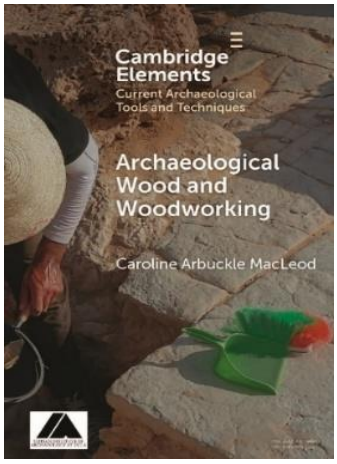


Caroline Arbuckle MacLeod.- ***Archaeological Wood and Woodworking*** **(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2025), 75 p.**

Caroline Arbuckle MacLeod, Archaeological Wood and Woodworking (Cambridge University Press, 2025) provides a focused and accessible introduction to this neglected material. Wooden artefacts played a central role in ancient economies, technologies and daily practices, yet they continue to receive only limited attention within archaeology. Arbuckle MacLeod argues that this imbalance arises not from a lack of interest or analytical tools, but from the fragmentation of research across multiple and often disconnected subfields, including anatomy, taphonomy, identification, dendrochronology, woodworking techniques, and conservation.

The book begins with a succinct overview of wood biology but avoids the common tendency to treat anatomy as a purely botanical prelude. The cellular structure is presented as the fundamental basis for understanding the behaviour of wood in archaeological contexts. Wood is a reactive material whose preservation depends on environmental factors, depositional context, and chemical alteration. This framing proves effective in the way it brings together biological and archaeological perspectives: the former concerned with the growth and taxonomy of trees, the latter with the preservation and transformation of wooden materials after deposition. By relating anatomical and taphonomic features – such as growth rings, parenchyma, and lignin decay – to depositional conditions, the author demonstrates that wood preservation follows identifiable patterns rather than occurring by chance.

The chapter devoted to wood identification maintains the same balanced approach. Rather than overwhelming the readers with a catalogue of anatomical features, the author explains the rationale behind wood identification how thin sections were prepared, how reference collections are used, which anatomical traits serve as diagnostic criteria, what sort of signature to look for and how identification contributes to broader archaeological understanding. The book successfully clarifies the process of wood identification without reducing it to a mechanical checklist. It demonstrates that the purpose of taxonomic analysis is not simply to assign species names, but to relate species-level data to broader archaeological questions such as landscape use, trade networks, craft organisation and resource management. The focus on the “chaîne opératoire” of sampling, preparation, observation, and interpretation is especially valuable for non-

specialists, who often encounter wood only at the reporting stage and are unfamiliar with the technical steps that precede identification and analysis.

Dendrochronology is treated with the same concision and clarity. The author emphasizes that it can also provide insight into environmental trends, timber-selection strategies, and even construction timelines when sufficiently well-preserved sequences are available. Importantly, the limitations of the method are presented not as weaknesses but as structural conditions of the discipline. The challenges posed by species with variable ring boundaries, irregular growth cycles, or weak regional chronologies are clearly acknowledged, preventing dendrochronology from being portrayed as a universal solution.

The woodworking chapter is among the most compelling, not because it offers a complete typology of joints or tools, but because it treats woodworking as a technically sophisticated and historically significant activity. Toolmarks, surface finishes, and joinery techniques are examined as traces of transmitted knowledge, labour organisation, and technological choice. Here, the author effectively links object-based analysis and craft archaeology, demonstrating how fragmentary wooden artefacts can reveal the social and economic context of their production. The examples are drawn largely from Egyptian contexts, where preservation is exceptionally good, but the methodological implications are clear: woodworking can be studied wherever toolmarks, shaping marks, or construction decisions, whether in carbonised beams, waterlogged ships timbers, or reused architectural elements.

One of the volume's most valuable contributions is the implicit argument that archaeological wood should not be treated as an occasional or exceptional dataset, but as a standard component of material assemblages whenever preservation permits. The author identifies the structural causes of wood's marginalisation: uneven preservation, disciplinary fragmentation, and the absence of shared methodological standards. By weaving these approaches into a coherent framework, the book offers something the field has long lacked – a clear point of entry for students, practitioners, and researchers – who may come across wood only occasionally without any knowledge of its breadth, terminology, or analytical conventions.

The success of the volume, however, lies in its clarity and systematic organisation, which allow it to address multiple audiences effectively. Specialists will recognise familiar techniques, but also appreciate the conceptual framework that connects them. Non-specialists – particularly excavators, students, and conservators – will benefit from a text that assumes no prior expertise while avoiding a condescending tone. The prose is concise, informative without becoming encyclopaedic, and clear without being

reductive. When one considers the scope of the book – which is just seventy-five pages – it is remarkably broad, and the balance between technical explanation and interpretive framing is largely maintained.

The limitations of the volume are largely those imposed by its concise format: readers working primarily with charcoal, or mineral-replaced wood, or highly fragmented remains may find the treatment of their material too short, and those seeking a fuller historiography of wood studies or a global survey of woodworking traditions will need to consult additional sources. The geographical and cultural examples are weighted toward Egypt and European waterlogged contexts, which may unintentionally suggest that well-preserved wood assemblages are rare or more regionally restricted than they actually are. In the same vein, the brief discussion of woodworking in relation to labour, identity and cultural significance implies, but does not fully explore, the interpretive potential of wooden objects.

What the book most effectively demonstrates is that archaeological wood is not a passive material awaiting identification or conservation, but a source that actively generates knowledge about the past. It records a range of technical, ecological, and economic decisions that are often invisible in more durable materials. Its evidentiary value lies not only in what survives, but also in what that survival reveals – such as the conditions of production, use, deposition, as well as post-depositional history. Arbuckle MacLeod demonstrates that wood is not just "found" but made legible through analytical choices, and that, when methodologically grounded, its study can reframe narratives of craft, environment, and ancient technology, rather than merely supplement them.

This compact yet pedagogically focused volume, *Archaeological Wood and Woodworking*, constitutes a long overdue contribution to the archaeological literature. It will be useful to both students and archaeologists: at once a synthetic survey of related specialisations and a conceptual foundation for a field that has too often been defined only through isolated case studies. Indeed, if archaeological wood studies are to be fully integrated into mainstream archaeological interpretation, this book represents a critical step toward that goal – not by resolving every methodological question, but by offering a clear and account of how the field operates and why it matters.

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