

Review

New Book Chronicle

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Big books for students, glossy books for their parents, small books for use or distraction, things that are not books: these constitute the elements of this spring chronicle.

Big books

KENNETH L. FEDER. *The past in perspective: an introduction to human prehistory*. Fourth edition. xxiv+696 pages, over 300 b&w & colour illustrations. 2010. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 978-0-19-539430-6 paperback £50. Companion website: <http://www.oup.com/us/companion.websites/9780195394306/student/?view=usa>

BARRY CUNLIFFE, CHRIS GOSDEN & ROSEMARY A. JOYCE (ed.). *The Oxford handbook of archaeology*. xviii+1162 pages, over 100 illustrations. 2009. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 978-0-19-927101-6 hardback £85.

CHRIS SCARRE (ed.). *The Human past: world prehistory and the development of human societies*. 784 pages, 770 b&w & colour illustrations. Second edition 2009 (first published by Thames & Hudson in 2005). London: Thames & Hudson; 978-0-500-28780-4 paperback £32.50. Companion website: <http://www.thamesandhudsonusa.com/web/humanPast/>

Fat textbooks, well established across the Atlantic, made their mark on the British undergraduate market with the publication of Renfrew and Bahn's *Archaeology: theories, methods and practice* back in 1991. Now in its fifth edition (2008, costing £29.95; ISBN 978-0-500-28719-4) and augmented by a companion website (<http://www.thamesandhudsonusa.com/web/archaeology/5e/index.html>) containing summaries, flashcards, quizzes and exercises, this undergraduate staple has been joined over the years by a number of contenders for students' meagre allowances. The uneven 2-volume set of the *Handbook of archaeological methods* (2005) and *theories* (2008; review by Ethan Cochrane in this reviews section, pp. xxx) would give little change out of £200. So, what

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is more affordable? Three big textbooks have come out recently, either new editions (FEDER'S *The past in perspective* in its fourth edition, and SCARRE'S *Human past* in its second edition) or brand-new publications (CUNLIFFE, GOSDEN & JOYCE'S *Oxford handbook of archaeology*). Let us take a brief look at them.

KENNETH L. FEDER'S nearly 700-page long *The past in perspective* must be popular in the US since it has reached its fourth edition since 1995. It comes with a companion website (the usual summaries, flashcards and quizzes, plus instructor resources). The book is essentially in two parts: the first 8 chapters are devoted to the Pleistocene and early humans, the next 8 chapters to the Holocene and manifestations of complexity around the world. To a European student, the balance is radically different from what might be expected. Indeed, in the second part of the book, it gets harder to find European examples or case studies, once past Star Carr, Stonehenge and Minoan Crete (e.g. nothing on the European Iron Age). There is of course much to commend in this book, such as explicit didactic purpose, clear exposition and intelligent debunking of myths (which is one of Feder's abiding interests). I found it however rather prescriptive and could not shake off my first impression of an author who spends twice as much space thanking his cats ('kitties'; urgh!) than his wife in the acknowledgements. Petty? Yes. So, to make amends, I conclude by pointing out the benefits of seeing a textbook with a different global balance and would recommend that *The past in perspective* be consulted for its wealth of well-organised information mastered by a single author.

Neither CUNLIFFE, GOSDEN & JOYCE nor SCARRE would contemplate attempting world-wide coverage single-handedly in their respective *Oxford handbook of archaeology* and *Human past*, opting instead to edit a vast range of specialist contributions. Since the *Oxford handbook* is the new kid on the block, comments will be mainly on this book. This does not in any way lessen the quality of Scarre's *Human past*, which in my opinion is the best textbook on world archaeology

<http://antiquity.ac.uk/ant/84/ant840275.htm>

available. It is pleasure to find that it has made it into a second edition, revised and updated to include recent discoveries and new thinking and a companion website with summaries, quizzes and flashcards. I would agree with Elizabeth Twohig (reviewing the first edition of *The Human past* in *European Journal of Archaeology* 8 (2005): 316) that ‘if a student could only afford one textbook for archaeology, I would recommend *The Human past*.’

