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Ralph Waldo Emerson once said that "all history becomes subjective," that, in fact, "properly there is no history, only biography." Today, Emerson's observation is hardly revolutionary for archaeologists; it has become conventional wisdom that the present is a battleground where interpretations of the events and meanings of the past are constantly being disputed. What were the major events? Whose lives did these events impact, and how? Who were the key players? What was their legacy? We know all too well that the answers to these questions can vary considerably depending on what political, social, or personal agenda is driving the response.

Despite our keen eye for discerning historical spin doctors operating today, it has been only in recent years that archaeologists have begun exploring in detail how the past was used in the past itself. This volume of ten original works brings critical insight to this frequently overlooked dimension of earlier societies. Drawing on the concepts of identity, memory, and landscape, the contributors show how these points of entry can lead to substantially new accounts of how people understood their lives and why things changed as they did.

Chapters include the archaeologies of the eastern Mediterranean, including Mesopotamia, Iran, Greece, and Rome; prehistoric Greece; Achaemenid and Hellenistic Armenia; Athens in the Roman period; Nubia and Egypt; medieval South India; and northern Maya Quintana Roo. The contributors show how and why, in each society, certain versions of the past were promoted while others were aggressively forgotten for the purpose of promoting innovation, gaining political advantage, or creating a new group identity.

Commentaries by leading scholars Lynn Meskell and Jack Davis blend with newer voices to create a unique set of essays that is diverse but interrelated, exceptionally researched, and novel in its perspectives.