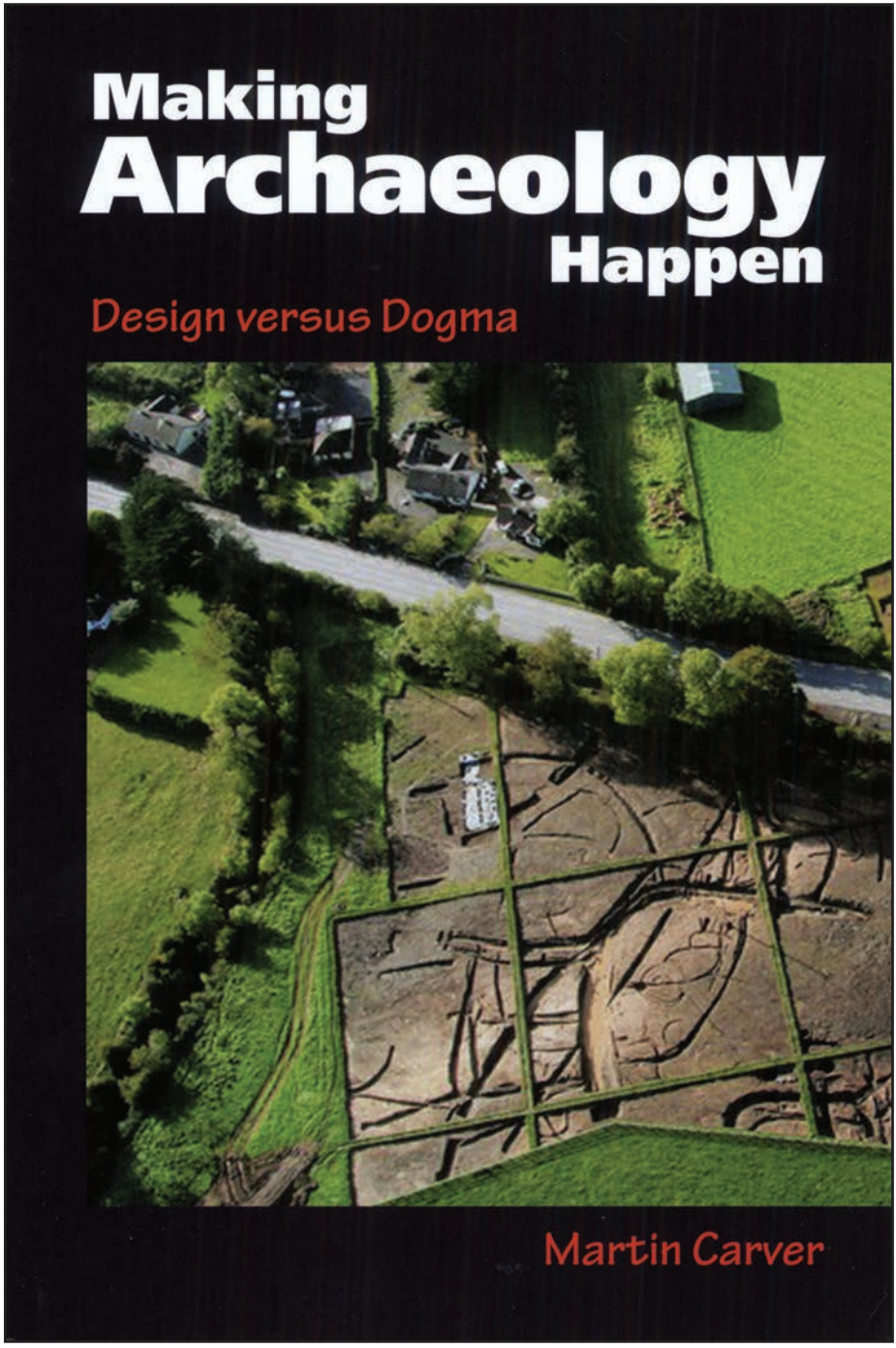

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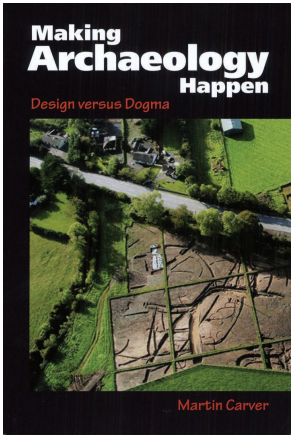

Making Archaeology Happen: Design versus Dogma

Marvin Carver. 2011. Left Coast Press. 184 pp., 30 figures, 6 tables, references, index. $94.00 (cloth), $29.95 (paper or eBook).

Reviewed by Dr. Thomas E. Emerson, State Archaeologist and Director, Illinois State Archaeological Survey, Prairie Research Institute, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Prefaced by a brief reminiscence likening his 2010 Rhind Lecture essays, published here, to a chat with colleagues in a bar at the end of the day, Martin Carver lays out, no holds barred, his thoughts on the current state of field archaeology and what it must do to recover it's vitality. Carver (p. 10) believes that "archaeological practice has become unduly fossilized,...unambitious, unquestioning, standardized, resigned to a low quality and wedded to default systems..." (the "dogma" of his subtitle). His essays are a blunt and telling assessment from an ex-army officer turned archaeologist who planned and carried out one of the premier archaeological field investigations of our times at the great Anglo-Saxon royal burial site of Sutton Hoo. They are enlivened by Carver's trenchant, sometimes acerbic, asides that make his observations so quotable.

