

Recognizing and Reading Archaeological Literature

Virtually all college and university students are aware that reading is important. Many, however, are unfamiliar with the various kinds of writing that make up the literature in academic disciplines, including archaeology. This Introduction explores the major kinds of archaeological literature and provides some tips on how to recognize and read them most efficiently.

Students need to understand the nature and diversity of archaeological literature for a few practical reasons. Throughout their college or university studies, they will be required to write research papers with the provision that scholarly sources be used. So learning how to differentiate between scholarly literature and popular or semi-scholarly sources is essential. Also, to effectively read archaeological literature, students will need to use various reading strategies, which are outlined here. Choosing a reading strategy based on recognizing the kind of literature can save students many hours of time spent in frustration when preparing for class or doing research papers.

Although the focus here is recognizing and reading archaeological literature, the information is transferable to other academic disciplines as well.

What Is Archaeological Literature?

The phrase “archaeological literature” means different things to different people. For some, archaeological literature refers to only that which is

considered scholarly, such as articles in academic journals, usually written by university professors. Others take a broader view of what constitutes archaeological literature and include a wider range of sources, such as printed works on topics of archaeological interest in semi-scholarly and popular publications. It is this broader view that is represented in this reader.

Only rarely are works written by people not trained in archaeology considered part of archaeological literature. Exceptions have included the writing of some journalists, science writers, amateurs, and those trained in other disciplines, especially if they are reporting on original research and adhering to the principles of good scholarship.

Periodicals and books are the two primary avenues for archaeological literature. The term *periodical* is used in library and information science to denote a publication that is published on a regular basis, such as daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly, three times a year, twice a year, or annually. Major kinds of periodicals include journals, magazines, newsletters or bulletins of associations, and newspapers. In academia, designating a periodical as a journal indicates an academic or scholarly content. Indeed, many scholarly periodicals include the word *journal* in the title of the periodical.

Periodicals that focus on archaeology number in the thousands. After consolidating their resources, a group of libraries in Great Britain now lists more than 2,000 periodicals of interest to archaeologists. This list excludes many periodicals that focus on areas out-

side of Europe, so it is reasonable to think that the number is significantly higher, especially when smaller, regional publications are factored in. A list of major periodicals of interest to archaeologists is included as an appendix to this reader.

As with periodicals, thousands of books focus on archaeology. Most non-scholarly or popular books about archaeology are published by commercial publishers, large and small. Scholarly and semi-scholarly books are published by university presses, associations of professional archaeologists (e.g., the Society for American Archaeology), or commercial publishers.

Many resources are available to students to help them distinguish between scholarly and popular sources. College and university libraries, for example, often have print or online guides, usually focusing on periodicals. However, for archaeology students, the guides usually oversimplify the diversity of places where archaeological writing can be found. Many kinds of writing fall somewhere in between scholarly and popular, and are called semi-scholarly. Each of these three major kinds of archaeological literature is described in the following section.

Three Kinds of Archaeological Literature

The boundaries between the three categories of archaeological literature—scholarly, semi-scholarly, and popular—are often blurred. What some classify as semi-scholarly, for example, will be considered popular by others. There is no consensus or standard, absolute factor that can be used to classify a piece of writing. While peer review is a constant in scholarly literature, it may also be found in semi-scholarly or popular literature. What follows should be considered the general characteristics or trends of each of the three major kinds of archaeological literature.

SCHOLARLY ARCHAEOLOGICAL LITERATURE

Scholarly archaeological literature, also known as academic literature, is published in two primary forms: journal articles and books. It is the major way of communicating scholarly research. So, most scholarly writing is undertaken by university professors and graduate students working on their master's degree or Ph.D. quite simply because it is they who are conducting the research.

This type of writing is expected, and in some cases it is demanded, in order to obtain tenure at a university. Writing a scholarly article or book is often the last major stage of an archaeological research project, and writing about one's project for the larger community of archaeologists is considered to be an archaeological ethic.

