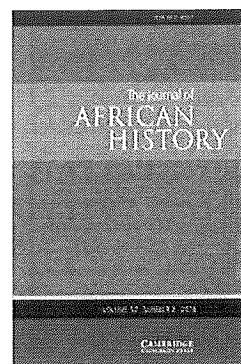


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**MATERIAL LIFE IN THE CAPE UNDER THE VOC. *Historical Archaeology in South Africa: Material Culture of the Dutch East India Company at the Cape.* Edited by Carmel Schrire. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2014. Pp. 285. \$89, hardback (ISBN 978-1-59874-164-3).**

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photographic record of some of the scratchy pieces retrieved through battlefield archaeology, such as a few camp tins and bricks, and the burial sites of soldiers who perished in the 1918 Spanish influenza pandemic. Their poignancy as historical heritage is all the more striking in a current political climate of official Namibian, South African, and German indifference to the South-West Africa campaign, and with there being no other 'compelling reason for anyone to care' (p. 112) about its significance to their interwoven colonial pasts.

In other respects, though, the 'new light' promised by *The Horns of the Beast* illuminates only one dimension of the war in this region, that of the operational conduct by the invading and defending forces. Here, it adds precise and interesting detail on a wide range of campaign-related issues, ranging from desertion, to Baster involvement in hostilities, and to the ever forbidding environment. Such was the desert heat that the thermometers carried by the South African army 'burst when the temperature climbed over 130 degrees Fahrenheit' (p. 97).

Stejskal's new volume does not substantially alter the established understanding of the impact of the First World War on German South-West Africa. London wanted the colony's strategic port and wireless facilities knocked out to remove their threat to imperial communications. While eager to do England's bidding, Pretoria was also after bigger fish. An invasion for conquest would enable Britain's newest white dominion to reel in neighboring northwestern territory as a first step towards realizing its geopolitical vision of an expansionist 'Greater South Africa'. Even if waged over tricky terrain, hostilities in German South West Africa were cheap as well as short. In the memorable words of the Boer loyalist, Deneys Reitz, a huge territory had been gained for fewer casualties than the cost of an average trench raid in France.

In calling the German South-West African campaign pivotal to Germany's African interests and describing the colony as 'its most prized African possession' (p. 11), the author is, perhaps, exaggerating a little. Even the dim-witted Kaiser knew otherwise. Two decades earlier, Wilhelm II had concluded that, were his country ever to end up at war with Britain, South-West Africa could be jettisoned to concentrate all energies on the defense of German East Africa. For there lay not sand, but the temptation of the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf.

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## MATERIAL LIFE IN THE CAPE UNDER THE VOC

*Historical Archaeology in South Africa: Material Culture of the Dutch East India Company at the Cape.*  
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**Key Words:** South Africa, anthropology, architecture, material culture, museums and memorials, trade.

Many historical archaeologists will welcome the publication of this book, especially those with specialist interests in South Africa, the *Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie* (VOC), or

Dutch East India Company), and the archaeology of Early Modern European colonialism and trade networks. Carmel Schrire, the principal author, is a prominent historical archaeologist, best known among Africanist colleagues for her excavations during the 1980s and 1990s at the site of Oudepost I on Saldanha Bay lagoon some 120 km north-west of Cape Town (which also feature here), and her parallel research on changing relations between autochthonous pastoralist and hunter-gatherer communities in the Western Cape and the consequences of European intrusion into their territories. Schrire also has a reputation for fiercely defending her interpretations of the archaeological signatures of early European encounters with these autochthonous groups, and for robust responses to her critics. There are several signs that this is a reputation she intends to preserve. However, this book is very far from being a diatribe. It also differs significantly from her autobiographical account of her archaeological career in South Africa and how it shaped her intellectual stance (1995). Instead, the book is a scholarly analysis of a vast body of data (predominantly, but not exclusively, archaeological finds of different kinds and their contextual associations), from a series of sites associated with the VOC that have been excavated by several different archaeologists, including Schrire and her collaborators, at different times over the past forty years. These sites are the Castle of Good Hope (Cape Town), Oudepost I, and Elsenburg, a VOC farm 50 km east of Cape Town.

