

***Measuring Time with Artifacts: A History of Methods in American Archaeology.* R. Lee Lyman and Michael J. O'Brien. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006. 346 pp.¹**

Reviewed by Don G. Wyckoff

Archaeologists R. Lee Lyman and Michael J. O'Brien are a prolific writing combination. Since 1997, they have published (sometimes with a third person) no less than seven major books and a number of important journal articles covering facets of the history of the development of archaeology and archaeological conceptualization here in the Americas. Without exception, these volumes have been well-researched, interesting syntheses that belong on the shelves of scholarly libraries, be they of individual archaeologists, cultural resource management firms, or universities. This latest study needs to be added to these libraries.

In *Measuring Time with Artifacts* Lyman and O'Brien document the many ways that archaeologists have used the material things they recover to gain perspectives on the time depth of prehistory in the Americas, especially here in the United States. For example, we are treated to readable syntheses about A. V. Kidder, A. L. Kroeber, and Jim Ford who used stratigraphically recovered pottery sherds to identify changes through time and used their findings to correlate, through the method of seriation, surface and excavated materials from other sites at local and regional scales. Likewise, we are reacquainted with the practioners (such as Waldo Wedel) and their applications of the direct historical approach, a means that attempted to track historically known native groups through their material culture back into prehistory. Notably, while providing a historical assessment of how archaeologists have viewed artifacts as clues to time depth, Lyman and O'Brien take issue with how other histories and theoretical perspectives have viewed artifacts and chronology in American archaeology. To be explicit, this is no dry history of how scholars struggled to develop and use the archaeological record to gain understanding of cultural change and the time depth involved in the days before radiocarbon testing or the other current means that we have to assess the ages of the artifacts we recover.

Most obviously, *Measuring Time with Artifacts* is going to be a valuable text for graduate classes on archaeological theory and the history of archaeology. So, why should such a volume be reviewed in a journal for anthropologists working in museum settings? I would think that, given the voguish concerns with exhibits and representation therein that pervade some cultural anthropologists' thoughts and research today, this book would give ample background to think about how our current knowledge of prehistory got to where it is. Admittedly, before the present array of means available for dating artifacts and sites, we archaeologists spent a lot of time trying to perfect typologies and their use as markers of both chronology and expressions of a particular people's material culture. The resultant literature of that research was not always dynamic. I fondly remember a former

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professor of ethnology and cultural anthropology referring to *Indians Before Columbus* authors Paul S. Martin, George I. Quimby, and Donald Collier as the “winking, blinking, and nod” of archaeological writing (University of Chicago Press, 1947). When they put that synthesis together, dendrochronology was the only means to absolute dating. But even as late as 1949, we knew that tree ring dating was not going to be applicable everywhere across the United States, and, even if it was, it was not going to help us with the time depth that was emerging from thick middens and buried deposits in the Midwest and Southeast. Consequently, *Measuring Time with Artifacts* should be viewed as a good source for gaining appreciation for the struggles that archaeologists made as they tried to use pottery, spearpoints, arrowpoints, and other time-sensitive artifacts to link sites and assess when and how Native American societies changed in the past. It was a struggle to understand structure and process in prehistory. Maybe that is a story we need to also be telling through exhibits. At least it bears keeping in mind as we critique the stories that exhibits are trying to tell.

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