Good scholarly writing usually takes considerable time. It is not unusual for an archaeologist to spend weeks or months crafting an article and a year or more on a book. It is standard practice that scholarly journals do not pay authors for their contributions. Authors may receive royalties on scholarly books, but considering that most are destined for research libraries rather than bookstores and personal sales, the amount of money earned tends to be negligible. The real reward for scholarly writing is in knowing that your work contributes to the advancement of the discipline and enhances your recognition as an archaeologist and scholar. More practically, for those beginning their professional careers, scholarly writing helps one find and maintain employment as an academic.

Scholarly writing in archaeology generally follows the format of most scientific writing. This includes an introduction that outlines why the research project was important, a review of other published literature on the same topic, a description of the methods of research, the results of the research, and a discussion of the results. Scholarly articles typically refer to several dozen or more other published works on the topic (cited within the article and listed at the end).

Archaeological scholarly writing in articles and books usually

- provides reporting of primary (original) research,
- uses specialized language (i.e., jargon), specific to archaeology,
- is written with an expectation that the reader has at least a broad familiarity with the topic,
- cites many sources within the article and includes extensive, up-to-date bibliographies or references,
- is evaluated by peer review by other archaeologists prior to publication to ensure the work meets high standards of scholarship,
- identifies the author as well as their academic affiliation,
- contains many references to other publications on the topic, some of which may be in foreign languages and the gray literature,
- is often indexed in academic library databases,
- usually has major headings throughout an article or chapter,
- refers to all figures and tables in the main part of the article,
- makes the goals, methods, results, and conclusions of research explicit, and
- includes an abstract: a brief summary of the article usually between the title and introduction to the article.

Of course, if an article is published in a scholarly journal, that is a good indication that it is scholarly. However, for those near the beginning of their studies in archaeology, it is not always self-evident whether a journal qualifies as scholarly or not. Some common characteristics of scholarly journals include

- authors that vary from issue to issue,
- editorial boards that include professors from universities, often identified in the beginning pages of an issue or on the journal web page,

- publication by a professional association of archaeologists or a scholarly publisher, often identified in the beginning pages of an issue or on the journal web page,
- continuous pagination throughout an entire volume, rather than within each issue (e.g., only the first issue of the volume or year begins with page 1),
- electronic archiving,
- availability through electronic search engines focusing on scholarly works, such as scholar.google.com.,
- absent or minimal advertising,
- images in black and white rather than color,
- availability by subscription only, appearing only rarely on newsstands.

Each scholarly journal tends to focus on a particular area within archaeology, such as a place, time period, or method, which can usually be ascertained by the journal title. Journals are also associated with different levels of prestige. For example, for archaeologists working in North America and focusing on method, theory, and prehistory, the premier journal is considered to be *American Antiquity*. For those working in the field of historic archaeology in North America, *Historical Archaeology* is considered the premier journal. Examples of other journals with relatively high prestige include *Antiquity*, *Archaeometry*, *Asian Perspectives*, *Geoarchaeology*, *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology*, *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory*, *Journal of Archaeological Research*, *Journal of Archaeological Science*, *Latin American Antiquity*, and *World Archaeology*.

Scholarly articles also appear in journals that focus on the broader discipline of anthropology, which in North America is often considered to encompass archaeology as a subfield. The most prestigious of these include *American Anthropologist* and *Current Anthropology*. Prestigious interdisciplinary journals such as *Nature* and *Science* also publish articles on archaeology.

Scholarly books come in a variety of forms,

including theses, dissertations (book-length treatments of a student research), monographs, and edited volumes. As part of the process of obtaining a master's degree or Ph.D. in archaeology, students are generally required to undertake primary research, usually including field and laboratory work, and describe it in a thesis or dissertation. Scholarly books on a narrow topic by a single author are often referred to as research monographs, or simply monographs. An edited volume consists of a series of individual chapters, each written by a different author or group of authors. Such books sometimes consist primarily of works originally published elsewhere. Edited volumes are compiled by the editor, who invites a variety of authors to contribute a single chapter on a topic. The topic may be quite narrow, and the book may be a compilation of papers presented at a single session at an academic conference. The topic may also be broad, such as the archaeology of religion or gender.

