Archaeology and Ancient History: Breaking Down the Boundaries, Eberhard W. Sauer, Routledge, 2004, 0203643712, 9780203643716, 224 pages. Challenging both traditional and fashionable theories, this collection of pieces from an international range of contributors explores the separation of the human past into history, archaeology and their related sub-disciplines. Each case study challenges the validity of this separation and asks how we can move to a more holistic approach in the study of the relationship between history and archaeology. While the focus is on the ancient world, particularly Greece and Rome, the lessons learned in this book make it an essential addition to all studies of history and archaeology.

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The relationship between archaeology and history has been problematical at least since the days of Schliemann, and there seems little chance of resolution in the near future (if ever). In this volume, however, Eberhard Sauer spearheads another attempt at rapprochement between the two disciplines. The papers were originally presented in a session of the Theoretical Archaeology Group Conference in Dublin in 2001: "Breaking down boundaries; the artificial archaeology-ancient history divide." They represent an even division between invited speakers and volunteers and offer a wide range of often conflicting views, though all share the belief (in Sauer's words) "that it would be beneficial to integrate archaeological and historical evidence more fully" (5).

Sauer, of course, is no friend of boundaries, and the geographic and chronological limits of the contributions are wide. They range from Siberia to Ireland, from Northern England to Greece; that Africa and the Near East are missing is simply chance, as Sauer would certainly consider insights from those regions of the ancient world equally relevant to this project, and to work in other parts of that world. Chronologically, the limits are the Late Bronze Age to Late Antiquity, with an occasional glance forward into the Medieval period. Within these parameters nine scholars (in addition to Sauer himself) offer their experiences of division within the academic study of the past, paradigms of or blueprints for successful collaborations, and suggestions for improvement in the future.

Sauer introduces the topic in two essays. The first outlines the origins of the project and lists the questions it seeks to answer: how the boundaries between the disciplines came into being; if and how they have affected and continue to affect research; whether there is justification for them or, conversely, danger in abandoning them; and, if they are to be abandoned, how one might work towards that goal. Sauer provides a summary of the contributions and attempts to draw some common threads out of what is a quite diverse array of offerings. His second essay ("The disunited subject," 17-45) directly addresses the main concern of the book. Sauer dismisses the now standard definition of archaeology (as formulated by Renfrew and Bahn: "archaeologists study past societies primarily through their material remains," 18), as well as those of Lev Klejn and Pierre Courbin. He does not, however, propose an alternative, nor does he define "history." This is perhaps understandable -- too precise a definition of either discipline might tend to erect yet another boundary -- but it is difficult nonetheless to discuss these matters in the absence of clear definitions. Sauer passes briefly over the relationship between archaeology and other disciplines -- chiefly history and sociology. Surprisingly (at least from an American point of view) the "great divide"
between anthropological and classical archaeology is not mentioned. Presumably this is because of
the particular academic structure within which Sauer operates; the book is at times quite narrowly
focused on British academia and curricula. Sauer provides many good examples of the contributions
of texts and archaeological data to the study of the past. He then tackles the most serious obstacle
to the kind of research that he views as ideal: the inability of a single individual to command more
than a few specialties. His solution appears to be that some individuals will focus narrowly
(producing pottery typologies, for example), while generalists with "as much factual knowledge as
specialists, only spread over much wider areas of interest" (32) should put this data into its wider
context. He continues with a discussion of the types of information that texts and archaeological
data, respectively, provide, concluding, predictably, that neither is more "important" than the other
and that the two should be studied in concert.

The remaining ten essays, more narrowly focused on a particular area and time period, are
organized in three sections: Greece, Rome, and Neighboring Cultures (Skythians, Celts). For the
purpose of this review, however, I group them according to approach, beginning with four (by
Rankov, Hoffmann, Murphy, and Karl) that outline specific research projects or problems in which an
interdisciplinary approach was indispensable or would clearly bear fruit.

Boris Rankov recalls his experience with an intensely interdisciplinary project, the remarkable
exercise in experimental archaeology that resulted in the trireme Olympias ("Breaking down
boundaries: the experience of the multidisciplinary Olympias project," 49-61). Not only texts and
material culture (as interpreted by historians and archaeologists) but also modern expertise (naval
architecture, physics, rowing) contributed to the final product. His account underlines the complexity
of such an undertaking, where consultation, coordination, and dialogue must be maintained over a
long period of time. The single factor that most hindered effective cooperation, he found, was
"subject pride": the instinct to close ranks and defend the accepted truths of the discipline when
challenged. In the case of the trireme project, the fact that many participants had expertise in more
than one area helped to mitigate this factor. Bringing this experience to bear on the more general
question, he argues for the integrity of separate disciplines, which foster the maintenance of "depth
of expertise and independent methodologies" (56); boundaries, he feels, are better crossed than
broken down.

