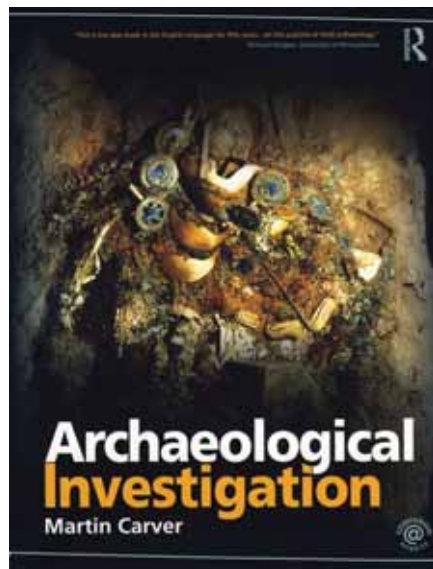




## BOOK REVIEWS

Carver, M. 2009. *Archaeological Investigation* – London/New York, Routledge

*Lucas Petit*



I must admit I had my prejudices reading this new publication of Martin Carver. Another archaeological guide, which was moreover “the best book in the English language for fifty years” according to Richard Hodges of the University of Pennsylvania. Don’t we have enough of those books? From Wheeler’s ‘Archaeology from the Earth’, till Renfrew & Bahn’s ‘Archaeology: Theories, Methods and Practice’, they all try to be complete, objective, critical and influential. And in the end they never were, at least not without revising and reprinting regularly. It seems a myth that world’s archaeology is to be described in one publication, including un-endless types of find spots, un-endless ways of approaches and un-endless ways of interpretations. You would

never try to write a book about the animals of the world with the intention to be complete, would you? So, why trying to summarize archaeological investigation?

Nevertheless I was excited to have the opportunity to read another publication of Martin Carver, known to me as the man of Sutton Hoo. After a military career at a Tank Regiment, Carver started to work as a field archaeologist in 1974, at the age of 33. From 1974 to 1982 he undertook a wide range of projects with a main focus on early medieval towns in England. During these years, he founded BUFAU, a unit at the Birmingham University that was primarily focusing on training students even though the main remit of this unit was to carry out rescue

excavations. In 1982 Carver got the opportunity to start investigating Sutton Hoo, a major Anglo-Saxon site. Within the open competition for this position he suggested a more careful research design and a constant evaluation process of all aspects of the work, instead of large-scale open excavations. Carver seems to have followed this approach throughout his career up to the year 2008 (and probably beyond), when he got his well-deserved retirement. Currently, he is editor of 'Antiquity'.

The book 'Archaeological Investigation' is divided into four parts. Part 1 discusses first principles of archaeological fieldwork. As the author points out, it starts with "familiar things" (p. xxxvii) and gently moves up to the development of archaeological theories and approaches. The second part describes the different field techniques and the most appropriate ways for their application. In the third part the reader is taken indoors again to do analyses and to publish results. The book closes with actually the most crucial issue of archaeology: the design. It seems a little awkward to end with the start, but Carver's goal was to write a book that follows somewhat an archaeological career: from 'The Stuff' for starting archaeologists (chapter 1) to activities that are essential for academic or commercial archaeologist, such as 'Evaluation and Project Design' (chapter 14).

Despite my reservations, this archaeological guide has fascinated me from the beginning to the end. The text is popularly written, without losing information, and the reader gets to know Martin Carver, both on a professional and personal level. And this is not only due to (recognisable as it is) sentences like "where is the nearest pub" (p. 115) and "on my desk is a laptop, various piles of half-done work, some borrowed books and a cold cup of coffee" (p. 245). A healthy portion of self-irony, a good sense of humour that is popping up now and then at the most unexpected places, and a clear way of explaining theoretical issues by using accurate and lively examples and illustrations, makes this book an intriguing experience for many. What is even more important and which is definitively the strength and uniqueness of this publication, is the view that there is no good or bad archaeology, nor a singular toolbox: archaeology is diverse and flexible, and so must be the approaches as well as the investigators. And although this dogma, in contrast to the

preface, where he did not consider this book to be dogmatic, is not kept as strictly as wished for throughout the book, it is one of the first archaeological guides – of which I know of – that proposes a project is successful as long as it is carried out with an appropriate and well written design. The decision what is considered appropriateness was, however, still made by Martin Carver and, even though this might be unavoidable in such a guide, this clashes sometimes with his own views.

