

Paul Hubbard

UCL Institute of Archaeology

Review of:

Phillipson, D. W. 2005. *African Archaeology* (3rd edition). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. xvi + 398 pages. ISBN 0521832365. Hardback £65.00. ISBN 052154002X. Paperback £24.99.

I must confess that I initially approached this book with a great deal of trepidation. The size of the African continent and the proliferation of archaeological research in recent times, means that there is an enormous amount of information, across a variety of sub-disciplines, to synthesise and present intelligibly. I did not think that this was still possible within the confines of a single volume. Also, the second edition failed to impress as it was disappointingly little more than a slight update and reprint of the first edition. Thankfully, this third edition has indeed fulfilled the publisher's claim of being "fully revised and expanded."

The book retains the narrative structure of the previous editions, tracing a linear chronological path from the appearance of humankind in Africa until the 17th century AD. In each chapter, material is divided according to region, the coverage of each being dependent on the amount of research that has been conducted in the area. This has led to the discussion in some areas (for example Egypt) being severely condensed, while other areas (southwest Africa for instance) are almost ignored given the dearth of archaeological research. This bias is acknowledged by Phillipson in the first chapter in which he discusses his sources of data and I would suggest is inevitable given the large area covered. Phillipson could have alleviated this archaeological inadequacy had he more leniently considered (and used) alternative sources of information such as oral traditions and texts.

The first chapter places African archaeology firmly in context as well as outlining Phillipson's framework for the elucidation of the African past. It is good to see that ethnoarchaeology is finally recognised by Phillipson (p. 10) as a valid source of useful information to inform archaeological interpretation (although the author expresses grave reservations over its use). As in previous editions he retains the concept of "lithic modes", as proposed in Clark (1969), seeing these as more useful in defining cultures than the names used today. This is in line with his view of the use of terminology in African archaeology (see below).

Chapter Two deals with the emergence of humankind in Africa; it covers the main aspects well and shows the great efforts Phillipson must have made in order to ensure this section included all the main finds, debates about classification and hypotheses about tool-making, hunting and expansion from Africa. He notes that much of the evidence has thus far been inadequately published, most coming from 'preliminary' research reports. This makes the creation of any definitive narrative on the hominids almost impossible as can be seen from the tentative language Phillipson is forced to employ

throughout the chapter when discussing evolution. This can be slightly irritating to those wanting a more definite account of human evolution.

In the third chapter, a thorough discussion covers the development and spread of the Acheulean and Sangoan cultures and the hominid groups thought to be responsible for these. East Africa dominates the coverage due to the exceptional amount of research carried out. Chapter Four provides a broad overview of the development and changes in hominid physiognomy and their associated stone tool technology (by far the most studied aspect of our knowledge of this period), as well as a discussion of some of the genetic evidence for change across the continent. A real strength of this chapter is the fact that each region is not treated in isolation. There is a good deal of cross-referencing, followed by a final section pulling together the apparently disparate strands of research that had been discussed previously.

The fifth chapter examines the evidence for the beginnings of permanent settlement in the Nile Valley and East Africa. The terminology can be slightly confusing due to the different names used for similar cultures but Phillipson does a masterful job of synthesising and elucidating the morass of information. This leads on to a discussion of the development of farming in the sixth chapter, primarily examining the evidence for African domestication of plants and animals. A pleasing aspect of this chapter (and the following ones) is the way in which Phillipson places Egypt firmly into an African context (rather than as a precursor to European civilisation), an identification that is gaining momentum (cf. O'Connor and Reid 2003).

As in the previous editions, the real strengths of the book lie in the areas and time periods where Phillipson himself has been actively involved in recent years. These form the basis of the last two chapters on iron-using peoples across the continent from about 2500bp to the early 17th century. Gratifyingly, there is not an over-reliance on linguistic evidence shown in the earlier editions, although as he discusses, it remains an important aid to archaeological investigation and interpretation. In the last chapter, the development of the major African states and empires are aptly summarised. I feel that Phillipson could have profitably included some discussion on the impacts of colonialism on these iron-using peoples.

The bibliography is respectably large and shows the wide range of sources Phillipson consulted while rewriting this book. It is pleasing to note that the referencing of ideas and data is more consistent than in the first edition, where large chunks of text had only a few references to substantiate their claims. I do not like the fact that the '*et al.*'s' in the multi-author papers are never acknowledged in full in the bibliography – I assume this was done to try to keep the already prodigious length manageable, but it is bad practice in my opinion. There is an apparent cut-off date of 2003, this in my view means that the book will remain reasonably up-to-date for at least the next decade or so.

In general, Phillipson favours a somewhat old-fashioned approach in his discussion of the archaeological evidence: the technology and economy of past societies is covered in detail, while we rarely learn much about the cognitive, social and political aspects of

the societies. In adopting this approach, Phillipson misses an opportunity to reveal the fascinating intricacies and complexities of African societies which make the study of African archaeology so beguiling: the subjects of study are 'dehumanised' as a result. The exception is the discussion on southern African rock art (pp. 111-116) where there is some acknowledgement of the assumed beliefs and cosmology of the hunter-gatherers.

As this is a book concerned with the whole continent, it is acceptable to use it to assess the health of the discipline in general. Archaeology is in a good condition: witness the expansion of research across the continent as shown by a comparison of the distribution maps between the editions. Egypt, southern and eastern Africa have remained the most active areas of research, albeit covering different time periods, while central and West Africa have recently enjoyed an upsurge in archaeological reconnaissance and study. The fact that this edition is 154 pages longer than the first speaks eloquently about the amount of new research that has been done. Interestingly the areas that were 'under-researched' in 1985 (notably Angola, the Democratic Republic of Congo and southern Sudan) remain so today because of the long-running conflicts in these countries. Significantly, compared to the first edition, Phillipson has also been able to draw on the research of many African scholars, showing the positive impact of the various academic training programmes initiated since the 1980s.

Phillipson borders on pedantry in his avoidance of the various names used for archaeological phenomena across the continent. He has a valid point that many are rather confusing and ill-defined, creating "an artificial compartmentalisation of what was usually a continuous variation" (p. 4) but his proposed alternatives are perhaps too general to be of much use. There is a real need for more discussion on nomenclature and definition than is currently practised by African archaeologists.

One suspects that this book has reached the limits for a general synthesis of African prehistory. With the explosion of new research into the continent's past, from a variety of disciplines and perspectives, future pan-African volumes could suffer from being too general to be of any real use. One cannot help but feel that a more useful approach for the future would be to publish papers based around themes or specific time periods rather than the continent as a whole. This has already been done to some extent for complex societies (Connah 2001), Islam (Insoll 2003) and for interactions between Egypt and the rest of Africa (O'Connor and Reid 2003). One could also treat the palaeoanthropology and food-producing cultures in separate volumes, allowing fuller exploration of the issues in each.

Reservations aside, I would not hesitate to recommend this book as an introductory text as it provides a useful and comprehensive overview of this fascinating part of the world and ably reveals what Africa has achieved in her majestic past.

References

- Clark, J. G. D. 1969. *World Prehistory: A New Outline*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Connah, G. 2001. *African Civilizations: An Archaeological Perspective*. 2nd edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Insoll, T. 2003. *The Archaeology of Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kusimba, C. M. and Kusimba, S. B. (eds.) 2003. *East African Archaeology: Foragers, Potters, Smiths and Traders*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology.
- Mitchell, P. J. 2002. *The Archaeology of Southern Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- O'Connor, D. C. and Reid, D. A. M. (eds.) 2003. *Ancient Egypt in Africa*. London: UCL Press.