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”Historical Archaeology in South Africa: Material Culture of the Dutch East India Company at the Cape”

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Historical Archaeology in South Africa: Material Culture of the Dutch East India Company at the Cape. *Carmel Schrire*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2014, 288 pp. + CD-Rom.

Historical Archaeology in South Africa by Carmel Schrire and contributors has 12 chapters and 6 appendices. This lavishly illustrated book presents comprehensive results on the archaeology of a sample of installations of the Dutch East India company—the Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie (VOC)—in the Cape Province in South Africa. The goal of the project and the publication is clearly stated: to move from descriptions of objects to an understanding of the global context and the broader picture of colonial life between 1666 and 1795.

The VOC settlement in the Cape was established in 1652 under the leadership of Jan van Riebeeck. From then on, settlement expanded in different parts of the province. The material discussed in this book was collected from excavations conducted in three test units from the Castle of Good Hope (Cape Town); from Oudepost I, 150 km to the north; and finally Elsenburg, a farm 50 km to the east. Schrire presents the general background of the archaeology of the East India Company at the Cape in the first chapter. She reviews the different strands of historical archaeology and asks the difficult question: “Does the cost of historical archaeology justify its constant and nagging trend to discover things that we already know?” (p. 18). Her answer is particularly interesting. She advocates “total archaeology” with rigorous analyses of well-contextualized data to reveal the bigger picture, “a vision of

consumption, waste, taste, provisioning, identity, and heritage into places texts often miss” (p. 19). The chapters of the book are a contextualized demonstration of this choice.

The history, architecture, and archaeology of the East India Company sites at the Cape are outlined in Chapter 2. It begins with the research conducted at the Castle of Good Hope, where three excavation units were tested: the Van der Stel Moat, the Old Granary, and the Castle Donkergat. Report on the excavation of the Old Post, Oudepost I, follows. The 15 m² excavation of the “kitchen dump” from Herehuis kitchen closes the chapter.

The material collected from these excavations is thoroughly analyzed and discussed in the remainder of the book. Heinrich and Schrire present a solid zooarchaeology chapter unveiling the development of the meat industry in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in the Cape colony. Ceramics from Asian origins are analyzed and discussed by J. Klose and C. Schrire. The recorded vessels reflect differences in provisioning strategies and use. They originated from China, Japan, and Islamic Persia and are distributed differentially among the excavated sites. Local lead-glazed, coarse earthenware production began in 1665 after the arrival of two potters in the East India Company settlements. The resulting coarse, utilitarian, locally made as well as imported European earthenware collections are analyzed by S. C. Jordan in chapters 5 and 6. The distribution and use of this domestic ware varies significantly from site to site, with some indication of “creolization”— new local uses.

Schrire and Klose study the collections of tin-glazed, refined, and industrial earthenware.

They arrived in the Cape in the late eighteenth century, with the establishment of British rule. Glass collections, which include bottles, tableware, and miscellaneous pieces, all imported from Europe, are also analyzed by Schrire. Items of personal adornment, clothing fasteners, and jewelry are discussed in Chapter 9 by White. The studied assemblages “provide an image of the individual appearance of many of the elite inhabitants of the VOC sites” (p. 211). Metals and associated artifacts from Oudepost I, minus a large collection of iron artifacts not yet analyzed, are discussed in Chapter 10. The study focuses on copper, brass, bronze, tin, and pewter. The collection points to repair and maintenance of the artifacts, as well as trade, fishing, and hunting activities. The 196 gunflints, identified from a collection of 520 lithic pieces, are analyzed in Chapter 11 by Durst. The recorded gunflints from the Cape are similar to those from the New World. They are of European origin, very likely from France and/or England, and obtained through the international trade. Finally, Schrire presents the implications and prospects of the archaeology of East India Company settlements at the Cape in Chapter 12. Six appendices add significant material to the book. The challenge is met. VOC settlement inhabitants are approached from different strands of evidence, providing a complex tapestry of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century social identities.