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What was where when

Christopher Chippindale

Past Worlds: The Times Atlas of Archaeology. General editor Chris Scarre. *Times Books, London/Hammond, Maplewood, New Jersey: 1988. Pp.319. £29.50, \$85.*

Time and space are the natural dimensions against which the variables in human history and prehistory are measured, so an atlas of period-by-period maps is a convenient way to present the pattern of sites of human habitation or activity. *Past Worlds* is the newest in this genre, offering 122 double-page spreads in a very large format; six sections cover the world from hominoid ancestors to the industrial revolution. The colour maps are drawn with shaded relief, and give a vivid impression of the set of the landscape.

Running across this landscape are, of course, the distributions of individual recorded sites — but individual sites are less and less the stuff of field archaeology, which is why distribution maps are a declining species. The trouble lies in the vagaries of site creation and of site preservation and discovery.

Some lifestyles, particularly mobile ones, do not create defined sites, but rather a diffuse scatter of material across the landscape. Others, like a tradition of building in mud-brick, generate massive mounds of debris. Accidents of preservation bury some sites beyond reach, or long ago exposed them to destruction. Elsewhere, conditions have both protected sites over the long term, and now make them accessible to study. Again, the patchy distribution of Pleistocene coastal sites follows from the postglacial rise in sea-level; because sites have survived only when they were raised on cliffs, or in those few places where uplift has raised the old shoreline, the bald pattern of distribution is not directly indicative of where Pleistocene settlement actually was on the coast.

Equally, the pattern of recorded sites measures the pattern of fieldwork; as the joke goes, there are no distribution maps of archaeology, only distribution maps of archaeologists. So it is that the blank regions on such maps may indicate blanks of site formation, blanks of site survival or blanks of field-survey — as well as real empty spaces in an ancient time.

The advent of better dating methods has meant that time has become more controlled as a variable, with the analytical units of Stone-Bronze-Iron Ages and their subdivisions giving way to absolute chronologies. In their place have come a variety of divisions by period according to a variety of criteria, so there is no longer

such a standard set of conventional, distinct periods.

Faced with the reduced usefulness of simple period-maps of spot sites, Scarre and his large team of contributors have gone in for very full explication. There are 14 introductory double-page spreads of method and analysis, and a map occupies only a part of each main spread. The rest is given over to pictures of artefacts, reconstruction drawings, case-studies and explanatory text, so the book is less an atlas, more a pictorial encyclopaedia of archaeology with especially thorough maps. A number of spreads have no maps at all.

The authors of the ancillary material have generally coped well with their difficult task of explaining complex questions in a few pictures and a few hundred words, but much less space is left for specific information about what was where when. Because the maps only occupy part of each spread, often less than half, they have to be smaller and show less than full-page maps would do. The largest North American map, for example, is too little to provide state boundaries, and it is not possible to use the atlas to find the main sites in, say, Minnesota. Some important sites fall in the gaps between the chosen topics. Mont Bego, the second region of later prehistoric art in the Alps, appears on the map of Bronze Age Europe (though under its old name of Monte Bego and wrongly placed in Italy), but the much more important region of Valcamonica does not appear, perhaps because its art spans several periods as well as the Bronze Age. While some things are lost, others are promoted to prominence — a few single sites have a whole spread to themselves, and feudal Yorkshire is given as much room as the Islamic world. Some users will think that the loss in factual detail is not worth the benefit of all the ancillary explanation, handsomely illustrated though it is.

The book is generally sound on contentious issues, although Americanists may be surprised by the judgements made about controversial early sites, but it will soon be out of date in regions such as Australasia where discovery is proceeding apace. Yet many of the maps draw together a remarkable amount of information from scattered sources; they must have been a real labour. The production, colour-printing and index of sites are good. This will be a useful volume, as well as handsome on the coffee table. □

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• The next review supplements to appear in *Nature* are Textbooks (which will be published in the issue of 9 March 1989) and Spring Books (issue of 20 April).