

H-NET BOOK REVIEW

Published by H-Net/H-Travel Review

Philip Duke. *The Tourists Gaze, the Cretans Glance: Archaeology and Tourism on a Greek Island*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, Inc. 2007. Paperback: 160 pages
Language: English. ISBN-10: 1598741438. ISBN-13: 978-1598741438. Product Dimensions:
8.8 x 6 x 0.5 inches. \$29.95

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Culture Critique of Archaeology in Contexts of Tourism

Having been engaged with the ethnographic study of tourism and of archaeology for more than two decades I was very excited to have the opportunity to review this book. My excitement and interest only increased while reading the Preface, Introduction, and Chapter 1. In these pages the author sets himself the task with the following: "This book is about a past but it is firmly situated in the present. It provides a case study of the past/present nexus and its impact on a group of people, tourists, who briefly tour a specific colony of the past, the Minoan Bronze Age" (pp. 14). Despite the vagueness of the phrase "past/present nexus" (what does this concretely mean and reference?), this statement does focus on tourists as an object of study. The author's objective, detailed in the remainder of the paragraph, is to show how "social inequality" is inherent in and expressed by the archaeological interpretation Minoan Civilization and construction of Minoan sites for tourism.

As an ethnographer, I was misled by own preconceptions that this would therefore be an ethnographic (and historical) study of the social contexts of archaeology with specific focus on some aspects of how tourism and archaeology intersect. By the time I was reading page 70 (out of 121 pages of text) I realized however that this was a different book than what I thought I was reading and than what it at times proclaimed itself to be about. I return this issue following chapter summaries of the book.

Chapter 1, "Touring the Past," offers the reader a statement about the theoretical assumptions and focus of the book. The author begins with a series of questions on what and how tourists experience and understand archaeological sites. This leads to the most precise expression of what this book seeks to do and, does in fact, accomplish: explore the substance and form of the archaeological knowledge that is presented to tourists about Minoan heritage sites. In this chapter he clarifies his theoretical position on whether or not tourists and publics in general are passive recipients or active interpreters of the constructions of the past that archaeology offers tourism. His three assumptions are: that the past is constructed by archaeology, that these constructions are forged out of and express a class elitism of archaeology/ists, and that publics are not passive. He posits that it is archaeologists moral duty to allow greater public, especially "lower" and non-middle class audience, to participate in the construction and in the interpretation of the past.

Chapter 2, “The Minoan Past,” is a synthetic synopsis of the current state of archaeological knowledge about Minoan Crete. For the non-specialist this is very informative, besides being essential for Duke’s argument. His description is geared toward pointing out the class bias of this body of knowledge and in defining a few key archaeological debates.

Chapter 3, “Tourists and the Constructed Past,” is a brief, eight page, synthetic review of some theoretical issues in the anthropology of tourism. This chapter concisely summarizes the major positions of the key anthropologists on the question of authenticity and commodification of the past (e.g., Nash, Bruner, McEnroe, Greenwood). The point of this chapter is to present the theoretical-conceptual grounds to argue: first, that the issue of (identifying) authenticity is not important and, second, that the archaeological past as constructed for tourism is a real (authentic if you like) reality in the present regardless of archaeologists’ (or other public’s) debates about the veracity and accuracy of the antiquity that is constructed for and presented to tourists.

Chapter 4, “Modern Crete, Ancient Minoans, and the Tourist Experience,” complements the preceding chapter by offering a descriptive survey of tourism representation of Minoan civilization. After a brief, two-three page characterization of Cretans’ relationship to their past, Duke provides synthetic descriptions of archaeological sites, specifically Knossos and Gournia, museum representations, specifically at Iraklion, and touristic literatures, primarily site brochures, as a way to “picture the Minoan past ... that is presented to the public” (pp. 88). While the last part of the title of the chapter, “Tourist Experience” resonates with its first sentence, “This chapter turns to the specific encounter of tourists with a Minoan past” (pp. 67), neither tourists’ experiences nor tourists’ encounters have any presence in the content of this chapter. There is neither description nor discussion of tourists’ experiences of and encounter with archeological sites, museums, or tourism literatures. The focus is entirely on what tourism represents of archaeological knowledge to tourists. Although the author does not hide the fact that this “picture” is based entirely on the subjective experience of one tourist’s (his) encounter with these materials, he also does not in fact explore his own experience and encounter. This weakness is particularly noteworthy given the author’s explicit plea that lower-class tourists should be able to participate in the construction of the meaning and interpretation of archaeological antiquities.