I do not, however, see *The Oxford handbook* as competition, more as a complement centred on concepts more than on summarising the multiplicity of past human endeavours. Between them 42 authors and editors have produced 35 discursive chapters arranged in 7 parts: the first two deal with the history of the discipline, theories, method and practice; part 3 considers early humans, part 4 subsistence strategies and part 5 complex societies including those of China, Mesoamerica and the central Andes. It is in this section that two excellent contributions are to be found: Robin Skeates on trade and interaction and Ian Morris’s essay on what is meant by that catch-all phrase ‘cultural complexity’. He comes up with his own ‘minimal definition’: cultural complexity is ‘the scale of practices (settlement, energy capture, monument building, inequality and heterogeneity, and communication) characterising societies’ (p. 529). Amen to that. Though a mouthful, once you remove the subdefinition in the brackets it becomes clear: the scale of practices. The handbook then sets off on widely scattered overviews, starting with Cyprian Broodbank’s excellent exposé of the fluctuating dynamics in the Mediterranean basin over a very long duration. Overviews ranging from sub-Saharan Africa to the circumpolar zone, and from East Asia to North America follow. The book ends with a few issues and debates such as the repatriation of cultural remains or sex and gender discussed in part 7.

Predictably enough, the chapter that least grabbed my imagination – though I confess to not having read the whole of this huge tome – was Roger White’s chapter on excavation. Why is it so difficult to write inspiringly about this subject? At the heart of it there seems to be a contradiction, expressed thus: ‘the important task of the archaeologist, therefore, is not interpretation, since this can be discarded later if it is proved to be incorrect, but the recording and the presentation of the data that lies behind the interpretation’ (p. 201). White really does mean it since it is also the point he hammers home

(‘dispassionate detail’) in his final sentences on p. 207. This is pedestrian, and shows naïve faith that there are such things as data that any observer could record. Surely by now it is acknowledged that this is not the case: as Christopher Chippindale puts it in an article in *American Antiquity* (654 [2000]: 605) archaeologists do not deal in *data* (givens) but *capta* ‘things that we have ventured forth in search of and captured’. Only when we stop being sanctimonious about ‘the data’ will excavation become once again a stimulating arena.

1160 pages allow generous coverage. Yet, perhaps with the US market in mind, – is it just a coincidence that Paleo-Indian points are chosen to illustrate the jacket? – Europe is not hugely prominent, nor indeed the Iron Age. There are generally few illustrations; the duplication of the same plan of the Uluburun shipwreck on pages 563 (in chapter by Skeates) and 707 (in chapter by Broodbank) could have been avoided. The exception is Stephanie Moser’s chapter which discusses archaeological representation of the past from the Renaissance to the twentieth century where the (monochrome) pictures are essential. Did the editors succeed in their aim, which is to ‘give those new to the discipline some sense of the excitement, possibility, and controversy of archaeological practices and results. For those already knowledgeable, there is plenty that is new and which has never been brought together in this form before’ (p. xvi)? On the whole yes, even if some chapters are perhaps at the low end of the excitement scale.

Glossy books

THOMAS HARRISON (ed.). *The great empires of the ancient world*. 288 pages, 300 b&cw & colour illustrations. 2009. London: Thames & Hudson; 978-0-500-051603 hardback £24.95.

CHARLES FREEMAN. *Sites of antiquity from ancient Egypt to the fall of Rome: 50 sites that explain the Classical world*. 248 pages, numerous colour illustrations. 2009. Taunton: Blue Guides, Somerset Books; 978-1-905131-31-0 hardback £25, \$50 & CAN\$62.50.

DOMINIC RATHBONE (ed.). *Civilizations of the ancient world*. 384 pages, over 1000 colour illustrations. 2009. London: Thames & Hudson; 978-0-500-288344 paperback £19.95.

If students are spending their loan money on chunky textbooks, they might persuade their parents to