If in doubt, the name of the publisher may be a clue as to whether a book should be considered scholarly or not. Most university presses focus their publication program on scholarly works, although it would be a mistake to assume that the work is necessarily scholarly because it was published by a university press. Many commercial companies, such as Blackwell and Routledge, also focus on publishing scholarly archaeology books.

SEMI-SCHOLARLY ARCHAEOLOGICAL LITERATURE

Semi-scholarly literature falls between the rigors of truly scholarly writing, which is primarily for those familiar with the topic and academic in style, and popular writing, which is mainly for the general public and usually in a mass media format, such as newspapers or widely circulated magazines. Semi-scholarly writing typically focuses on simply sharing results of research rather than explaining a phenomenon or making significant contributions to archaeological method and theory.

The amount of time to undertake scholarly writing is usually measured in weeks, months, and years, but the amount of time required for semi-scholarly writing can often be hours or days (unless it is a book). This is one of the primary reasons why a considerable amount of semi-scholarly literature is written by non-university based archaeologists, who, unlike university archaeologists, rarely have the time or resources to produce true scholarly literature.

The four major forms of semi-scholarly archaeological literature are (i) works produced by archaeologists primarily for other archaeologists and those in related fields, and appearing in trade or professional publications, (ii) project, field, and laboratory reports, (iii) works produced by archaeologists for other archaeologists, students, and the lay public in books and popular magazines, and (iv) text and reference books in archaeology, produced for students and professionals.

Works written by archaeologists primarily for other archaeologists and those in related fields are often in the form of brief reports, comments, forums, essays, opinions, and reviews. This sort of archaeological literature is likely to occur in publications such as *The SAA Archaeological Record*, targeted at professional archaeologists and presented as a benefit of membership in the Society for American Archaeology.

Semi-scholarly writing by archaeologists for archaeologists or those in related fields shares these characteristics:

- it often appears in a periodical explicitly described as a newsletter, magazine, or bulletin of an association of professional archaeologists, anthropologists, or those in heritage-related fields;
- it usually lacks the rigor of true scholarly writing (i.e., lacks abstract, has little or no context, lacks formality of academic writing);
- it may contain advertisements and color illustrations;

- the articles are usually much briefer than scholarly writing;
- it may not include in-text citations and bibliographies;
- it may not include the dissemination of primary research; and
- it cites relatively few or no sources.

Project, field, and laboratory reports are perhaps the most common type of writing by archaeologists, but these reports usually remain unknown to most researchers, and even when they do know about them, they are often difficult to find. With rare exception, every archaeological project requires a written report, and the time and other costs for writing are usually built into the project budget. Reports are usually required of funding. It is also a long-standing ethic that archaeologists write reports of their work and make them available. Such works, whether on the overall project or a particular aspects of field and laboratory research, are often prepared for clients, governments, and aboriginal groups. These reports typically are written in the same style as scholarly work, but lack the extensive citations and discussions found in such works.

Works produced by archaeologists for a wide audience consisting of other archaeologists, students, and the educated lay public is the form in which the distinction between scholarly, semi-scholarly, and popular writing is most blurred. Many books, for example, are targeted at both those in or studying the profession of archaeology and the lay public, and this is often reflected in the writing. While maintaining some aspects of academic writing, these kinds of books tend to use less specialized terminology, provide fewer or no references, and are written in a more informal style than purely academic publications. Some contributions in such periodicals as *Archaeology*, *Expedition*, *National Geographic*, and *Scientific American* may also be considered semi-scholarly, especially if the article is written by an archaeologist, reports on original research, is peer reviewed, or provides references.

Textbooks, reference books, manuals, and case studies are usually considered semi-scholarly. Authors are usually paid a royalty on sales, but as with most other kinds of writing in archaeology, the real reward is in sharing and contributing to the discipline, especially considering the relatively small market. Major publishers of these kinds of books include both university and commercial presses.

POPULAR ARCHAEOLOGICAL LITERATURE

Archaeological writings targeted at the general public are often termed *popular* and are found in both periodicals and books. One form includes articles written for newspapers and popular magazines such as *Time*, *Discover*, and *The Economist*. Some may consider periodicals such as *Archaeology*, *Expedition*, *National Geographic*, and *Scientific American* to be popular, while to others they are semi-scholarly. Generally, if a reporter, journalist, or anyone not trained in archaeology writes the article and if it is appearing in a periodical not clearly scholarly, the article will be considered popular. Articles by journalists are often based on presentations at conferences that they attend, press releases, or recently published reports.

