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African Connections: Archaeological Perspectives on Africa and the Wider World

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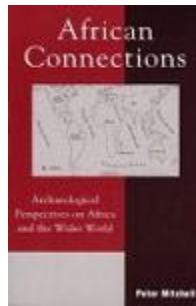
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Book Review



H-NET BOOK REVIEW

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Peter Mitchell. *African Connections: Archaeological Perspectives on Africa and the Wider World*. African Archaeology Series. Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2005. xiv + 309 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, index. \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 0-7591-0258-9; \$34.95 (paper), ISBN 0-7591-0259-7.

Reviewed for H-SAfrica by Andrew B. Smith, Department of Archaeology, University of Cape Town

Out of Africa Always Something New ("Ex Africa Semper Aliquid Novi")

We can easily see this book, the seventh volume in AltaMira's African Archaeology Series, as an extension of Mitchell's chapter 13 on the archaeology of colonialism.[1] In preparing the material on the colonial period at the tip of Africa, Mitchell must have come face to face with the wider continental realities.

Let me say at the outset that this is a well-researched and superbly referenced work that will be good background for any student looking for essay material on Africa and connections with the rest of the world. But more than that, it is a good read of the later history of Africa from an archaeological perspective. Being based in Oxford and having access to the Bodleian Library collection must have made life considerably easier than having to struggle with local provincial African libraries. With fifty three pages of bibliography there is little of importance that has slipped by Mitchell's gaze.

Mitchell leads us through an introduction to Africa's geography to set the stage for how connections were built up. He deals first with farming systems, indigenous and exotic, then looks toward the east, first with the Red Sea Corridor, and wider to the Indian Ocean. North Africa and its connections to sub-Saharan Africa are then tackled, before focusing on the Atlantic. The archaeology of the diaspora of what he calls "Out-of-Africa 3" is then discussed, and the book finishes with a review of Africa's later archaeological problems and prospects.

One area that might have been included in the section on the archaeology of slavery (chapter 6), or as part of the summing up discussion in chapter 8, is what social repercussions there have been in the present. For example, Bruner has shown that the past of Elmina Castle is contested space, where African-Americans have wanted to keep the castle as a shrine to the many people shipped and lost to the Americas, while local Ghanaians who have virtually no memory of slavery only want jobs.[2] Ironically, the locals see the black Americans as rich people, whom they give the epithet *obruni* ("whiteman"), and see them as lucky to have become Americans.

Another example of contestation is in the recent excavations at Prestwich Place in Cape Town. Unmarked graves of hundreds of skeletons, exposed during development for new buildings, have been championed by local activists as those of "slaves" who never had a voice in their life, so they want the grave sites left alone. The irony is that in death these skeletons finally have a chance to speak by offering themselves to scientific analyses for forensic work on isotopes, pathologies, and reconstructed life histories of Cape Town's underclass of the late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth-centuries.

While most of the book is concerned with the last 2000 years of Africa's history, earlier connections are raised; not the least is the "Out-of-Africa 2" hypothesis. Connections of Africa with the Near East are mentioned, but nothing on the possibility of the Indian subcontinent's native peoples, such as the Andaman Islanders, being descended from an early African diaspora, even when recognizing that Australia had to have been colonized by sea-going people (p. 30).[3]

Mitchell also subscribes to the indigenous domestication of African cattle model (p. 39). This does not take into account that nowhere else have cattle or small stock been domesticated outside an agricultural environment, and that hunters taking up stock husbandry always have role models to follow. On page 140, Mitchell is reluctant to accept that iron was independently discovered in Africa. If he accepts that sheep and goats had to come from the Near East (p. 230), what makes cattle so different?[4]

Considerable attention is focused on the historical archaeology of South Africa, as this is where the greatest amount of research has taken place. The Portuguese, however, were longer in Africa than the Dutch. Mitchell (p. 129) recognizes that the "Portuguese period remains little explored archaeologically" and offers only one paragraph on Luanda, whose settlement was established in 1575 (p. 186).

Mitchell hypothesizes that "it seems by no means impossible that late Roman North Africa had access to West African gold" (p. 143). I believe this to be unlikely, as the introduction of the camel was instrumental in the Saharan gold trade, and this only occurred after the Roman period. Probably most of Roman gold came from Nubia (the land of the Blemmyes). A question that might be asked is did the Garamantes learn the use of the camel from the Romans? The answers to these questions might be provided by doing chemical analyses on Roman gold, and awaiting the results of the excavations at the ancient Garamantes capital, Garama.

Having compressed an amazing amount of information into 241 pages of text, this tour-de-force will be a welcome addition to any Africanist's library, and is highly recommended for graduate student use. I hope that African historians get to know about it, as archaeology is too often seen by them as a Cinderella discipline.

Notes

[1]. Peter Mitchell, *The Archaeology of Southern Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

[2]. E. M. Bruner, "Tourism in Ghana: The Representations of Slavery and the Return of the Black Diaspora," *American Anthropologist* 98 no. 2 (1996): pp. 290-304.

[3]. L. L. Cavalli-Sforza, *Genes, Peoples and Languages* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 2000): p. 171; S. Oppenheimer, *Out of Africa's Eden: The Peopling of the World* (Cape Town: Jonathan Ball, 2003): p. 157.

[4]. A. B. Smith, *African Herders: Emergence of Pastoral Traditions* (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2005).

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