

Wallace, Jennifer: *Digging the dirt. The archaeological imagination*. London: Gerald Duckworth 2004. ISBN: 0-7156-3278-7; 220 S.

Rezensiert von: Cornelius Holtorf, Riksantikvarieämbetet, Stockholm

Archaeologists have sometimes felt uneasy about their relationship with other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences. Whereas they themselves have, over the years, borrowed a lot of ideas and approaches from other disciplines (including philosophy of science, sociology, anthropology, literature studies etc.), no one else seemed interested in archaeology. This perception reflects a particular lack of self-confidence that, for some reason, is ingrained in the consciousness of many archaeologists. Yet arguably this supposed isolation has been untrue all along, and it is certainly untrue now, as Jennifer Wallace's new book „Digging the Dirt“ vividly illustrates.

The table of contents reveals not just some of the themes of the book but also some of the spirit in which it has been written: „The Poetics of Depth“, „Romancing Stones: The Archaeological Landscape“, „Unearthing Bodies: The Disruption of History“, „Fulfilling desires: Erotic Excavation“, „Fundamentalism: Digging our Trojan Origins“, „Rock Bottom: Digging and Despair“, „Holy Ground: Archaeology and the Sacred“ and „Postmodern Archaeology: Trashing Our Future“.

„Digging the Dirt“ is the personal journey of a literary scholar and intellectual through another discipline than her own. Wallace can hardly conceal her excitement about the riches she discovered in archaeology. Her book traces colorful personalities like William Stukeley, Heinrich Schliemann and Sigmund Freud. She investigates with much enthusiasm mummies and bog bodies, and she is fascinated by the archaeology of Pompeii and Jerusalem. Currency is provided to her arguments by pertinent references to the sunken Titanic, the remains at Ground Zero, and forensic archaeology at 20th century mass graves. Wallace's explorations of what she calls „the archaeological imagination“ are spiced with citations from English poets such as William Wordsworth, Byron and Seamus

Heaney. In short, „Digging the Dirt“ presents archaeology within a very wide cultural and intellectual context, making it plain why archaeology can be seen as one of the dominant cultural themes of our age.¹

This book is all the more illuminating for the innocent observations its author cares to make about archaeology and archaeologists. Sure enough, some of them betray her own naivety, for example when she considers the excavation of Jesus' cross in the 4th century AD to be „the world's first archaeological excavation“ (although others were undertaken several millennia earlier) or when she mistakes a „heap of old stones“ for the ancient city of Gortyna. But these and many other personal anecdotes somehow lend a peculiar credibility to Wallace's writing. Unforgettable are the stories how, in the British Library, she was allowed to read William Hamilton's sexually explicit letters about Pompeian artifacts, but only as long as her hands were above the desk at all times where they could be seen. There is also a splendid account of the uproar Wallace caused among archaeologists on a dig in Israel, when she (not so) innocently suggested that politics may be affecting research methodologies. On a more theoretical level, I found it intriguing (though also strange) how William Rathje's Garbage Project is described as exemplifying „in concrete form the practice of postmodern theory“; I can hardly imagine anything less postmodern than his search for hard facts through positivistic science.

My only two reservations are ultimately related to the kind of book Wallace chose to write. First, she followed conventional habits in her own field and remained very text orientated. Although each chapter provides vivid journeys through different aspects of the archaeological imagination, Wallace limited her ambitions to create a very readable text, and did not care very much for finding suitable images that could have extended the scope of her discussion into all sorts of different directions. Those plates she did chose to reproduce are partly mere illustrations of what the text already describes and partly her own snapshots that are - it has to be said - not very

¹ See also Ebeling, Knut; Altekamp, Stefan (Hgg.), *Die Aktualität des Archäologischen in Wissenschaft, Medien und Künsten*, Frankfurt am Main 2004.

good. It would have been desirable for this kind of project to give the same attention to the images as to the text, and celebrate the visuality that is so important for the archaeological imagination.

Second, Wallace's book focuses a lot on discussions of primary literature from the 18th century onwards, some of which can only be read in the British Library („if possible, readers should try to track down the original accounts“, she recommends). That emphasis occurred at the expense of a large body of topical, secondary literature which she chose to mention only in passing or ignored altogether. Since the advances others have made in many of the same areas have been largely left out of this book, the accounts given are often not as full and rich as they could have been. There is no mention, for example, of Christine Finn's Doctoral research on archaeology in Yeats and Heaney,² Michael Shanks' extensive explorations of the archaeological imagination and poetics of archaeology,³ Barbara Korte's work on archaeology as a theme in English literature since Victorian times, Christiane Zintzen's extensive research on archaeology and the public in the 19th century, featuring extensive sections on Pompeii, Troy, Schliemann and Freud, or Sam Smiles study about the Romantic imagination and the poetics of prehistory.⁴ Now, Julian Thomas's exploration of archaeology and modernity could be added to this list of related literature.⁵ A book pulling together all these strands (and more) is likely to encounter a great deal of interest in many disciplines but still remains to be written.

In sum, despite my minor quibbles, this is a wonderful book that celebrates the archaeological imagination in an exciting way, showing archaeologists why it is not only them who love their subject.

Cornelius Holtorf über Wallace, Jennifer: *Digging the dirt. The archaeological imagination*. London 2004, in: H-Soz-Kult 25.11.2004.

² Also published by Duckworth: Finn, Christine, *Past Poetic. Archaeology and the Poetry of W. B. Yeats and Seamus Heaney*, London 2004.

³ E.g. Pearson, Mike; Shanks, Michael, *Theatre/Archaeology*, London 2001.

⁴ Korte, Barbara, 'The Reassuring Science'? *Archäologie als Sujet und Metapher in der Literatur Britanniens*, *Poetica* 32 (2000), S. 125-150; Zintzen, Christiane, *Von Pompeji nach Troja. Archäologie, Literatur und Öffentlichkeit im 19. Jahrhundert*, Wien 1998; Smiles, Sam, *The Image of Antiquity. Ancient Britain and the Romantic Imagination*, New Haven 1994.

⁵ Thomas, Julian, *Archaeology and Modernity*, London 2004.