

*The Archaeology of Ancestors:
Death, Memory, and Veneration*

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(EDITORS)

University Press of Florida,
Gainesville, 2016. 261 pp., 43 figs.,
forward, list of contributors, index.
\$89.95 cloth.

The *Archaeology of Ancestors* is a pointed collection of comparative scholarly essays that address the long-debated tensions between classic anthropological concerns over kinship, death, and memory by refocusing attention on ancestor veneration. The editors position ancestors as the loci around which contests over legitimacy, agency, power, authority, inheritance, identity, and memory consistently circulate. Ancestors, and more formally the concepts of ancestor cult and veneration, have a central place in the scholarly debates of 19th- and 20th-century anthropology and ethnohistory. The eventual marginalization of ancestors as a topic of study within anthropology left many debates inconclusive. The editors, however, argue that as ancestors are ultimately implicated in most arenas of social life—whether politics, religion, social organization, material culture production, or architecture—the lack of attention to them in recent studies in anthropology, and perhaps especially archaeology, leaves a deficit.

The collection grew out of a Society for American Archaeology session that brought together perspectives that cross temporal and spatial divides, ranging from the ancient

Greek Iron Age (1200–700 B.C.) to Moche Early Intermediate (A.D. 1–850) in the Andes. The volume features nine chapters, divided into two parts. “Part I: Revisiting Ancestors” includes two introductory chapters and three case studies that reconsider three regions of the world that have been the subject of the most influential anthropological works on ancestors and ancestor veneration: China, ancient Greece, and sub-Saharan Africa. “Part II: Discovering Ancestors” includes four chapters whose authors focus on regions underrepresented in 19th- and 20th-century anthropological scholarship on ancestors and associated ritual: central and western Europe, the Andes, and the Maya regions of Central America. This volume effectively argues for the continued centrality of archaeologist’s engagement with the role of ancestors and their associated ritual practice and material culture in past societies. It employs broad and multifaceted categories of evidence to draw attention to what the material record—archaeological and archival—can expose about both whom ancestors may have been and how and why they may have been important to past peoples.

Part 1 begins with the editors’ two introductory chapters, which form a robust framework for the volume. In “Leveraging the Dead” Jon B. Hageman and Erica Hill provide an impressive synthesis of the development of the concept “ancestor” in anthropology and its associated ritual spheres, commonly denoted by “veneration” or “cult.” They trace the development of competing definitions and agendas surround-

ing ancestors in anthropological thought. They begin with late 19th-century debates about the position of ancestor worship as the earliest form of religion and move to review the substantial impact of Africanist and Chinese ethnographies on understanding the relationship between power, social organization, and sociopolitical transformation in ancestor studies. Finally, they trace the decline of ancestor studies in cultural anthropology that occurred between the 1970s and 1990s, but suggest that the recent turn toward postcolonialities and alternative modernities offer promising spaces for the reemergence of ancestors in anthropological thought. They leave readers with a list of 10 key definitional elements that can be operationalized to avoid overconstraining or overdiluting the concept.

In their second framing piece, "The Archaeology of Ancestors," Hill and Hageman specifically address archaeological thought surrounding ancestors. Why should archaeologists be concerned with ancestors? Ancestors are often materialized through both their biological remains and the periodic ritual acts venerating them. These materializations ought to be visible, and even prominent, in the archaeological record. Such potential prominence, however, risks the uncritical application of ancestors as explanations for poorly understood archaeological phenomena. For this reason, the authors turn readers' attention to two milestone monographs in the archaeology of ancestors: *Living with the Ancestors: Kinship and Kingship in Ancient Maya Society* (Patricia A. McAnany, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1995) and *Access to Origins: Affines, Ancestors, and Aristocrats* (Mary W. Helms, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1998). Aligning with these foundational works,

the editors suggest that there are several lines of material evidence that archaeologists can use to identify past ancestors and evaluate past people's engagements with them. These multiple forms of material culture include mortuary remains, shrines and similar deposits, architecture and landscape, symbols and icons, and documentary sources, namely ethnohistories. These lines of evidence are enthusiastically taken up by the volume contributors. Although each author takes a slightly different approach to defining and delimiting ancestors in their pieces, the volume as a whole puts forth an important distinction between the general dead and a select ancestral collective (named or unnamed). This distinction, then, draws critical epistemic lines between mortuary archaeology, for instance, and an archaeology of ancestors.

In chapter 3 Roderick Campbell seeks to tighten the definition of ancestors that is applied to ancestor veneration in China, suggesting that early Chinese studies have suffered from overly inclusive definitions of ancestors and ancestor worship that ultimately obscure how local beliefs and practices give shape to apparently widespread customs. Carla Antonaccio's eloquent response to studies of ancient Greece that overly constrict their definition of ancestors pushes archaeologists to consider the ramifications of omitting fictive kin from studies as, in doing so, the processes that underwrite the formations of group identity dissolve within the analysis. Charles Mather focuses on ethnoarchaeological observations of Kusasi ancestor shrines in northern Ghana to show how archaeologists might interpret the features they encounter with ancestors in mind. The chapters that form part 1 cogently demonstrate that attention

to periodicity and context are critical to establishing robust and fruitful studies of the role of ancestors in past societies.

Matthew L. Murray and Estella Weiss-Krejci (chaps. 6 and 7, respectively) turn readers' attention toward Europe. Murray makes a case for understanding the structured ancestral landscapes of Iron Age southwestern Germany through a phenomenological analysis of the role of monuments in the collective cultural performance of ancestor veneration. Weiss-Krejci traces the genealogical landscapes of the royal House of Hapsburg, reinforcing the notion raised by Antonaccio that fictive kin are just as, if not more, important to establishing group identities, resource access, and the intergenerational transference of sociopolitical power as are biological ancestors.

Hill and Hageman (chaps. 8 and 9, respectively) turn readers' attention to the Americas. Mobilizing the elements of ancestorhood that they jointly advocated in their introductory chapters, each applies a critical eye to evaluating the evidence for ancestors and ancestor veneration in their particular study areas. Focusing on Moche iconography and architecture, Hill argues that while evidence for Moche ancestors as a select group of the dead have yet to be identified, a strong case can be made for their veneration by evaluating artistic depictions of ritual feasting, captive taking, and bloodletting during the Early Intermediate. The volume

closes with Hageman's contribution seeking also to distinguish between the general deceased and venerated ancestors during the Late Classic period across the Maya lowlands. This important distinction mirrored gender and class divisions in ancient Maya society and can be observed through multiple lines of evidence.

While this book will have broad archaeological appeal, the subfield of mortuary archaeology especially would benefit from an engagement with ancestors as a conceptual framework. This volume finds its strength in its cross cultural, cross temporal nature and the richness of its introductory frameworks. Direct conversation about the sociopolitical implications of ancestor studies today—what of the emergent obsession with tracing genomic ancestors? How have new nations created fictive kin to tie themselves to the territories they claim?—are underplayed in the volume (although see Murray, p. 87). Nonetheless, readers who focus on the more recent past will encounter provocative points of reference with past societies that can be used to engage in scholarly conversations that continue to cross geographic and temporal boundaries to advance the study of ancestors broadly. This fresh take on a foundational anthropological topic will find wide appeal and is certainly recommended.

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