

Better late than never

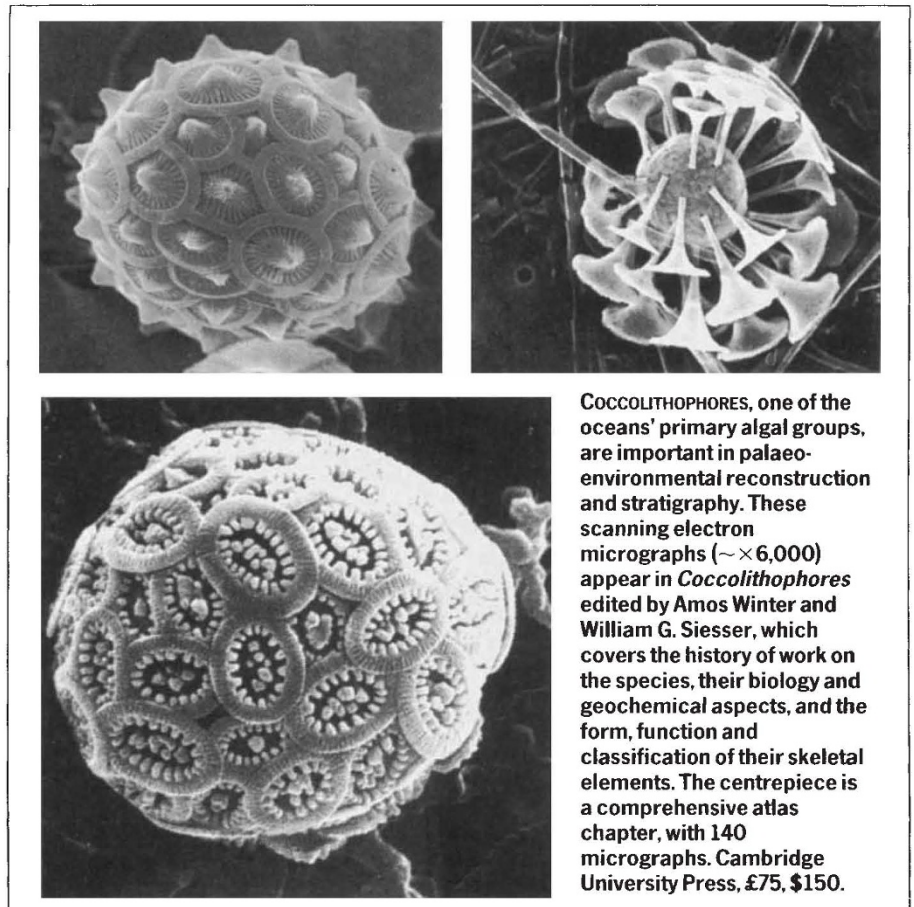
Paul Bahn

Timewalkers: The Prehistory of Global Colonization. By Clive Gamble. *Harvard University Press/Alan Sutton: 1993. Pp. 309. \$27.95, £19.99.*

THE award for the silliest archaeological book title of 1993 must go to *Timewalkers*. What on Earth does this word mean? The author never actually defines it, but seems to use it in place of 'ancient humans'. It reminds one of those snappy single-word titles for television series. 'Timewalkers' is not simply a dreadful neologism that sounds like a sci-fi term (a hybrid of *Timelords* and *Luke Skywalker*, perhaps?), it is also utterly devoid of meaning: as walking is inherently and inevitably a diachronic action, then presumably I shall become a Timewalker when I pop out to take this review to the Post Office — as soon as I have finished being a Timetyper. Since the theme of this book is the prehistoric colonization of the globe, one would have thought that 'Colonizers' or even 'Landgrabbers' would have been a more apt choice.

The author's aim is to present a new kind of world prehistory which, laudably, places the emphasis not so much on stone tools or skeletal shapes — although these inevitably dominate the text at times — but rather on behaviour and social context. After an introductory section in which Gamble presents the familiar evidence for early explorers and Victorian scholars being patronizing racists with regard to the "primitive" peoples in remote parts of the globe, he leads us through the whole of prehistory, at an accelerating pace: lots of space is devoted to the earliest hominids for which we have the least evidence, but by the end of the last ice age we are at full gallop, with Holocene colonizations of empty islands accorded only a few pages.

At first glance the book is thorough and reasonably well-balanced. But it quickly becomes apparent that the author has his own agenda, and his treatment of the evidence is clearly tempered by the particular version of world prehistory that he happens to favour. In particular, he sees a definite break at around 50,000 years ago between what he calls the "Ancients" and ourselves, the "Moderns"; in essence this boils down to stating that the Neanderthals were so different from ourselves that a firm line can be drawn between them and us, a view that is by no means universally held. To shore up this approach, all the growing body of evidence for 'art' before 40,000 years ago is simply dismissed and ignored.



COCCOLITHOPHORES, one of the oceans' primary algal groups, are important in palaeo-environmental reconstruction and stratigraphy. These scanning electron micrographs ($\sim \times 6,000$) appear in *Coccolithophores* edited by Amos Winter and William G. Siesser, which covers the history of work on the species, their biology and geochemical aspects, and the form, function and classification of their skeletal elements. The centrepiece is a comprehensive atlas chapter, with 140 micrographs. Cambridge University Press, £75, \$150.

In fact, throughout the book, later dates are consistently preferred to earlier ones: for example, the author selects the youngest date available for the Israeli site of 'Ubeidiyah (although new work has recently brought further support for a far earlier date); he is clearly uncomfortable with the (apparently well-founded) date of 1.6 million years ago for the jaw from Dmanisi, Georgia; and Yuri Mochanov's claims for a very early occupation at Diring, Siberia, are also given short shrift, although they are beginning to find some support in the United States where specialists agree that the lithics are artefacts and thermoluminescence dates of 500,000 years have been obtained from soil samples from the site. Gamble also simply dismisses, without discussion, all the claims for people in Europe earlier than Isernia la Pineta, Italy, at 730,000 years ago — so much for Vallonet in France, or Chilhac, let alone the growing number of claims for even earlier occupation from Spain to Romania. He opts for the later dates for the Palaeolithic of Japan; in Australia he appears to accept the thermoluminescence evidence for humans at 55,000 or 60,000 years ago, but omits not only Gurdip Singh's (albeit contested) pollen and charcoal evidence for a human presence at 120,000, but also Peter Kershaw's recent findings of similar pollen and charcoal evidence at 140,000 years ago on the continental shelf off northeast

Queensland, the only such disturbance in a 1.5-million-year record. Worst of all, he makes the astounding claim that only two sites in the whole of the New World (Meadowcroft and Monte Verde) survive as evidence of a possible early settlement, thus ignoring completely not only Pedra Furada — potentially the most important archaeological site in the Western Hemisphere — but also many others.

One cannot object to claims for early dates and sites being subjected to critical or even harsh scrutiny; but the author can make no excuse for simply ignoring or brushing aside so much material that conflicts with his chosen scenario. By contrast, he accepts other claims quite ingenuously — for instance, that the Laetoli trail in Tanzania has a child treading in an adult's footsteps — and his reasoning at times seems inconsistent. He supports the view that the wealth of art and ornament in the Upper Palaeolithic of central and eastern Europe represents a "hysteria" in reaction to a hard life where economic and social survival was a considerable problem; yet he fails to address the question of what could explain the similar explosion in southwest Europe, an area where we have no evidence for any such struggles, and indeed where the living seems to have been easy, as far as we can tell.

Unfortunately, we cannot tell very far. The fundamental problem with trying to