As well as the latest research, there are some fascinating examples of early tools, China: visions through the ages discusses the origins of agriculture and the Neolithic roots of Chinese civilisational traditions, with a handy table showing the different cultures active at different points across the sprawling land. Research into the Hemudu culture (beginning 5000 BC) has shown that early communities in the Lower Yangtze River region had sophisticated systems of architecture and technology, and a varied diet. Ongoing excavations at the Hemudu site Tianloushan (which lies below the water table, providing good conditions for the survival of the settlement’s wooden posts and walls) have recovered thousands of ancient rice grains preserved by charring, as well as probable evidence for the management of peaches, foxnuts, and water chestnuts – crops that are important in China’s economy today. As for animals, dogs were the earliest domesticated in the country, with the oldest finds dating to about 10,000 BC.

Much of the material in the book stems from investigations in the 20th century, from the milestone excavation at the Shang Dynasty site of Anyang in 1928-1937 onwards. This was the first campaign organised by the new Academia Sinica, and established the importance of archaeological fieldwork in modern China. As well as the latest research, there are some fascinating examples of ‘old’ archaeology. Ornate bronze vessels were highly prized objects in ancient China, and one Eastern Han stone carving shows a bronze ding vessel being discovered in the Si river and (unsuccessfully) hauled out with rope. Although this stone does not illustrate the actual retrieval of the object, it is a common motif of the period, and shows an interest in earlier antiquity within the ancient world.

Bronzes come in all shapes and sizes, and many have inscriptions, but older than these writings in metal are some 200,000 Shang oracle bones. These date to about 1200-1050 BC and were used in divination, by writing on a piece of turtle shell or ox bone and assessing the cracks that appear when heat is applied. In the surviving fragments, we can see a king’s desire to have a son or to get rid of a troubling toothache. Some of the bones have been written on again when the outcome of the event was known, so we too can find out what fate had in store for these people.

One interesting feature of China: visions through the ages is that, as it has its roots in a curatorial department, it offers some insights into museum practices, such as acquisitions and personal opinions about different artefacts, changing standards and expectations of labels and displays, and techniques available to conservators. With this museum-based dimension, and splendid images of sites and artefacts, the book is a multi-faceted and comprehensive guide to China’s past and how we view it.

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Materialising Roman Histories
Astrid Van Oyen and Martin Pitts (eds)
Oxbow Books, £40
ISBN 978-1785706769

Your possessions can tell people a lot about who you are, but this only makes up a small part of what objects do and mean: all have hidden stories in ways that often go unnoticed. This book therefore asks a simple question: what did objects do to Roman society? Objects obviously did not have minds of their own, but they did have powerful effects on behaviour, whether intended or not, through their evolving shapes, styles, and decoration. How and why objects evolved is not always clear – perhaps new crazes in ceramic lamp and figurine design, for example, were simply the artistic pursuits of bored craftspeople. But did this affect how people interacted with objects. Standardised Samian tableware, for instance, stacked and allowed traders to transport more goods and make bigger profits. Less variation also meant that more people with similar pottery were now more concerned with owning the ‘shiniest’ and ‘purest’ products. At its heart, this is a digestible academic book that shows how people and objects were closely connected in the Roman world, and is vital reading for archaeology students and anyone interested in wider material culture studies.

Matthew Fittock

Archaeology of the Night: Life after Dark in the Ancient World
Nancy Gonlin and April Nowell (eds)
University Press of Colorado, $75
ISBN 978-1607326779

With easy access in modern homes to instant illumination and streetlights a common feature in the outside world, it can be difficult to relate to how people in antiquity experienced the night. But, just like our ancestors, most of us spend the night at home. Household archaeology, then, can shed some light on how people lived through the night in the past, and how they set about the essential activity of sleep. Most cultures have artefacts that can easily be associated with the night or sleep, such as Classic Maya benches and mats; by looking at these we can observe practices like co-residence.

Arguing that most archaeology focuses on daytime activities, the book draws from a range of sites across the globe to show the astonishing diversity of nocturnal activities. The night is not all about sleep, visits to brothels, and witchcraft; there is still work to be done, particularly in agriculture, and in Oman even today the night continues to be the preferred time for water distribution. Other modern case studies appear in this influential book, such as 18th- and 19th-century Bahamian plantations, where the dark night offered enslaved peoples a chance to enjoy forbidden activities.

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