Now You See Them, Now You Don’t
Biased macro-scale site distribution maps and their influence on interpretations

Iza Romanowska  
Centre for the Archaeology of Human Origins  
University of Southampton (UK)  
I.Romanowska@soton.ac.uk

Jonas Danckers  
Catholic University Leuven (Belgium), University of Bologna (Italy)  
Research Foundation Flanders (FWO, Belgium)  
Jonas.Danckers@arts.kuleuven.be

It is common knowledge that the visibility of archaeological sites is largely influenced by their structural properties (e.g. large vs. small sites, low vs. high density sites) and post-depositional processes (e.g. organic vs. inorganic material, surface sites vs. deeply stratified sites). Although archaeologists are aware of this representation problem, it can be argued that during the history of our discipline, certain periods and regions have received repeatedly more attention than others, precisely because of their exceptional archaeological visibility (e.g. surface sites, wetland sites, large sites, architecturally elaborated sites, etc.). Consequently, site distribution maps on a regional or supra-regional scale do not always simply reflect representative ‘patterns of the past’, but can be seriously biased by the ‘research intensity of the present’ or/and regional differences in preservation and the ease of detection of sites (taphonomical factors).

Again, although archaeologists are aware of this ‘modern’ bias in representation, the difference between well and lesser known regions and periods did and still does, often implicitly, influence our interpretations (e.g. a ‘crisis’ for a less investigated period, a ‘golden era’ for a well investigated period; climatic explanations for over- or underrepresentation, economic importance or a ‘demographic boom’ for well documented areas and phases, migrationist explanations for the ‘appearance’ of a well documented phase, etc.). It can thus be argued that a growing awareness of the problem of archaeological representation on the macro-scale has not always led to an equivalent change on the interpretational level.

This session wishes to address this conundrum and compare how archaeologists cope with it. For example, the implementation of the Valetta treaty resulted recently in a serious expansion of the scale and intensification of archaeological research in many European countries. The related use of a more random and often methodologically more thought-out sampling strategy smoothen out some ‘historical’ representation biases on the macro-scale. However, does it suffice to simply change our methodologies in order to alter the traditional interpretations based on earlier representation biases? Or are there other ways of coping with this problem? Can new distribution maps change traditional grand narratives based on older ones? Or are academic power structures stronger than a flood of new ‘dots on a map’?
We invite speakers to focus on this problem on a more theoretical level or with specific case-studies from all over the world.