There are two more critical issues to be mentioned here. The first one is related to the introductory comments of this review: why would someone write a guide on such a wide and diverse topic. Someone who has impeccable credentials concerning field work and who certainly is aware of the enormous diversity of world's archaeology. Nevertheless, Carver has tried to submit an overview of the different scenes in archaeology, for example by using several 'foreign' examples (chapter 7). These projects, besides being somewhat outdated, are seemingly randomly chosen tiny points in an enormous archaeological field. Being a field archaeologist is not just learning the right method but to adjust to the situation in the field. However, by presenting these random projects, Carver places the diverse archaeological scenery again in boxes. He forgot to mention that settlement mounds in Africa are completely different from those in China (*tells* are thus not something limited to the Near East, contrary to what is written on page 11). Caves in a tropical climate are different from those in Europe and open air sites can be studied in the Sahara or in wetlands. Not only different site-types exist, but also extreme variations among them. Each of those variations needs a separate publication (happily nowadays more and more of those methodological chapters are being incorporated into excavation and survey reports). I am convinced that Carver is able to spread his message on the basis of British examples only. This proposed revision will also go in line with the general character of the book. Probably without noticing, Carver's publication is drenched with British examples – not in the last place the prime position of Sutton Hoo, British terms (see comment below) and British regulations. This is not a problem up to the moment that the author is using words that are not universal, like 'context' (p. 120), 'feature' (p. 121) or 'phase' (p. 300).

And with this comment we came to the second issue: the rather fuzzy use of archaeological terms. Despite the glossary at the end, I could not figure out what exactly Carver means by 'sites', 'settlements', 'tells' and 'towns'. Are they the same? As explained on page 89, 'site' is a word especially landscape surveyors "like to argue about". The decision of Carver to use the definition "an area of ground in need of investigation" might be understandable, but not very useful in an archaeological guide. The sentences "It [a site] may well turn into a site in the sense of ancient site" (p. 89), and on the same page "Site survey is simply landscape survey on a smaller scale" confuses the reader even more. And why did Carver divide chapter 4, 'Landscape Survey', and chapter 5, 'Site Survey', if the only difference is the scale (and thus the method of research)? On page 93, fig. 5.5, the "Site Survey at Tell el-Amarna" seems to me rather a landscape survey (*hinterland*) in which a road, a central city, tombs, villages and other features were discovered (we are speaking here of an area of about 15 square kilometres!). And on page 255, it becomes even more confusing as he wrote "A site survey lies somewhere between an excavation survey [?] and a landscape survey, but the differences are marginal and the analyses are interchangeable." Here is definitely some more work to be done in future editions: Carver should clearly define terms and use them consequently throughout the book, since it will be read by young and old, starters and advanced archaeologists.

Besides being helpful for students and beginning archaeologists, I would advise especially lecturers in archaeology to study this publication thoroughly and from the beginning to the end, in order not to miss the tiny, hidden bits of information in between the lines. The conservative and inflexible way of teaching today is one of the biggest obstacles in archaeological progress and this publication could be an eye-opener for many of those scholars who promote their own methods and theories and reject others. With this book Carver has pointed out that archaeology is not a 'hard' science with a fixed road from the project design to the publication – a road that can simply be taught in school. A lack of expectations, multiple practical and theoretical toolboxes, and self-reflective and evaluative approaches are topics not often seen in archaeological guides. And I am delighted to

see them in 'Archaeological Investigation'. Martin Carver can be congratulated on an excellent work that competes successfully with the endless flow of conservative-written handbooks.

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