Chapter 5, “Constructing a Prehistory,” is an analysis of two different broadly construed periods or paradigmatic horizons of interpreting the Minoan past (19th-early 20th century and the contemporary period starting in the era of Binford’s New Archaeology). He is specifically interested in analyzing (in broad strokes) the political implications of the different historical modes and forms of knowledge that have been produced about the Minoans. The author considers the colonial/modern, processualist, postprocessualist, and Greek state archaeological constructions (i.e., knowledge production) of the Minoan past. This is one of the two longest chapters forming the substantive body of the argument (along with Chapter 4). However, this chapter only consists of a general discussion that does not make close, detailed analyses of any specific body of knowledge. It is broad scoped commentary and synthesis filled with insights backed by an erudite knowledge of the field.

It is less a rigorous analysis than a set of insights that would be useful as a launching point for sustained, in depth studies using historical, ethnographic, and sociological methods. The central argument of this chapter is that there is a class-elitism in the production of knowledge of Minoan past that extends across from the 19th century.

Chapter 6, “The Nexus of the Past,” is less a chapter than a three page epilogue with a thought-picture presented to synthesize and encapsulate the author’s arguments in this book. This image illustrates the author’s concept of “past/present nexus.” Unfortunately, this term had only appeared once previously with an opaque meaning in the sentence quoted above that stated the objectives and purpose of this book. This second occurrence, at the very end, is where the concept is defined and discussed, albeit very briefly and in the illustration. This “chapter” does not attain the level of a conclusion and this commentary would have been more effectively used in the Introduction as a tool to conceptualize what this study sought to accomplish.

Half-way through this book, I began to wonder why the book was not doing what it seemed to have set out as its task. By the end of the book, I realized that this book is not a study “of tourism” in the sense of either an historical or an ethnographic investigation of tourism processes or tourism development; nor is it an ethnographic investigation of tourist experiences, consumption, or practices of the past. Further, despite the book’s title, it really does not provide an understanding of Cretan relationship to their past based on first-hand research: The author quite explicitly states this when Duke asserts on more than one occasion that this book is based on his subjective experience while living in Crete during a sabbatical during which he visited archaeological sites. He calls his book something of a “self-ethnography” and, significantly, never, not once, an ethnographic study. If it is not an ethnography of archaeology, what is this book? I began to ask, therefore, for whom is this book written and by whom? It is generally well written (not always) and easy to follow. This led me at times, to wonder if this book could be sold to tourists in the tourist markets in Greece, even it had this as one of the intended audiences? Regardless of the intentions of author and the press, I suspect it would do very well, especially with its beautiful cover,.

The study is not ethnography in the sense that it does not seem to have been explicitly designed as an ethnographic research project with a rigorous methodological plan. The only methodology that is described is “a very personal journey... [based on] professional and personal observations... published sources... informal conversations...[and] chatting over coffee” (pp. 18-19). While the ethnography is weak, the profound insights, erudite understandings, and expansive scope of knowledge of the author has allowed him to produce a “study” that is nonetheless very well worth reading. It is written by an archeologist primarily for archaeologists. It has the exceptional merit of being a book that speaks to archaeologists and tells them they need to be concerned with the social contexts of archaeology. Further, it is also a warning for archaeologists: in order to do good ethnography one must have some training and have a rigorous research design, even if or especially because the subject matter is so familiar. However, this study, to reiterate, is not ethnography: Instead it should be viewed as a strong example of culture critique made from a position internal (i.e., as an archaeologist) to what it targets, archaeology.

This book should also be read by ethnographers, cultural studies scholars, and students of tourism: the weaknesses and the successes of this book offer many lessons from which we can learn and improve our work. This study needs to be read, and read closely, in multiple contexts of disciplinary interests to extract both intended and unintended significances. It is an other important contribution for the continuing development of the ethnographic study of archaeology.

November 5, 2008