

## Archaeology: The Comic by Johannes H. N. Loubser

Altamira Press, Walnut Creek,  
California, 2003.  
xiii + 169 pp., glossary, index.

This innovative book surprises in many ways. It is not as funny as I hoped it would be, yet it has unexpected humorous elements. It is a far more well rounded treatment of the discipline than I expected, but it exhibits some traits that may lead to its being dismissed. The comic book format works very well in presenting complex scientific and humanistic concepts and the artist's style has the ability to appeal to the reader's imagination. The artist is, by the way, a professional archaeologist employed by a consulting company.

The book uses black and white comic strip panels that follow a narrative describing the experiences of Squeeze, a young girl whose farm has an archaeological site. The site is found by pothunters who make the mistake of showing up with their shovels at the same time that Squeeze's mother is aiming her gun at dogs she accuses of killing her chickens. Off goes the shotgun, and unknown to her one of the pothunters gets a load of shot in the rear. Hmmm. The closing scene of the book has the pothunters returning with Squeeze's mother to continue their dastardly deeds. What's the message here?

Spread throughout are off-putting chauvinistic stereotypes: the low-life pothunters, the archaeologist preparing his lecture in a strip-bar, an Indian with a kill that he'd rather not share with his relatives. But in the author's defense, the book as a whole is too intelligent for these to be unintentional, so maybe they are best seen as instruments of the genre, exaggerations to make a point. Some of the stereotypes are just funny — people nodding off as the archaeologist drones on, or the names used for various professionals — Abe Stract the philosopher, Ed Dibble the floral expert, and Ana Lysis the lithics person.

I say that those few panels are probably purposefully negative because the book is indeed highly instructional.

It is accurate in its science; it is balanced in its approach to differing theoretical views and in its dealings with more controversial and sensitive topics. The comic book format is highly effective at communicating through drawings and voice balloons what can take pages in a standard text. Carbon-14 absorption, thermoluminescence, various methods of typology, and many more standard topics are illustrated with real imagination and a goodly amount of detail. Traditions, phases and



archaeological cultures are described with views from outer space. Taphonomic processes are illustrated by showing what was next to what it's become. A little devil appears as a possible contaminant to the carbon dating of the Turin Shroud. South America is upsetting an apple cart full of Clovis points. The details in the drawings are greatly appreciated in a second read. Some details I just didn't catch the meaning of right away: What's with pots that have legs? I thought, well, some pots do have feet of sorts, and then a later panel describing the diffusionist school shows pots hopping around a bunch of islands. Oh, I get it. I'm still scratching my head about a few voice balloons, though.

As an introduction to archaeology, there's not much, if anything, that's missing. Faunal analysis. Check.

Aboriginal perspectives. Check. Regulatory issues (although American). Check. Environmental determinism vs. social agency. Check. Random and systematic sampling, lithic and ceramic technologies, dating methods, excavation techniques — it's actually quite amazing what's in here and even more so given that it's all presented in a light-hearted way.

I really liked this book. Apart from the very few things about it that I found objectionable, it provides an introduction to archaeology that is accessible to many young students who may be intimidated with standard texts. In no way can this book be a replacement for those at the university or college level, but it will be valuable as an addendum. In certain high school curricula, or simply for personal interest, *Archaeology: The Comic* will stimulate further learning. It has 49 references, a glossary with 135 entries, and an index. This book is pioneering, it sets a standard. It can be bettered, but it's pretty good. Stay tuned — the last panel hints that there's more to come.

**Martin Magne**

---

**Martin Magne is Manager of Cultural Resource Services for Parks Canada. He and his staff of archaeologists, historians, and planners provide CRM services for all the National Parks and National Historic Sites in Alberta and British Columbia. He obtained his Ph.D. from the University of British Columbia in 1983, where his dissertation dealt with prehistoric lithic technology of the Interior Plateau. His current research activities include microblade technology, rock art, and Athapaskan migrations — sometimes all at once.**

---