

the other, it remained the poor cousin of Egyptian and Mesopotamian scholarly research. Whilst the lack of monumental architecture, a deciphered script, or depictions of elites may have dissuaded a number of scholars, it has presented a group of hardy archaeologists with the challenge of understanding an early complex society from excavation and survey data alone.



Wright's book, *The ancient Indus: urbanism, economy and society*, aims to do this, presenting in detail the archaeological evidence from a broad sweep of sites, sources and periods. Ranging from the development of agriculture and the domestication of animals and plants at Mehrgarh to the breakdown of urban society, the core chapters of the book cover the key periods in sequential order. It begins with an in-depth look at the palaeogeography and hydrology of the Greater Indus region, and the varied topographical and climatic conditions within which this civilisation emerged. It goes on to explore the origins of sedentism and the movement of settlements from the upland areas of Baluchistan to the Indus plain itself. Subsequent chapters examine the function, morphology and political organisation of the urban centres; a heavy focus on what Wright terms 'agro-pastoral and craft-producing economies'; long distance trade; the social landscape of the Indus; and its religion and ideology. The book ends on a discussion of the breakdown of urban society.

The real strength of *The ancient Indus* is the focus on new research that allows the book to break from the traditional Wheeler-derived paradigms of statehood, rigid planning and hereditary elites, and shift the focus onto ideas of city-states, competing groups of elites, and urban-rural dichotomies. The reconstruction of manufacturing processes and techniques bring the artefacts to life in a way that few other fields can match. Indeed, it is Wright's analysis of craft specialisation — in particular seals, and the terracotta and stone figurines from Harappa and Mohenjo-daro — that are the stand-out features of the book. Decades of archaeological and ethnographic work by a number of scholars culminate here in a highly detailed record of not only how such artefacts were produced, but also the debate generated. Craft specialisation is Wright's

area of expertise, and it shows through in the chapters on craft-producing economies.

Wright's references to her own work within the Indus, ranging from excavating at Mehrgarh as a graduate student to conducting her own survey within the Beas River lend an air of competence with the material, as well as adding a personal touch to such a detailed book. While some may be put off by the use of the first-person within textbooks, to others it creates an air of informality. It allows the reader to understand that these are the interpretations of an individual, and not necessarily the collective, agreed norms. This leads to one of the few criticisms of the book: that Wright tends to shy away from some of the more contentious, and interesting, debates within the subject. For instance, the issue of whether social, political and artefactual homogeneity is achieved through co-operation or coercion. Or that the 'decline' of the Indus is really only a collapse of the urban infrastructure — most artefactual, subsistence and architectural facets of the Indus are maintained, and even developed, on the peripheries. The lack of theoretical debate underpinning the archaeological interpretation means that at times *The ancient Indus* can seem a little dry and data heavy. However, this should not detract from the valuable archaeological information that lies within. Currently, no other book offers such an in-depth review of Indus studies.

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CHRISTOPHER EVANS with JUDITH PETTIGREW, YARJUNG KROMCHAI TAMU & MARK TURIN. *Grounding knowledge / walking land: archaeological research and ethno-historical identity in central Nepal*. xii+212 pages, 117 illustrations, 12 tables. 2009. Cambridge: McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research; 978-1-902937-50-2 hardback £40.

This volume is part interim archaeological field report, part archaeological travelogue, part interim anthropological field report, and part local heritage impact study; and all these rather disparate sections are bound together by the search for origins of the Tamu-mai or



Gurung people of Nepal. The central theme of the book can perhaps best be summed up in what Evans calls ‘*the construction of the past in the present*’ (p. 185). The multi-disciplinary field project on which this work is based developed in the 1990s from anthropological explorations, and is closely linked to readings of the oral history or *pye* of the Tamu-mai, which is the cornerstone of their identity and sense of historical origins. This means that much of the archaeological survey and excavation is driven (explicitly or implicitly) by concerns of historical geography — interesting in itself, but contributing to what Evans clearly recognises as the major debate surrounding the use of archaeology to directly answer questions of origin and ethnicity.

Archaeologists with field projects in South Asia, and many other parts of the world, will sympathise with the difficulties of carrying out fieldwork in times and areas of political instability and unrest with the very real threat of physical danger leading to the disruption and even cessation of survey and excavation. Cultural tensions and local misunderstandings will also be familiar, but the sheer physical demands and access issues faced by Evans and team make quite astounding reading. The archaeological travelogue sections of the volume are fascinating and provide an interesting insight into the lengths that this team had to go to obtain archaeological data. Sadly, the whole field project was cut short by political developments, leaving many areas where more and different work would be highly desirable.

Each of the five chapters deals with a different aspect of the project — archaeological excavation, survey or the different anthropological and ethnographic ventures — accompanied by a more general introductory and concluding chapter by Evans which discuss the theoretical framework of the project and present some key results or conclusions. Of course there could have been other ways of organising the volume, but given the need to cover so much diverse information and take into account the different project protagonists this is a reasonable way to structure such a work.

Chapter 2 alone would make very interesting reading for anyone intending to use ethnography in their work, particularly within archaeology, or those who are interested in local impacts and the importance of archaeology. For me, one of the highlights of the book was the delightful discussion of what archaeology and anthropology are and how they differ from

each other, by Yarjung Kromchai Tamu, the lead shaman of the expedition (and also an ex-Gurkha). Yarjung also provides a very neat summary of the tensions between ‘scientific’ proof, the rationale for believing in the age of oral histories, and the need to show great antiquity of roots and origins in an area where ethnic tensions are at least partly predicated on ‘belonging’. This is a very individual and personal account of the importance of history and archaeology, and also the ways in which heritage can affect local people. The flip side of this is that Yarjung’s rhetoric leads readers to wonder whether the archaeological work is being ‘subverted’ to support the oral histories and historical claims where it suits the Tamu shamans, and then disregarded as not going far enough (to provide the proper or ‘real’ proof), as it was cut short through political insecurity in the region. For archaeologists and ethnographers this brings into focus the much-discussed issue of how we might reconcile the ‘scientific’ objective approach of archaeology with the subjectivity of working with particular peoples who believe absolutely in their intuition and their oral histories — who is to say one view is more important or more real?

Two things marred my enjoyment of this volume: firstly, there is no index, and given the vast range of material covered and geographical scope of the volume, this would have been very useful; and secondly, I strongly object to the use of the word ‘Aryan’ as a cultural or ethnic description, as in: ‘*southern Aryan people*’ (p. 5) — this is casually and carelessly repeating accepted wisdom without properly examining the roots or accuracy of such descriptors. In a volume about origins and identity in South Asia it is critical that labels such as ‘Aryan’ are challenged and explored and such a lack of awareness of current debate within and outside South Asia really did detract from my support for this otherwise very sympathetic work.

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BARBARA E. BARICH. *Antica Africa: alle origine delle società* (Studia Archaeologica 171). 432 pages, 126 illustrations, 17 colour plates, 5 tables. 2010. Rome: L’Erma di Bretschneider; 978–88–8265–547–1 hardback €95.

Recently published syntheses on African archaeology (e.g. Phillipson 2005; Barham & Mitchell 2008)