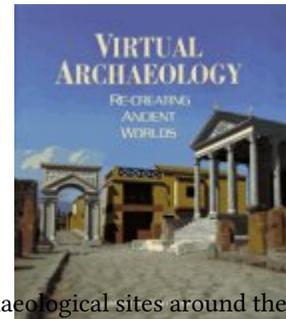


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Maurizio Forte, Alberto Siliotti, eds. *Virtual Archaeology: Re-creating Ancient Worlds*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1997. 288 pp. \$49.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8109-3943-1.

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This handsome and impressive volume is Judith Toms's British English translation of an Italian publication *Archeologia: percorsi virtuali nelle civi lascomparsate* (Milan: Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 1996). Edited by Maurizio Forte (a researcher in the disciplines of information sciences and archaeology from Pisa, Italy) and Alberto Siliotti (the director of the Archaeological Documentation Center located in Verona, Italy), the work includes more than sixty separate contributions (each with a modest but excellent and up-to-date bibliography) prepared by thirty-six authors affiliated, in the main, with academic institutions and museums located in Italy or France. Fifteen British and American scholars assisted with the English-language edition. The significance of the volume may be measured by the distinguished foreword provided by Colin Renfrew, Master of Jesus College and Disney Professor of Archaeology at Cambridge University. Renfrew's irrefutable stature in the archaeological community is powerful evidence that this book is, indeed, something special, since a scholar of his caliber does not associate his name with works that are less than stellar.

A reader's initial impression might be that this volume is a popular, lavish, and decorative "coffee-table" treatise on selected archaeological sites and topics—one perfect for intellectual pursuits on a cold winter's day in front of the family fireplace. However, in reality, the book entices two categories of patrons—those interested in the romance of archaeology and an academic audience. This an innovative and refreshing scholarly work that that professors of archaeology and other educators from many other disciplines in the social sciences and humanities may find stimulating as a point of departure for socio-cultural interpretations and cultural reconstructions. The intent of this unique work is to present a "startling real

sense" of how significant archaeological sites around the world once appeared by combining aerial photography and high-resolution three-dimensional computer renderings emended with clear, informative site descriptions. The text considers more than fifty important sites and includes 660 illustrations in full color. Your reviewer, who has taught New and Old World archaeology for nearly twenty years, has personally visited about half of the sites or cultures selected by the editors, and can provide an objective basis for analysis.

The senior editor writes that the object of this book is "to offer to the reader the most faithful re-presentation of the ancient world possible: highly realistic in information and with a high scientific content. The common thread of its chapters is the new directions being opened up by the conjunction of archaeological research and technology" (p. 10). The book goes well beyond Paul Reilly's article "Towards a Virtual Archaeology" (1991) in that computer processing, simulation, and reconstruction ("re-presentation" is, indeed, the more advisable term) are blended. Some of the images are illustrated through the use of a new computer graphics language, Virtual Reality Mark-up Language (VRML), which describes three-dimensional objects and permits the user to move from texts to three-dimensional spaces and vice versa. It is a powerful graphics tool that opens up new possibilities for manipulating multimedia data in three-dimensional form whereby information/objects may be rotated, moved, and observed from any angle. The technique of visualizing three-dimensional space via hypermedia links will, in the near future, allow graphics, images, and text to be available in VRML format. In addition, it will be possible to modify these virtual images as new data becomes available. However, while these computer-aided reconstructions are unique, they form

only a small portion of the copious illustrations; therefore, I would not characterize the volume as “an atlas of archaeological models” as Renfrew has done. The created images are renditions based upon currently available data and with minimal conjectural reconstructions or artistic license.

The contents are organized into five broad sections, each with major essays and images of sites or other archaeological phenomena such as glyphs and writing systems; these five are: Africa, the Near East, Europe, Asia, and the Americas.

The part comprising Africa includes eight essays and accompanying sets of images (seven Egyptian and one North African essays), eight from the Near East (e.g., Southwest Asia), fourteen from Europe (including six from Italy and four from Greece), ten from Asia (six from East Asia and four from Central or South Asia), and eleven from the New World. Although one Italian site dates to the Lower Paleolithic (Early Old Stone Age), the majority of sites selected are associated with the advent of settled life and farming and the development of urbanization throughout the world (e.g., the Neolithic/Formative, and Bronze and Early Iron Ages/Classic periods).

