

Virtual Archaeology: Great Discoveries Brought to Life Through Virtual Reality

Foreword by Colin Renfrew

Thames & Hudson Limited, 1997, London. ISBN 0-500-05085-6, 294pp.

Martin P. Evison

This is going to be a very brief review. The reason is that the book does not have very much to do with virtual reality as a research, analytical or modelling tool in archaeology.

The UK edition of this book is attributed to Colin Renfrew as author of the foreword, although numerous writers contribute to the fifty articles, which take the form of case studies. These studies are representative of the world's 'classic' archaeological finds, sites and cultures: Stonehenge, Catal Huyuk, Teotihuacan, the Acropolis, Rome, etc., and needless to say, Ötzi the iceman makes a 'guest appearance'. The articles are only a few pages long and consist of a concise description of the archaeological site in question. Each article is framed with a series of high-quality colour illustrations, including one or two which are computer generated. Captions briefly describe each illustration, but they are rarely discussed in the main text.

When I once raised the issue of computerised 3D reconstructions in archaeology, a leading theoretical archaeologist replied "I'd rather paint a picture". I found this a somewhat impoverished view at the time, but *Virtual Archaeology* goes a long way to proving his point. The computerised reconstructions are almost entirely incidental to the main body of lavish colour illustrations in the book. The book shows that for most of the 'classical' archaeological record, the monuments and artefacts themselves are a far greater testament to the past and are far more aesthetically pleasing than any digitised imitation can ever hope to be. The computerised images provide minimal further information. It would indeed have been better to paint a picture.

In my view, this is really where *Virtual Archaeology* goes wrong. Virtual reality is only useful where reality itself does not provide a rich enough medium – where there is just not enough left for us to easily conjure a view of the past in our mind's eye. This is precisely the case for the 'lumps and bumps' which form much of history and prehistory in Britain and elsewhere. Here there is often very little to illustrate in a contemporary photograph. Landscapes, environments, settlements, structures, activities and people must all be reconstructed. In a computer simulation, all of the available information can be brought together flexibly and interactively. A picture will look better, but it will not be as versatile as a reconstruction or as a research tool.

I wanted to know about the computer hardware and software platforms, the ease of use for the archaeologist, the cost, the possibilities for reconstruction and analysis, the theoretical framework which took archaeological and environmental evidence through to the finished reproduction. None of this is touched upon in *Virtual Archaeology*.

To be fair to the book, the temporal and geographical coverage is impressive and the standard of presentation, with numerous colour plates, is excellent. Most of the world's 'classical' archaeological cultures are illustrated. At £29.95, the copy I have received would make an excellent gift and sit handsomely on any coffee table. Those whose interests are in the theory and practice of computerised 3D modelling in archaeology will be disappointed, however.

[Martin Evison](#) recently completed a Ph.D. in ancient DNA and currently works as a forensic archaeology consultant to the [Department of Forensic Pathology, University of Sheffield](#). His research interests are in archaeology and genetics, human origins, ethnic conflict in historical perspective and computer simulation in archaeology and forensic science.

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[TABLE OF CONTENTS](#)

[ABOUT US](#)

[RESEARCH PAPERS](#)

[FEATURES](#)

[NOTES FROM THE FIELD](#)

[REVIEWS](#)

[WORDS OF WISDOM](#)

[FORUM](#)

[THE FUN PAGES](#)

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