The introductory essay, *A Visit to the Ancestors,* may be unsettling to readers for whom ancestor worship is alive and well. In an eclectic tour of the development of archaeological methodologies, icons such as Pitt-Rivers and Wheeler, and more recent theorists such as Binford and Hodder, are found to have feet of clay. Many early standard excavations strategies such as test pits and the box system are shown to grow out of local site and social conditions, the nature of labor, and the types of questions being asked. In the US, the test square becomes sanctified within Binford's agenda of scientific sampling. In Carver's view, field archaeology has become "single-minded" following the classic "one-method fits all" approach.

Carver laments that archaeology has been "captured" in "ding-dong" academic debates of science vs. art, of competing interpretations, on the nature of reasoning, and in grand theory. His goal is to reinstall field archaeology as the central axis of the discipline—and to show that field archaeology must be driven by project designs that encompass research objectives, the archaeological terrain, and the social, economic, and political context in which we operate. He extensively explores the ramifications of these variables on real-life archaeological methods in Chapter 4, to show archaeologists have seldom followed a uniform methodology, regardless of claims to the contrary.

Carver is not one to hold his opinions close to his chest—in his first essay he lays out a number of key principles in a series of one-liners on doing archaeology that resonate throughout the volume: the importance of flexibility and opportunism; the need to focus on "appropriate" rather than "correct" field methods; the inhibiting force of standardization; and the need to recognize that our product is new knowledge about the past, and that the discipline is a historical pursuit deploying scientific procedures in a social arena.

His second and third essays move us rapidly from technique to example. *Dialogues with Terrains* briefly outlines the diverse nature of archaeological deposits and the ever more rapidly evolving field and lab technologies that archaeologists can employ to discover them. This 22-page review may seem brief in a volume dedicated to "doing field archaeology" but it is intended to make a point, not exhaust the topic. Those interested in a more detailed discussion of this topic can read nearly 500 pages on doing archaeology in his volume, *Archaeological Investigation* (2009, Routledge, London).

The variance in social context is explored in three examples, Viking Dublin, the New York African Burial Ground, and at Prohear, an Iron Age Cambodian cemetery. His interpretation of these case studies supports his contention that the past should be preserved and exploited only for the public benefit—more interestingly he asserts that although in each case the relevant laws treated the "past" as "property" the public demands were for information—more than preservation or ownership they wanted archaeologists to produce new knowledge about the past. Throughout his essays, Carver returns to this point: the product of archaeology is knowledge.

In categorizing governments' relationships with their past, three forms are recognized; unregulated, regulated (the most common), and deregulated. The UK and US fall under the latter category, in which the state recognizes the importance of the resources but gives over their management to the private sector. He explores archaeological practice in such systems and finds much to disturb him. The endgame of most CRM activities is the efficient clearance of a historic resource for a client—if we concede that the public wants knowledge, not project clearance, then the validity of the whole CRM enterprise is called into question. The marketplace also rewards low costs, low wages, and minimal recovery and compliance rather than high-quality research and contributions to knowledge. It drives wedges between CRM practitioners and University researchers. In a typical Carver terse assessment, this CRM-University chasm arises because field archaeology is a universal discipline while theoretical *[academic]* archaeology "remains more disputed, ephemeral, and unevenly distributed, like architectural aesthetics..." (p. 117–18).

While Carver sees some bright spots on the practical and regulatory horizon in Ireland, Sweden, the UK, and the US, in general he contends that the discipline must achieve a higher self-valuation—it must be less a supplier of services and more a player in project design. In *From Procurement to Product* he presents a model to raise the profile of archaeology by employing a design-competition approach to contract awards similar to that found in architectural practices. In his vision, this would raise the quality of the work accomplished, and the requirement that the best research design be produced would reunite the now divided CRM and University practitioners. It is an ambitious scheme and one whose implementation would face many obstacles in the United States.

Finally, Carver returns to the theme that pervades his essays—archaeologists are in the business of producing knowledge about the past. He champions the "unfashionable idea" that archaeologists should "serve science" (p. 157) and our acknowledged constituents of students and the general public by producing and publishing new knowledge

about the past. This is a very different path than that proposed by those in the discipline who promote increased media outreach, popularization, community archaeology, or the archaeology of relevance that serves to make the world a better place.

There is always much to ponder in the considered observations of an archaeological practitioner who has been, so to speak, on the front lines of both commercial and academic archaeology during a lengthy career. Of course, Carver concentrates on the UK archaeological conditions he is most familiar with, but his examples of Kidder's Southwestern pueblo research, the Virú Valley, Geronimo's wickiup, Dust and Salts Caves help bring his points home to the US reader. While I certainly disagree with some of his views of the archaeological situation in the U.S., I have to agree with most of his concerns about the state of the discipline. American observers of archaeology will have to agree with his comments on the failure of the low bid system of procurement, the increasing fracturing of the discipline into field archaeologists and teachers, the general decline in the quality of field archaeology, the failure of most CRM efforts to contribute to the knowledge base, and the superficiality of many academic projects.

This is a unique volume—it is a cutting evaluation of the practice of field archaeology. It is definitely *not* just another textbook on archaeological methods. It confronts all of your preconceptions about field archaeology. It actually challenges archaeologist to *think* about the investigative process. That alone is worth the price of the volume.