Earth, and its archaeological record, is diverse. Archaeologists continually work to characterize how the archaeological record formed and in what ways it can be interpreted to learn about past human lifeways. Researchers continue to revise their ideas and approaches as new evidence is unearthed, the puzzle pieces shift, and images of the past are reconstructed. Sullivan and Olszewski acknowledge that archaeological variability influences researchers’ processes, and they have created a volume that provides disciplinary self-reflection. The book’s contributors use global case studies that incorporate diverse theoretical and methodological perspectives—conceptual, cross-cultural, experimental, scalar, etc.—to provide insights that illuminate the myriad ways in which archaeologists can approach human prehistory.

The book’s first section, “Advances in Interpreting Regional Archaeological Records,” explores spatiality: how sites, assemblages, and artifacts are distributed within landscapes and how these data can be used to investigate prehistoric technological organization, human interactions, mobility, and what factors contribute to humans’ sense of place.

Two articles in this section stand out. First, Holdoway et al. investigate how the terminal Holocene arid environment in western New South Wales, Australia, influenced raw material access, technology, artifact reuse, and occupational durations at a landscape level. They conclude that Aboriginal mobile lifestyles in this arid zone focused on provisioning people rather than provisioning places. This article demonstrates that studies of raw material procurement and mobility should consider a human-focused approach in addition to the more typical place-focused one.

In the second standout, Roth writes about how “persistent places” emerged in the Mimbres Valley in southwestern New Mexico and what socioeconomic consequences resulted as these occupations continued. Roth notes that how people reacted to environmental change in these landscapes influenced regional culture change. Among the articles in this collection, Roth’s continues to linger in my mind and make me (re-)consider how I learn about and understand both the archaeological record and how prehistoric groups related to the spaces they occupied.

The book’s second section, “Venerable Sites Revisited,” reinterprets important archaeological sites via studies that use new methods and theoretical frameworks. Here, Rollefson’s contribution is notable for integrating experimental research into a new model of biface production focused on technological features (i.e., chaînes opératoires) that he uses to reclassify the lithic assemblage from Tabun Cave, Israel. Rollefson finds that when the assemblage is classified following the typical morphological protocols, researchers over-characterize biface quantities in the assemblage. His techno-
logical approach yields greater numbers of cleavers in the collection. He also observes that cleavers occurred in higher frequencies at other Levantine sites. This study shows that researchers may have underestimated the quantities of cutting and/or butchering tools in lithic assemblages; the result has implications for models of human evolution and cognitive development and underscores why routinely assessing archaeological typologies (and integrating experimental programs into this work) is an important part of the discipline.

Finally, the book’s third section, “Cross-Cultural, Conceptual, and Experimental Perspectives,” examines how archaeologists have used theoretical frameworks to interpret variable archaeological records.

Here, two papers provide refreshing new ideas. First, Whittaker and Kamp use cross-cultural data to interpret atypical lithic artifacts as powerful ritual artifacts. Using ethnographic examples, the authors breathe life into an artifact category often exclusively considered utilitarian, arguing that these items could have protected humans from hostile forces, or been offerings or status symbols. This paper reminds readers to consider diverse perspectives as they approach archaeological interpretation. Second, Chase examines how archaeologists have described prehistoric humans’ “mental templates” in artifact manufacture, concluding that the term is imprecise and that archaeologists should instead focus on creating testable hypotheses to learn about past human behavior. This paper demonstrates how definitions can both help and hinder archaeological analysis, an important consideration as archaeologists continue to unearth evidence of the earliest humans.

Sullivan, Olszewski, and the rest of the volume’s contributors achieved their goal of providing examples of how archaeologists can understand a diverse archaeological record with an eye toward assessing and improving the discipline’s theoretical frameworks and methods. I appreciate that the book integrates a global perspective alongside diverse frameworks—ecological, typological, ethnographic, experimental, conceptual, etc.—to interpret past lifeways. I think the mark of a good book is that it sticks with you—it makes you consider, and perhaps even improve, your own practice. This book has challenged me to think more deeply and broadly about the methods I use and the interpretations I make from the data I collect. For these reasons, I believe the volume is worth reading for any archaeologist who wants to critically engage with how they approach the past.

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