Archaeological writings in the popular press (e.g., magazines and newspapers) are often characterized by

- authors who are not identified,
- authors who are not trained in archaeology,
- secondary reporting, such as articles based on a press release or presentation at a conference,
- little if any specialized language or assumption of basic knowledge of the topic,
- few if any citations of sources or no bibliography,
- a writing style that often uses quotes extensively,
- little or no attention paid to the goals or methods of research, or other relevant background information, and

- boxed-text features, side bars, and illustrations that do not directly correlate to the article (i.e., no reference is made to them in the main article).

Often, popular journals that include articles on archaeology

- are available at retail locations as well as by subscription,
- are produced by a commercial publisher,
- are printed on glossy paper,
- begin new pagination for each issue (i.e., each issue of the same volume or year begins with page 1),
- contain extensive advertising, and
- feature color photos on the cover and in the interior.

A WORD ABOUT GRAY LITERATURE AND ARCHAEOLOGY LITERATURE ON THE WEB

Archaeologists frequently refer to “the gray literature,” which is a body of archaeological writing that remains largely unknown beyond a small group and is generally difficult to access. This includes unpublished reports on archaeological investigations to governments and clients, master’s theses, Ph.D. dissertations, bulletins and newsletters of various professional and public groups, and local popular publications including newspapers. Sometimes gray literature is referred to as “non-conventional literature.” Gray literature is rarely indexed in libraries and thus usually remains unknown, despite that it often contains significant information.

Over the past few decades, the amount of archaeological research done outside of academia, such as in cultural resource management or CRM (which involves investigating an area before it will be disturbed by construction), has burgeoned. So too has the amount of gray literature, especially the production of field and laboratory reports. It is the rare archaeological project that concludes without a written report. Most academic archaeologists working

in universities are expected to produce scholarly literature, and they are often given time to do so. However, no such expectation falls upon those working in the CRM industry. Indeed, due to the significant amount of time it takes to produce truly scholarly works, it is not a reasonable expectation for those working outside of academia. Thus, while archaeological gray literature continues to increase, the wider community’s lack of access to it often remains a problem. Some agencies have begun cataloging and archiving the gray literature in their offices and repositories with the goal of making it available on the Web, but this is likely to represent less than 1 per cent of the many thousands of reports considered part of the gray literature. Perhaps one of the most useful ways archaeologists have found to access the gray literature is to make enquiries about potential gray literature for their topic of interest on Internet listserves, such as HISTARCH.

Many kinds of archaeological works appear on the Web, and much of it does qualify as scholarly. Purely Web-based scholarly journals, such as *Internet Archaeology*, do exist and many scholarly journals publish both in print and online. Some journals provide immediate access to the issue online, while others require a waiting period of one or more years after print publication before they allow their issues to be viewed online.

Many websites focus on archaeology, but it would be dangerous to assume that they all contain archaeological literature without some kind of critical evaluation. Similarly, some very lengthy and insightful comments often appear on listserves and blogs, but without taking a critical look at them, it is inappropriate to consider them archaeological literature. Some of the things to consider when evaluating writing on the web are the credentials of the author (e.g., Is he or she an archaeologist who is considered expert in the particular topic?) and the website host (e.g., Is the site hosted by an academic institution or association of professional archaeologists?). One should remember that unless the writing is associated with an academic journal, contributions on the Web are

unlikely to have gone through a proper, scientifically sound, peer-review process and are thus unlikely to qualify as “scholarly.”

Reading Archaeological Literature

A successful college or university student should be familiar with various kinds of reading. These include skim reading, narrative reading, reading for content, and critical reading, also known as deep reading or reading for meaning.