The use of Tacitus' Agricola for the interpretation of archaeological sites in the north of England
forms the subject of Brigitta Hoffmann's essay. She describes how dependence on a problematic
edition of the text (which did make use of archaeological evidence) has led to an overly positivistic
interpretation of sites that, although rejected by most scholars, is perpetuated in the handbooks. She
shows how a nuanced reading of Tacitus and a thorough familiarity with his practices as a writer of
history are essential for a proper use of his text. She puts her finger on a very real problem, the
naiveté with which many (perhaps even most) archaeologists use texts. It is a problem that is not
likely to go away since, as Hoffmann points out, more and more frequently those excavating the
sites do not have any command the classical literature or of the tools needed for its investigation.

Osteoarchaeologist Eileen Murphy's contribution ("Herodotus and the Amazons meet the Cyclops:
philology, osteoarchaeology and the Eurasian Iron Age," 169-184) attempts to bring together
bioarchaeological data and Herodotus' accounts of the Skythians. Describing a number of severe
physical deformities among the 800 burials in the cemetery of Aymyrlyg (S. Siberia, 3rd century
B.C.E. to 2nd century C.E.), she postulates that the existence of such individuals in the Scythian
population lies behind Herodotus' tall tales of the one-eyed Arimasps and goat-footed men, and of
her less fantastic accounts of the androgynous Enarees. Her paper suffers precisely from the
unfamiliarity with the apparatus of textual study against which Hoffmann warns, as she bases much
of what she says about Herodotus on scholarship of the 50's and 60's, which today seems dated
and overly positivistic. In the end, her hypothesis is not convincing, but she nonetheless rightly
draws attention to a topic (Herodotus and the Skythians) where collaboration between
archaeologists and text-based scholars might be the extremely fruitful.

Raimond Karl ("Celtoscepticism: a convenient excuse for ignoring non-archaeological evidence?"
185-199) offers a polemic against Celtoscepticism, insisting that linguistic and documentary
evidence indicates many points of similarity among the Iron Age cultures of Ireland and Europe. With two case studies -- on the chariot and on the words used for elements of social and political structure -- he argues that a model of shared culture among these people (whatever we may decide to call it, and with many instances of variation) is well supported by texts, linguistics, and archaeological evidence. Here one might question the degree to which a common language or language group indicates a shared social structure or political systems, but whatever doubts one might entertain about the specific conclusions, Karl provides a powerful argument that linguistics and the texts have something important to offer to the discussion.

Offering more general comments rather than detailed case studies, Lin Foxhall and Martin Henig sketch pessimistic views of the chances of significant boundary-breaking in the near future. Foxhall ("Field sports: engaging Greek archaeology and history," 76-84) questions whether the fundamental aims of history and archaeology are, in fact, the same. Even if she might reply with a guarded "yes" for the study of classical Greece, historians and archaeologists ask different questions of their evidence and perceive "the 'big issues' of the classical past in a different way" (76). She points out that both the material culture and literature of antiquity have been largely decontextualized; this, and lack of detailed documentary sources make it impossible to reconstruct, for example, the social realities of the Greek countryside. She observes that texts and material culture are not easily brought to bear on the same problems, and that the time-scales of historical narrative and archaeologically perceived "events" are different -- perhaps obvious points, but nonetheless worth repeating. The best she can offer is the hope that "documents can lead us as archaeologists to redefine the terms of our questions, even if we cannot link the archaeological and historical evidence directly in a valid way" (82).

It is a divide within archaeology itself that exercises Martin Henig ("A house divided: the study of Roman art and the art of Roman Britain," 134-150) -- the divide between those who study the Roman archaeology of the Mediterranean, with its emphasis on major sculpture and architecture and the norms of classical style, and those investigating the Roman archaeology of Britain, who give priority to such features as military installations, roads, and pottery. He points out that this division serves the art of Roman Britain extraordinarily badly: classicists dismiss it as provincial, while British excavators regard it as irrelevant to their main concerns. He sees these interests as stubbornly entrenched and is gloomy about any prospect of substantial change.

Taking a step backward, Alkis Dialismas and Janett Morgan contribute more general comments about the history of the divide. In his discussion of the relationship between archaeology and history, Dialismas ("The Aegean melting pot: history and archaeology for historians and prehistorians," 62-75) comes the closest of any author to a definition of archaeology and history, concluding that the difference between the two "lies solely in the methods used to collect different data" (67). He moves the discussion back into prehistory, pointing out that the late Bronze Age has its own texts, which contribute to, and must be taken into account in, the study of the Mycenaean past, and arguing as well that later ancient textual sources can provide analogies that may be useful in the understanding of prehistoric behavior (the Homeric poems, for instance, may shed light on feasting and gift exchange). He advocates cooperation between historians and archaeologists, but only at the level of "interpretations, explanations, and reconstructions" (62) -- each discipline should reach its own conclusions, and only then should they compare notes and try to generate a synthesis that takes both viewpoints into account.

