



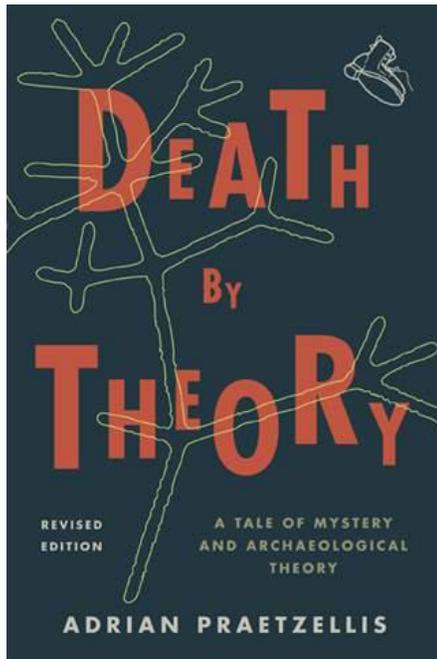
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REVIEWS



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Death by Theory
A tale of mystery and
archaeological theory

[by Adrian Praetzelis]

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An amazing and mysterious archaeological discovery in the Pacific coast of North America. Hannah Green, archaeologist, and her nephew, Sean, will be involved in a strange archaeological affair, a sort of vortex of academic envy, tourist interests, esoteric threats and racial prejudices. Taking up the "sword" (or the "Occam's Razor") of scientific archaeological theory, Hannah will have to drive dissolve the mist of misconceptions and non-scientific prejudices that surround the site to "solve the mystery". No guns, no whips, no leather hats... but a "real" picture of a contemporary archaeologist at work. But "Death by Theory" is more than that; the book of Adrian Praetzelis (Professor of Anthropology and Director of the Anthropological Studies Center at Sonoma State University, California) is an introduction to the passionate, but sometimes hard and complicated, field of theoretical archaeology.

Through the dialogues among the characters, Hannah, Sean and professor Ian Tulliver, the author deals with the most important theoretical topics of the discipline. As threads are elegantly interlaced to

create a precious and lasting weave, the mixture of fictional characters created by Adrian Praetzellis and the real archaeologists cited in the text creates a very interesting and original literary product of what the author himself defines as "the unappreciated field of archaeology/mystery/textbook".

"The archaeology of the past twenty-five years has assimilated the theoretical debates of at least the past century, from structuralism and hermeneutics to phenomenology. The pace of assimilation has been rapid. Topics are adopted, burn brightly, and fade with amazing speed. As a result, the historical depth of different theoretical approaches is fairly thin. Like all science, as archaeology adopts new approaches others are forgotten" (Jones 2009: 106). In this sense, "Death by theory" results in being a valid approach to the development of archaeological theory, at least in its key-points, during the last century of archaeological investigation. Archaeology is not a hard science; indeed, like other social sciences, it follows an accumulative development not strictly progressive. Because of its soft nature (soft science), the discipline today needs, more than ever, important historiographic and theoretical contributions.

The book of Professor Praetzellis is not an academic essay (this is not the author's goal), but offers the reader a correct explanation of the different archaeological theories through the words of the novel's protagonist. The "archaeological mystery" imagined by the author (we have to remember that "Death by theory" is also a novel) corresponds to a precise evaluation of the theoretical status of archaeological science. Page by page the reader, captivated by the development of the mystery tale -the fiction part of the book-, finds out how real archaeology is and how real archaeologists work.

In the first pages of the book, the author addresses, through the words of one of the main characters, one of the crucial theoretical questions of contemporary archaeological investigation: "is archaeology a science or isn't it?" We return to the disputed classification of science in hard sciences and soft sciences. This theoretical topic gained importance and relevance after the loss of innocence due to the development of New Archaeology and the following criticism of Processual Archaeology. Praetzellis is clear on this issue: "this science or not-a-science business is a bit of a false dichotomy. Archaeology isn't a science in the same way that chemistry is. Listen! The scientific method works best when people can test their ideas by making predictions and seeing if things turn out the way they expect. [...] Archaeologists can make some predictive

statements [...]. But people aren't as predictable as chemicals, and they don't follow universal laws of behaviour that we can use to predict – or should I say retro-dict – what they did in the past”.