SKIM READING

Skim reading can be a very important tool for archaeological literature of all kinds. If the work has been written well, then focusing on the title, the abstract (if there is one), the major section headings, the first paragraph of each major section, and the captions to figures and tables can be an efficient way to begin reading a selection. For example, if the selection is being read to find appropriate sources for a research paper, then skim reading is a very efficient method. Skim reading should enable a reader to have a general idea of an article or book chapter within a few minutes, and it is probably the most common way of reading for both students and professionals in archaeology. The sheer number of articles and books on most topics of archaeological interest is so vast that it just isn't reasonable to expect a thorough reading of each. After skim reading, most archaeologists will then make a decision whether to proceed to one or more of the following stages of reading: narrative, reading for content, or critical reading.

Another advantage of skim reading is that even if you know you should be reading to extract content or reading critically, it provides a mental preparation for what's ahead.

NARRATIVE READING

As with skim reading, narrative reading can be a useful tool to quickly determine the value of the

writing and prepare for what lies ahead. Narrative reading is probably closest to what most would regard as reading for pleasure. It requires little forethought; the reader simply follows along and attempts to grasp the big picture without getting lost in the details (as one typically does when reading a novel or article from a popular magazine for pleasure). Sources written in anticipation of being read in a narrative style generally fall into the categories of popular and semi-scholarly literature. Often, professors who ask students to read a textbook chapter before coming to a lecture are anticipating the student will do a narrative reading so they have a broad familiarity with the topic.

READING FOR CONTENT

Reading for content requires care and time. Much of the semi-scholarly and all of the scholarly literature is written with the expectation that readers will be extracting information useful for their own studies. Most textbooks, for example, are written to provide information, not pleasure, although I suppose it is possible to have both. Practical tips for reading for content include the following:

- Allow plenty of time for reading.
 - Skim read or do a narrative read first to prepare mentally for what is ahead.
 - Know the kinds of information you are seeking so you don't get bogged down with irrelevant information.
 - Be prepared to mark the paper (unless it is a borrowed copy, of course) either with your own system or some standard symbols, highlighting such things as the thesis, important results, conclusion, and key points.
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CRITICAL READING

Reading critically, also known as “reading for meaning” and “deep reading,” is the highest level

of reading a college or university student will encounter. Critical reading does not necessarily mean that one must find fault with the writing. Mostly, critical reading involves evaluating how well an author presents the information and attempting to identify the unstated biases of the author (i.e., reading between lines). Critical reading often requires making inferences on the reader's part.

Practical tips for critical reading include the following:

- Allow plenty of time.
- Read for content first to become familiar with the material.
- Determine the explicit purpose of the writing (i.e., goals, objective, thesis).
- Carefully pick out the evidence used to support the thesis or argument.
- Distinguish the kinds of evidence used for support (e.g., scholarly versus non-scholarly).
- Determine if the article flows logically.
- Identify the assumptions of the author (both the stated and unstated ones).
- Identify any bias of the author (e.g., methodological, theoretical, geographical, temporal, or political).

Of course, the more one knows about archaeology, the easier it should be to do a critical reading, especially when it comes to evaluating whether the author did an adequate job of presenting the background and identifying theoretical and methodological bias.

However, novices to scholarly archaeological literature should still be able to critically evaluate the literature by examining how a selection follows the standard model of scientific writing. Ask the following questions:

- How well has the Introduction been written? For example, does it introduce the topic, background, and thesis? Does it include the nature of the problem being investigated and the rationale for the study?
- How well has the background information been presented? Are there references to other works on the same general topic? Is there enough information to provide a reasonable context for the research being reported? (The background should provide enough information that the general problem being studied and the rationale for the study are understood.)
- How well are the methods of research detailed?
- How well are the results presented? Are the results clear?
- How well are the results discussed? Are the implications of the results, such as supporting an hypothesis, clear?

Concluding Comments

This volume contains 29 selections from published scholarly, semi-scholarly, and popular literature. The selections were chosen to enhance the reader's appreciation of both the discipline of archaeology and the nature and diversity of archaeological literature. Each selection has a brief introduction that includes some questions to guide reading and usually a bit of context, such as information on the general topic, the author(s), and the publication in which the selection originally appeared. The questions have been included with the expectation that readers will primarily be reading for content. Of course, it would also be a good exercise to use the criteria in this Introduction to categorize each selection as scholarly, semi-scholarly, or popular, and to attempt a critical reading.