Myth is the focus of Morgan’s paper ("Myth, expectations and the divide between disciplines in the study of classical Greece," 85-95): ancient and modern use of ancient myth, myth as a legitimator of cultures and powerful individuals, and the modern creation of a multiplicity of new myths about antiquity and our relationships to ancient cultures. This modern mythmaking has contributed to the rise of different approaches to the study of the past. The different approaches, in turn, have fostered what Morgan sees as a dangerous situation, "preventing the development of unified narratives" (85), which makes the classical past "prey to wider social and political discourses" (93). Although she appears to applaud the boundary-breaking agenda, she opines that interdisciplinary work will simply create "another history that stands alongside those created by earlier and contemporary needs" (94). Since, for her, there is no "history", only myths of the past, it is hard to know by what criterion
one should judge scholarship; in the end, she seems to favor an approach in which "academic discourse can be kept interesting as well as elucidative." Multiple views allow "the individual to make of the past what he or she wants and, as a result, keep the study of classical Greece relevant" (94). But, one is prompted to ask, at what price relevance?

Two essays (Laurence, Sauer) make suggestions for the bridging of the offending divide. Ray Laurence ("The uneasy dialogue between ancient history and archaeology," 99-113) urges archaeologists and historians to frame new questions to which both can make a contribution. Using the sociological concept of "dwelling" as an example, he discusses ways in which both disciplines could contribute to a deeper understanding of Pompeii in 79 C.E., with study of such topics as sense of community, ancient visual perception, and dwelling as a place of consumption. He warns against the procedure that Dialismos advocates -- that is, of the independent pursuit of questions in the two fields, with an eye cast over the fence only after conclusions have been reached. Instead, dialogue should be present and appropriate questions formulated from the very beginning.

In his third contribution to the volume ("A matter of personal preference? The relevance of different territories and types of evidence for Roman history," 114-133), Sauer discusses alternatives to the increasing specialization within the field of Roman archaeology, asking whether one can understand such a large and cosmopolitan enterprise as the Roman Empire through the study of a small corner of it (limited either geographically or academically). He makes a plea for looking outside one's own specialty in a search for parallels and context. Conceding that too much is written, even in a single field, for one person to read, let alone master, he argues that contextualization within the greater whole is more important than command of every fact within a single area. He concludes with several concrete and sensible suggestions for curricular improvement: students should be discouraged from focusing too narrowly on a single geographical area, and should be trained in the ways of accessing information in areas outside those with which they are familiar.

As will be clear from the summaries above, a number of concerns recur in this book. One is whether or not archaeologists and historians ask the same questions and have the same concerns: Sauer says yes, Foxhall doubts it, and Laurence's call for new questions suggests that in the past they have not. My own reaction is that they sometimes do, but there are numerous topics of considerable interest to which one or the other group cannot make a substantial contribution, and the areas for productive collaboration are not infinite. Another concern is the dismissal of the work of one field by practitioners of the other. Certainly there are scholars who study the past through exclusively textual means, and perhaps a few who resolutely ignore texts in favor of pure archaeology. But is that necessarily a bad thing? To cite a single example that emerges from this book, a lifetime of purely text-based study of Tacitus has enabled Tony Woodman to discover a feature of Tacitus' historiography that helps Hoffman in her quest to reconcile the historian's account and the archaeological landscape (160-161). Finally there is the issue of specialization: the explosion of information requires it, but it has its clear dangers in loss of perspective and command of the greater context. What is not mentioned, however, is the opposing danger of generalization; how do we avoid becoming jacks of all trades but masters of none? It is not only a matter of acquiring various bodies of fact, as Sauer seems to imply. Different scholarly tasks -- for example, reading a text, an image, an architectural plan, or a stratigraphic record -- require different methodologies and skills, each of which requires considerable time and effort to master. Some scholars, and Sauer seems to be one, have an enviably wide range in terms of training and knowledge. Such polymaths are few, however, and most of us make a hash of it when we venture too far afield. Different kinds of graduate training could change this situation to a degree, but there will always be limits. In the end, this book makes a powerful argument, by example, for close and genuine collaboration between scholars who are past-masters in their own fields, but with the humility to acknowledge that they can learn something from another quite different discipline.
Challenging both traditional and fashionable theories, this collection of pieces from an international range of contributors explores the separation of the human past into history, archaeology and their related sub-disciplines. Each case study challenges the validity of this separation and asks how we can move to a more holistic approach in the study of the relationship between history and archaeology. While the focus is on the ancient world, particularly Greece and Rome, the lessons learned in this book make it an essential addition to all studies of history and archaeology.

Some classicists still deal with the ancient world as if archaeological evidence is of little relevance to their work. This can mean that territories or subjects for which there is little textual evidence can be marginalised or not studied at all. Similarly, many historical archaeologists, dissatisfied with their ancillary role, assert that material evidence for the ancient world can and should be studied independently.
This collection of pieces from international contributors explores the separation of the study of the human past into history and archaeology, challenging its validity and asking how we can move to a holistic approach. While the focus is on the ancient world, particularly Greece and Rome, the lessons that emerge are significant for the study of any place and time.

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