Readers who are familiar with (and those not cognizant of) famous archaeological sites will enjoy the juxtaposition of the images of the site as it exists presently and its computer simulation. Among the more notable sites depicted are the Egyptian Temple of Abu Simbel, the Anatolian village of Catal Huyuk, the urban centers of Ur and Ebla, Cretan Mycenae, the Athenian Acropolis and the Parthenon, the Temple of Apollo at Delphi, and Qin Shi Huangdi’s Chinese terracotta army. In addition, there are excellent high-definition reconstructions of the city of Rome depicted in the fourth century B.C.E., the House of the Faun at Pompeii, dwellings from the ancient Pakistani settlement of Mehrgarh, the Central Asian site of Togolok 21, and Beijing during the Mongol era. Examples from the Americas include one site each from the American Southwest and Midlands (the Anasazi site of Pueblo Bonito in Chaco Canyon, New Mexico, and Cahokia, a prehistoric Mississippian city located near East St. Louis, Missouri), six from Mesoamerica (the monumental sites of Teotihuacan, Tikal, Palenque, Copan, and Tenochtitlan; and an explanation of the translation of Aztec script), and discussions and images from three Andean South America cultures (Inca, Nazca, and Moche) [Inka is the preferred spelling]. Surprisingly there are no renditions of important sites from Sub-Saharan Africa

(particularly Great Zimbabwe with its Eastern and Western Enclosures and the magnificent Elliptical Building) or from Australia and the Pacific islands (the megalithic architecture, royal residences and mortuaries, and ninety-two artificial islets comprising the Melanesian site of Nan Madol come to mind). Nor is the important Cambodian political-religious center of Angkor Wat included.

By reading this volume we also learn something about modern archaeological field practices and laboratory methods, and data interpretations; for example, Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and Global Positioning Systems (GPS), a mineralogical explanation of “jade,” computer deciphering of the Egyptian “Pyramid Texts,” the zooarchaeological analyses of animal bone, and the use of computers beyond site documentation and artifact tabulations and characterizations. The text and illustrations are emended by a 140-item glossary of basic terms (for example: abacus, copal, henge, kiva, rhyton, and ziggurat), a tabulation of illustration sources, and a six-page, triple-column index which includes both topical and image caption entries. Some of the archaeological sites appear to be incorrectly situated on the several “location maps” (e.g., Teotihuacan, 245; Tenochtitlan, 261). Several typographical errors in this edition are, unfortunately, not corrected (for example, among the references, R. Miller, 247, should be Rene Millon).

Nonetheless, these are miniscule detractions from this innovative and highly-recommended volume which often provides novel insights on the human past and, as Renfrew states “a keener awareness of the preconceptions that we ourselves bring to its reconstruction.” The illustrations and narrative will whet the appetite of a general audience interested in matters archaeological and exotic places and unique cultures. It will also be of popular and pedagogical interest to teachers and students in primary and secondary education, particularly in school systems where archaeology/world cultures classes are scheduled.

While archaeologists (such as this reviewer)—who are known to quibble about details, debate paradigms, and argue the pros and cons of inferences—may fault aspects of this work, it is, in the main, a volume that provides the reader with an extremely valuable set of renderings that assists in placing the peoples back into the extinct cultures. The pedagogical potential of this distinctive work has substantial merit—with potential use in introductory classes in anthropology and pre-history to computer graphics and advanced seminars in regional archaeology.

On the other hand, some scholars may consider the work to be “virtually archaeology” and may question the reasoning for certain reconstructions and color selections. Nonetheless, the work is also valuable to the general public, students at levels from middle school and above, as well as to scholars who seek better ways to instruct their students. Little wonder that this worthy volume has been chosen as a members’ selection by the

Book-of-the-Month Club, the Quality Paperback Book Club, and Natural Science Book Club.

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