Following his best way of story-telling, the author builds up a tale in which archaeological fieldwork and method seem like a police investigation, where detail analysis, scientific training and the rejection of both personal and academic prejudices result in the key for comprehending both the archaeological evidence and the criminal evidence. There's no doubt that adventurer-archaeologists, anti-nazi or tomb raiders had been an effective formula of fun for the public in adventure films, novels, and video games, but archaeology is something more than that, maybe it's much more.

Professor Praetzellis offers us a simple but well written story, a story almost believable if we remember the most famous archaeological frauds and fakes, from the “Piltdown man” to the Spanish case of Iruña Veleia. As an archaeologist I enjoyed the precision of the scientific character of the book and the focus on the most recent -and sometimes controversial- theoretical key-points in archaeological research; as a reader I enjoyed overall the light and educated but effective sense of humour of the author (for example: “for as Hannah well knew, if you put archaeologists within striking distance of free food, it disappears faster than sand through a quarter-inch shaker screen”) and the use of illustrations: one of my favourites is “The history of archaeology (as viewed via headgear)”.

Several times, us archaeologists have had to deal with political pressures (“just as archaeologists don't interpret their sites in an intellectual vacuum, neither do they work in a political void”), so the hard relationship between archaeology and nationalism is another topic that Praetzellis addresses, taking for example the Near East area: “while many North Americans think of preserving the evidence of their country's history as a pastime for the overeducated and underemployed, in Israel archaeology and national identity are inextricably bound. Nationhood is quite literally a matter of life and death”.

Archaeological theory is strictly linked with the history of the discipline, with men and women who developed new approaches to the study of material evidence. Praetzellis, in the course of the novel, presents to the readers the most important archaeologists, those personalities who shaped the development of the discipline, from Thomsen and his Three Ages System, to Ian Hodder and his excavation

at Çatalhöyük, going through to Marija Gimbutas and the "Old Europe", Lewis Binford and his middle range theory, New Archaeology and V. Gordon Childe... At the same time archaeology, especially in North America, is linked with the development of anthropological theory, so the author underlines the importance of some concepts borrowed from anthropology to archaeology like determinism, gender and feminist critique of archaeology, agency, the traditional anthropological classification of societies (band societies, segmentary societies, chiefdoms and state societies), cultural relativity, emic-etic approach, and the crucial relationship between archaeology (the science and the scientists) and Native American communities that today live in North America, like the Hopi: on the one hand "a lot of Hopi think that archaeology is fine [...], because it gives them more information about their clan migrations and how they got to be on the mesa where they live now. Not that they need archaeology to confirm that. They already have oral histories and sacred stories. But some places are out of bounds", and on the other hand "...a site could be more important than just the information that we archaeologists can get out of it. And sometimes that information just shouldn't be out there for everyone to see".

The book is constituted by 10 chapters, an epilogue, some "talking points", a glossary and bibliography. The whole product is perfectly assimilable to students, professional archaeologists and everyone who has an interest in archaeology. Good scientific popularization is neither a simple task nor a marginal field (or at least, it shouldn't be), far from the "pure" scientific investigation. In the case of archaeology, a non-vulgar popularization is a necessary task today more than ever, with the increase of urbanization, literacy and the improvement of technologies that make archaeology accessible to a great portion of the world's population. An archaeology too far from society, isolated in a hidden "ivory tower" is neither a social science, nor history or anthropology.

The author's idea of archaeology is clear: "remember, it's more important to start out in archaeology by getting an understanding of its logic than by memorizing who invaded whom and which culture's pots have that squiggly line around the top". This approach to understanding the discipline is quite different from the canonical approach of culture-historical archaeology that still today reigns in Departments of Archaeology of several Universities, at least in Europe (or, maybe more correctly, in Mediterranean Europe).

At the end of the book we can read this sentence "... archaeology can do no more than tell stories about the past. Some are stories of harmony, others of discord. Some pass the test of Occam's razor, others don't. Some sound plausible but have no data to back them up". Praetzellis told us a story about the past, about how archaeologists interpret the past, about the theoretical knots of the discipline and how archaeologists can solve them. Praetzellis also gave us something more: an interesting "archaeological mystery tale" and a good lesson in archaeology.

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