had presented his model in terms of the dual role of style as perceived by the editors.

Four case studies follow. Macdonald presents a multi-level analysis of mortuary data from two American Plains groups. Plog addresses stylistic variation (as he perceives it) in pottery from the American Southwest, using materialist statistics. Earle sets out to demonstrate how style and iconography can be applied to legitimising systems of political control in complex chiefdoms, such as those of Hawaii and of the Olmec. Most of this is good, solid American empiricism and confirmationism.

De Boer presents a most informative contextual case study of stylistic variability, which more than any contribution in this volume provides a glimpse of the true complexities of style. His analysis of the ontogenic, social, skill-related, functional, structural and genealogical aspects of Shipibo-Conibo art (northeastern Peru) is both authoritative and highly pertinent. The production of this geometric art is the exclusive preserve of females (by the age of 10, males pretend almost complete ignorance about the world of art), and it appears to be broadly emblematic. However, the style is at the same time 'assertive', in Wiessner's sense, with stylistic variations being attributable to factors such as striving for individual identity as a result of unsatisfactory relationships within family units: 'learning may lead to similarity or difference, depending on context'.

Finally, Wiessner poses the question, 'Is there a unity in style?' Her ethnologically derived 'emblematic' and 'assertive' styles are archaeologically ineffective concepts. Not only can ethnographically accessible styles have both functions at the same time, how would the archaeologist decide into which of her categories an archaeologically derived (ie merely postulated, not demonstrated) stylistic class falls? Wiessner, like Sackett, still seems to cling to a belief that archaeology can reliably locate ethnicity.

This volume demonstrates the existence of a healthy pluralism on the subject it seeks to explore, while providing comparatively little actual progress. The reader is left with the impressions that there are as many concepts of what style

is, as there are writers; that the 'reliable' detection of style in archaeology is a subject from which it is best to steer clear if at all possible; and that one will meet vigorous opposition with whatever one decides to say about style. The book's major omission is its total neglect of 'prehistoric' rock art (apart from a very brief reference in a footnote). After all, it is in the field of rock art studies that the ambiguity of stylistic analyses has been perceived most clearly, and that the most decisive measures to escape the gravitational pull of style have been taken. Leading protagonists now speak of a 'post-stylistic' era of rock art studies (Lorblanchet 1990:20). Surely when a discipline that had been almost synonymous with stylistic taxonomisation unceremoniously discards style, it would be timely for archaeologists to consider the reasons. It is the book's silence on this subject that renders the volume essentially superseded.

Reference

Lorblanchet, M. 1990 The archaeological significance of the results of pigment analyses in Quercy caves. *Rock Art Research* 7:19–20.

PREHISTORY AND HERITAGE: THE WRITINGS OF JOHN MULVANEY, by **D.J. Mulvaney**. Occasional Papers in Prehistory 17, Department of Prehistory, Research School of Pacific Studies, the Australian National University: Canberra (1990). ISBN 0 7315 1010 0 (paperback). Price \$27.00 (includes postage)

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The recycling under a different guise of works published long ago is not without precedent. Recently I read J. Bronowski's *William Blake and the age of revolution* and learned with some surprise towards the end that the book was simply a reprint of an earlier work by the author entitled *William Blake* to which a different Introduction had been added. Other examples that spring to mind include several repetitious papers by R.H. Mathews scattered widely among a number of, often obscure, journals.

Motives for republication are usually either to bring up to date a work which has become rather flaccid through advances in its subject matter, or to provide sought-after material that is not easily available, usually because it has gone out of print. While the latter motive is applicable to the work under review it is not the main reason. John Mulvaney, ever the historian of Australian prehistory, has assembled a selection of his writings that span four decades and reflect on various stages in his development as a prehistorian, providing not only a retrospective overview of his own career but also a commentary on how prehistory has progressed in Australia. In selecting the 44 articles presented, the author gives priority

to those that explore issues and ideas. There are a few regional research syntheses, but detailed excavation reports are excluded. The articles are arranged thematically into six sections, each introduced by the author with a page or so of comments arising from his present day views on the material. Except for the omission of some illustrations the writings themselves have not been modified from their original form. To give some idea of their range I will briefly describe a couple of papers from each section.

Australian Prehistory, the first section, contains 'The Stone Age of Australia' (1961), a remarkable paper that explored and assessed a diffuse collection of early writings by amateur and professional field workers and by other commentators. It was the first major synthesis of Australian prehistory and marked a watershed between the days of such early battlers as Davidson, McCarthy, Mitchell, Gill and Tindale, and a newer generation of archaeologists who were beginning to fill academic positions in the early 1960s. Also in this section are two short papers I had not seen before. 'Why Dig up the Past?' and 'A New Time Machine', both written for general consumption during student days at Cambridge in 1952. Though introduced rather apologetically by the author, they are very well written pieces of popular science, displaying a freshness and enthusiasm that many later papers lack. Notable among other papers in this section is 'Archaeology in Sulawesi, Indonesia' (1970). Co-authored by R.P. Soejono, this reports on a joint Australian/Indonesian expedition to Sulawesi aimed at discovering early cultural links between Australia and lands to the north, a topic always of interest to archaeologists but quite an obsession in those days.

Reflections on the human past, the second section, contains another paper exploring past links with Indonesia. In 'Beche-de-mer, Aborigines and Australian History' (1966), Mulvaney looks at a combination of archaeological and historical evidence for visits by Macassan trepang fishermen to Australia's north coast, a topic studied in detail later on by his student Campbell Macknight. An historian before becoming a prehistorian, Mulvaney always writes with particular confidence and authority when combining the two kinds of evidence, as a number of later papers in the volume demonstrate clearly. Changing views of Aboriginal culture, from Dampier to the present day, and their relationship to more general developments in social theory are discussed in 'Discovering Man's Place in Nature' (1971). This is a paper that withstands well the test of time, being as enlightening to read now as it was when written. 'What Future Our Past? Archaeology and Society in the Eighties' (1981) on the other hand fails to enthral today because, after the requisite historical introduction, it merely describes a stage in developments a decade or so ago (eg the new Shepparton Keeping Place, the proposed Gallery of Aboriginal Australia, the recently assembled Register of the National Estate); all of it yesterday's news, overtaken by more recent events but not yet old enough or sufficiently digested intellectually to be interesting as history, even though such withering broadsides as '... a plethora of moral superiority and surfcial scholarship' aimed at certain academic writings of the time may still be relevant.

The two sections that follow, *Archaeological History* and *Anthropological History*, have titles that indicate the historical