

H-Net Reviews

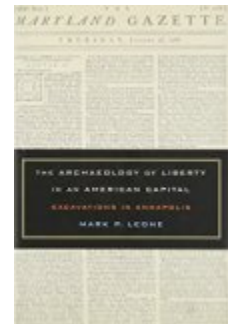
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Mark P. Leone. *The Archaeology of Liberty in an American Capital: Excavations in Annapolis*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005. xxvi + 327 pp. \$41.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-24450-4.

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Archaeology and the Intangible in American History

People who wonder what historical archaeologists actually do, and more importantly what they can teach us that we cannot learn from written documents, will be surprised and hopefully delighted with this book. Here, readers will discover the true reality of archaeological research: that it is seldom the stuff of the movies and that interpretations are indeed hard won and never obvious. Readers will get insights into the true nature and promise of historical archaeology, the ways in which various meanings can be imparted to the past, and the role that archaeology plays in interrogating what we think we already know.

Leone's program, called Archaeology in Annapolis, is one of the oldest and most successful archaeological programs in the world. This book is based on twenty-two years of excavations and analyses of home sites and public buildings ranging from the grand houses and manicured landscapes of the elite to the simple homes of men and women held in lifelong bondage. Often using an extremely personal perspective, Leone explores the meanings of pieces of material culture, extending from the terribly common—the toothbrush—to the more unusual—pieces of printer's type. But this is not a mundane recital of archaeological minutiae. Instead, Leone unravels the complex history of Annapolis by examining the notion of liberty through the lens of such objects.

Liberty would not immediately occur to most people as a fitting topic for archaeological research. After all,

what does liberty actually look like and how do we know it when we see it? Beginning with the ideology of individualism that was and still is the stuff of the American Dream, Leone traverses an archaeological landscape replete with signs that real men and women living every day in Annapolis struggled to create their own sense of liberty. Nowhere is this search for freedom more apparent, says Leone, than among Annapolis's African American community.

Leone uses ideas from Jürgen Habermas and Louis Althusser to investigate the historical culture of African America as it was expressed in Annapolis. One of his most interesting analyses focuses on the discovery and meaning of spirit bundles. Spirit bundles appear as caches of artifacts found together in the soil: buttons, pins, broken plates, and other objects that African Americans used both to protect themselves from evil forces and to distinguish themselves from their owners. Rather than perceiving these bundles as simple proof of the retention of African customs in America—a common conclusion of historical archaeologists in past years—Leone situates the bundles firmly within the struggle for liberty.

Ultimately, Leone's analysis focuses on the ways in which men and women in capitalist societies wrestle with the realities of that economic system. As he notes, "The promise of and quest for freedom masked the inescapable reality of capitalism's base and essence" (p. 247). As people become absorbed in the system, they find various

ways to accept it or to struggle against it, and it is this ongoing conflict that Leone addresses so adroitly in this book.

This book is not what people unfamiliar with historical archaeology might expect; it is much more than that. Rather than offer detailed descriptions of artifacts supplemented with copious pictures and drawings, as one might expect in an archaeology book based on excavation, Leone takes us far beyond this surface world into the mind of the archaeologist attempting to untangle the

meanings of what he sees in the evidence. We accompany him as he searches for answers, as he strives to negotiate the complex past he has entered. The clues are diverse and lead in different directions, and some are misleading. But through it all, Leone comes to understand better the notion of liberty as it was struggled for and expressed in Annapolis, Maryland, and the ways in which historical archaeologists can use the remaining evidence—memories, histories, colonial newspapers, toothbrushes, dishes, and landscapes—to educate us about the world in which we live.

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