In terms of structure, the book closely follows the conventional excavation monograph format. The opening chapter by Schrire provides the scene setting, in terms of historical archaeology, an outline history of the VOC, historical archaeology in South Africa, the background to the various projects that generated the archaeological remains scrutinised in this book, and how and why these diverse data sets have been assembled here. Chapter Two describes in more detail the areas selected for excavation at each site, the surviving architectural remains, and the stratigraphic evidence. It is important to note that elements of the excavation archive from the Castle and Elsenburg have suffered from benign neglect. This limits the potential for detailed stratigraphic interpretations of the different contexts from which the various finds were recovered. Schrire does not avoid these issues, and some of those involved in the earlier excavations, especially those at the Castle, are called to account. However, Schrire's main points are not just that 'stuff happens' and archaeologists need to be as vigilant and outspoken about conserving excavation archives as they are about protecting sites and monuments from mindless destruction, but also that through a sequence of unrelated, but ultimately connected, events, a once thriving and intellectually groundbreaking tradition of historical archaeology of Cape Town (especially the archaeology department at the University of Cape Town) was allowed, through no malice aforethought, to wither away.

There follow nine chapters on the finds, mostly co-authored with various specialists: faunal remains (Heinrich); Asian and European ceramics (Klose, Jordan); gunflints (Durst); and items of personal ornament (White), along with Schrire's analyses of the glass and metalwork components. Each chapter begins with an informed overview of the subject material that is its focus, written in a manner that a non-specialist can engage with. Subsequent chapter sections focus in on specifics and these will largely interest those needing to identify finds recovered from excavations elsewhere that may have a VOC connection. In this regard, the published photographs are not very informative. Fortunately, all of the images are reproduced at much better quality on the accompanying

CD-ROM, where catalogues of all the analysed material can also be found. Each chapter concludes with a synthesis and interpretation, all engagingly written with numerous insights about how much can be learned about life in the Cape during the heyday of the VOC, and some important challenges to previous interpretations of these materials. The concluding chapter draws these observations together in a series of well-crafted and historically informed vignettes. Six appendices provide supplementary information on a variety of topics. These are followed by a very helpful index.

This volume offers scholars with specialist interests in the period, locality, and/or the VOC valuable descriptions and analyses of the everyday detritus of early Dutch settlement at the Cape. These will prove to be invaluable sources of reference for dating and contextualising similar finds from other VOC sites, whether in South Africa or elsewhere. It is also more than this. It is an accessible and thought-provoking interpretation of a large body of material remains, much of which was previously unpublished, associated with the VOC presence in the Cape; a passionate defense of historical archaeology and demonstration of its potential; and, a call to arms for the revival of archaeological research on this crucial phase in South Africa's history.

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## UNEVEN TERRAIN

*Materialities of Ritual in the Black Atlantic.*

Edited by Akinwumi Ogundiran and Paula Saunders.

Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2014. Pp. xii + 404. \$65, hardback (ISBN 978-0-253-01386-6).

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**Key Words:** Anthropology, comparative, currencies, diaspora, material culture, religion, ritual.

This book originated in a symposium at the Society of Historical Archaeology in 2009. In their introductory chapter the editors say the contributors seek to show how objects, places, and landscapes assume agentive roles in rituals that contribute in everyday lives to cultural formation, identity, memory, and self-realization. Their approach embodies current trends, substituting a concern for historical context, creative bricolage, and situational specificity for a preoccupation with fixed ethnic identities and related questions of 'authenticity'.

The editors review some of the many dichotomies that scholars have put forward to cope rationally with the apparently irrational (sacred/profane, ritual/ceremony, meaning/practice, and so on). They praise Catherine Bell's performative understanding of ritual and Charles Pierce's work on the social construction of meaning, and they refer briefly to Bruno Latour and Alfred Gell on the attribution of agency to objects that mediate social relationships, but it is difficult to discern the influence of any of these theorists in the book. Some of the contributors abuse their freedom from the old imperative to associate American traits with specific African peoples by reverting to the methods of nineteenth-century anthropology, hunting through a vast pan-Atlantic literature in search of traits, taken out of context, to support speculations about function and meaning.