next offering of my Historic Preservation Policies in Archaeology course.


Reviewed by Jayur Madhusudan Mehta, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign

Ian W. Brown’s recent monograph published by the Louisiana Archaeological Society and Borgo Publishing, The Petite Anse Project: Archaeological Investigations along the West-central Coast of Louisiana, 1978–1979, is a weighty declaration of coastal Louisiana prehistory and an important read for any scholar interested in coastal Native American archaeology, salt production, and Mississippian trade and exchange. His monograph covers the full prehistory of the region, from its oldest inhabitants to its more recent ones, and adroitly considers the archaeology relative to ecology and environment and, consequently, opens itself up to those interested in historical ecology, environmental archaeology, and topics related to resilience and sustainability.

For those working in coastal Louisiana or nearby, Brown’s thorough and detailed descriptions of material culture, which constitute the second chapter, provide an easy-to-read and accessible reference for students and scholars who do not have access to his archives at the Gulf Coast Survey. For the study of southern Louisiana material culture, this report is the second best thing to working directly with his type collections. Thorough in-text descriptions are of pottery, stone artifacts, and bone and antler objects and include richly detailed images, spatial distributions, and the chronological and temporal position of each artifact.

If you are an environmental archaeologist, ecologist, and/or coastal scientist interested in learning more about prehistoric life in aquatic environments, the following three sections, as well as the natural setting section of the introductory chapter, will be of special importance, as they each describe archaeological sites in different settings: salt domes and prairie terraces, the Chenier plain, and along waterways. By contextualizing the archaeology of each of these regions within specific environments, the volume provides the reader the opportunity to compare and contrast how indigenous architecture, site plans, site function, and material culture vary across different ecosystems. In the penultimate chapter, the author enumerates and describes these differences by presenting a sequence of maps for the region by time period, which feature diagnostic artifacts and cultural phases.

In the final concluding chapter, Brown dedicates three short pages to wrapping up and summarizing his thoughts. Important subsistence- and history-oriented conclusions are offered, especially regarding population shifts during the transition to maize agriculture, the timing and technology of salt production on Avery Island, and the presence of nonlocal, Mississippian populations on the island. My only critique here is that I would have liked to hear more from him in this concluding chapter; given that this is a data-oriented monograph, perhaps we can expect a future volume offering greater insight into his interpretations on the significance of ecology and environment on the long-term history of indigenous coastal Louisiana communities.

Reading The Petite Anse Project has been an exercise in revisiting lessons from Brown’s work, which include his emphasis on site locations, environments, architecture, site plans, and material culture. His clear and detailed writing avoids inferential leaps, focusing on data, and allows readers to draw their own interpretations and conclusions. For this, it is an excellent volume, because he writes with an eye towards the practicing archaeologist, one who would seek solutions to problems of identifying material culture and defining cultural sequences in a region that undeservingly sees too little attention. I remember an early lesson in the field; Dr. Brown standing on a prominent landscape feature in the southern Mississippi Bluffs, describing how a certain place felt to him and what it may have meant to humans hundreds of years ago. In the preface, Brown describes how he felt on his first visit to Avery Island. This book is a reminder of one of his most enduring lessons: that the experience of a place and its material culture must simultaneously be employed to understand its archaeology. Since the island is open to tourists, where you can visit the McIlhenny Tabasco factory, you too can experience this yourself. Bring a copy of The Petite Anse Project with you.


Reviewed by Terry L. Jones, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo

In 2003, Todd Braje and a contingent of students initiated unprecedented research on the Northern Channel
Islands off of southern California: a survey/testing project that targeted commercial Chinese abalone fishing from the late nineteenth century. Sites representing this short-lived (ca. 40 years) enterprise were known from the islands, but this was one of the first projects to focus exclusively on this ethnic group on the northern islands. Nineteenth-century Chinese sites are, in general, common in California, especially from the gold-mining era, and their distinctive artifact assemblages are well documented, but Braje’s project focused on a Chinese enterprise that probably few people are aware of. Goals of the project seem to have been twofold. First, the team sought to archaeologically confirm and further illuminate the history of this understudied ethnic industry. Fleshing out the histories of overlooked ethnic minorities has been a raison d’être for historical archaeology in California and elsewhere for many decades, and, in and of itself, this might not have been worthy of National Science Foundation funding. However, the second and more substantive goal of the project was one of historical ecology, the idea that archaeologists can provide deep time depth to modern ecological/environmental systems. The notion that archaeology can contribute to ecology in this way has also been bandied about for some time, but many studies espousing this goal have fallen short on substantive data. As such, the historical ecology approach may not have received the type of attention from biologists and other environmental scientists that its proponents hope for. Braje sought to improve this situation by investigating the nature and potential effects of Chinese commercial exploitation of black abalones in the nineteenth century. By identifying Chinese sites and measuring the size of the black abalone shells resulting from the harvest, and then comparing them with measurements from the preceding 11,500 years, Braje sought to provide a critical missing piece in the not fully understood ecological puzzle of kelp forests, abalone, sea otters, and humans.

With this book, Braje is partially successful in accomplishing these goals. Relying on recent and authoritative syntheses by others, he provides a well-written review of literature on the history of Chinese settlement and fishing in California. This contextual background makes up the bulk of the book. Braje’s contribution to historical ecology is contained in a relatively small number of pages toward the back, where measurements from historic and prehistoric abalones are presented. These data, which are key findings from the study, show quite clearly that the average size of black abalones harvested by the Chinese from ca. 1858–1900 were significantly larger than those collected by Native people over the preceding years. Unfortunately Braje’s interpretations of these measurements illustrate why biologists might be hesitant to embrace archaeological contributions to ecology. The diachronic size differential seems to merit a fairly simple and straightforward conclusion—that Native Californian harvest depressed abalone sizes so that once sea otter and human predators were removed from the nearshore ecosystem (both were gone from the islands by the early nineteenth century), abalones grew larger. Chinese fishermen then had the good fortune to exploit a bonanza of large abalones when they began their commercial harvest. Driven by market forces, the Chinese most likely targeted the largest and easiest-to-find individuals in order to turn a modest profit in this challenging, risky enterprise. However, Braje does not endorse this interpretation. Rather, he weaves his findings into an ethnic/ecological morality tale of sorts, asserting that the selection of large abalones was not driven by market pressures, but that the Chinese, aware of the history of demographic collapse of abalone populations in their homeland, engaged in a conscious effort to exploit the fishery sustainably. Despite being subjected to horrendous racism and brutality in California and having only a tenuous foothold in this commercial fishery, the Chinese, according to this narrative, were motivated to harvest abalones with a conservation-oriented strategy. This alternative scenario essentially replaces the “ecological Indian” with “ecological Chinese,” despite no empirical basis for such a conclusion. Later, while discussing red abalones, Braje suggests that Native Californians during the early Holocene initiated a program to intentionally reduce sea otter populations in order to promote the growth of abalones. Unsupported by empirical evidence, this idea also detracts from the scientific findings that are a highlight of the book. Such an interpretation does little to bolster the credibility of archaeology, but instead portrays us as storytellers rather than scientists. This is an interesting book, the core of which is an important contribution to marine historical ecology, but its scientific values are lost amid attempts at sociopolitical moralizing.


Reviewed by Barnet Pavao-Zuckerman, University of Maryland

Fort San Juan and the Limits of Empire is dedicated in part to the late Charlie Hudson, who instilled in his students the value of clean writing, good storytelling,