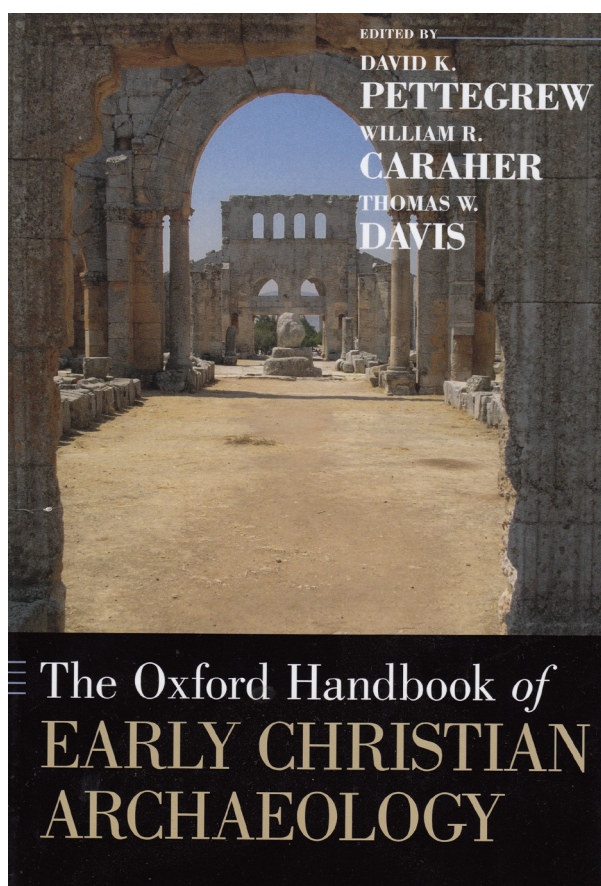


Reviews



David K. Pettegrew, William R. Caraher and Thomas W. Davis eds, *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Archaeology*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2019, ISBN9780199369041, pp 707+xv, illus., maps, plans, USD 154.00.

Reviewed by Christopher J. Davey

This handbook represents a watershed in the study of the archaeology of the first seven centuries of Christianity. A previous book by W.H.C. Frend, *The Archaeology of Early Christianity* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1996) devoted less than ten pages to this period. *The Handbook* reviews the history of archaeological research into Christianity, discusses methodological developments and surveys the current knowledge of early Christian archaeology. This volume aims to provide ‘up-to-date syntheses and new interpretations of evidence from more than two centuries of archaeological investigations’ (p. 2).

The book contains thirty-four contributions arranged in a form of three-dimensional matrix: one axis dealing with *Sacred space and mortuary contexts*, such as catacombs, churches, monasteries, *martyria*, baptistries and baths: the second axis considers *Art and Artefacts*, including

wall paintings, icons, mosaics, pottery, lamps, statues and amulets: while the third is devoted to regions stretching from Ireland and the Iberian peninsula in the west to Iran in the east and from Britain in the north to north Africa and Egypt. The spread of Christianity to China and India is recognised but no archaeology is described, and Ethiopia is not considered. Numismatics, which commanded a section in C.M. Kaufmann, *Handbuch der christlichen Archäologie*, (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1922), does not have its own chapter and is instead discussed in the chapters of the relevant region.

The contributing scholars hold university positions in Europe and the United States, except for one Israeli, one American Seminarian and one archaeological scientist attached to an American overseas archaeological school. Only three hold chairs that are concerned with Christian history or archaeology, demonstrating that this is not generally considered an important aspect of archaeology, in the English-speaking academic world at least. We are assured that the contributors are either field archaeologists or familiar with field techniques and archaeological methods and evidence (p. 9). Traditional church historians are not represented amongst the authors.

The first chapter deals with the history of inquiry, methods and current status, and addresses most issues that early Christian archaeology brings to mind,

Our goal here is to provide a more focused overview of a field that developed quite differently in largely Protestant English-speaking countries than it did in Catholic and Orthodox continental Europe. Originally serving to reinforce or critique the narrative accounts of New Testament Studies and ecclesiastical history, the field has increasingly become independent of text-based approaches as archaeological investigations have become more sophisticated and varied (p. 3).

The study of the early church has generally focussed on the writings of church officials and theologians. This volume by contrast will assist those the studying the lives of non-elite early Christians. It is argued that a distinctly Christian material culture is evident by the third century when there were also some buildings that appear to be devoted the Christian liturgical practice (p. 14). Although not the focus of this volume, pagan culture, politics, socio-economics may be equally relevant to the study of early Christian practice because of the context they provide. We are assured that ‘archaeologists of early Christianity have only begun to explore the potential of understanding the development of Christian culture amid this dense web’ of cultural relations (p. 22).

A review of all thirty-four chapters is not realistic, so I will focus on a sample of three. Charles Stewart’s entry on *Churches* begins with synagogues as the archetypal religious meeting place; temples by comparison are considered to be places only entered by priests and serve as backdrops for non-Christian religious rituals. The early

structures for Christian meetings are discussed and the appropriateness of the basilica form for Christian gatherings is explained. These churches served Christians' daily needs and accommodated decoration, rituals and liturgy encoding didactic and narrative content. Many such buildings had unadorned facades and were entered through unprepossessing doorways. Stewart discusses the socio-economic role of churches and the techniques used for recording the architecture and decoration of Medieval churches. He does not consider the theological and liturgical principles behind early church design, building orientation, urban profiles or water management practices. Typologies of church design, such as proposed by S. Balderstone, *Early Church Architectural Forms: A Theologically Contextual Typology for the Eastern Churches of the 4th-6th Centuries* (Melbourne: Australian Institute of Archaeology, 2007), are not discussed.

The chapter on *Lamps* by Maria Parani is broad and deals with objects made from clay, metal and glass used to light both private and public places. 'Lamps ... were ubiquitous and often employed in intimate and private circumstances ... and they lent themselves to adornment with images that were expressive of personal beliefs and concerns' (p. 313). Christian clay lamp content is categorised and the characteristics of some regional production workshops mentioned. Metal lamps by comparison are not so common and come mainly from Italy after the third century; they are given significantly more space than clay lamps. The discussion about usage is general and notes that 'there have been no contextual studies of the distribution of lamps with Christian symbolism within excavated houses' (p. 327). There is clearly a need for more research on this subject.

Joan Taylor, Professor of Christian Origins and Second Temple Judaism, King's College London, contributed the chapter on *Christian Archaeology in Palestine*. She notes that in the past there was a focus on traditional holy places officially under the care of church authorities, but that now there is significantly more archaeological data coming from non-ecclesiastical archaeological sources. She discusses the third century Megiddo/Legio church supporting the proposal that the mosaic indicates that the room was used for gender segregated Eucharist meals. Her discussion of the archaeology of the Constantinian church building program, which followed the visit of his mother to Palestine, leads to the suggestion that the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem may retain more of its original superstructure than generally thought. Taylor lists later churches discovered elsewhere in Palestine, and in her discussion of material culture notes a change in pottery wares after the arrival of Christianity.

The chapters are all well documented giving readers a good basis from which to pursue further research. There is an adequate number of illustrations and a useful index. As may be deduced from my comments the volume does not present neatly packaged chapters, instead it portrays archaeological evidence as it now is.

Those studying early Christianity in almost any region or in relation to any material culture will find this handbook a good place to start. Time will tell if the expectation that 'the ever-growing sophistication of scientific approaches, and especially dating techniques, will both widen the gap between text-based and material approaches to the study of ancient religion and encourage new opportunities to bring scholars of different backgrounds and disciplines into productive conversation' (p. 3).

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