SETTLEMENT, SOCIETY AND COGNITION IN HUMAN EVOLUTION

This volume provides a landscape narrative of early hominin evolution, linking conventional material and geographic aspects of the early archaeological record with wider and more elusive social, cognitive and symbolic landscapes. It seeks to move beyond a limiting notion of early hominin culture and behaviour as dictated solely by the environment to present the early hominin world as the outcome of a dynamic dialogue between the physical environment and its perception and habitation by active agents. This international group of contributors presents theoretically informed yet empirically based perspectives on hominin and human landscapes.

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SETTLEMENT, SOCIETY AND COGNITION IN HUMAN EVOLUTION
Landscapes in mind

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CONTENTS

List of figures ........................................ page vii
List of tables ........................................... xi
List of contributors ................................... xiii
Acknowledgements ...................................... xvii
Foreword .............................................. xxiii

1 What use is the Palaeolithic in promoting new prehistoric narratives? .......................... 1
   CHRIS GOSDEN

2 Local objects, distant symbols: fission-fusion social systems and the evolution of human cognition ............. 15
   MATT G ROVE AND ROBIN D UNBAR

3 The extension of social relations in time and space during the Palaeolithic and beyond .................. 31
   DWIGHT W. READ AND SANDER E. VAN DER LEEUW

4 Beyond animality and humanity. Landscape, metaphor and identity in the Early Upper Palaeolithic of Central Europe ................. 54
   MARTIN P ORR

5 At the heart of the African Acheulean: The physical, social and cognitive landscapes of Kilombe .................. 75
   JOHN A. J. GOWLETT, JAMES S. BRINK, ANDY J. R. HERRIES, SALLY HOARE, ISAYA ONJALA AND STEPHEN M. RUCINA

6 All in a day’s work? Early conflicts in expertise, life history and time management .................. 94
   ANTHONY SINCLAIR

7 To see a world in a hafted tool: birch pitch composite technology, cognition and memory in Neanderthals .......... 117
   REBECCA WRAGG SYKES
Contents

8 Ecological niches, technological developments and physical adaptations of early humans in Europe: the handaxe-heidelbergensis hypothesis .......................................................... 138
NICK ASHTON

9 ‘Dancing to the Rhythms of the Biotidal Zone’: Settlement history and culture history in Middle Pleistocene Britain .............................................................. 154
MARK J. WHITE

10 ‘Forest Furniture’ or ‘Forest Managers’? On Neanderthal presence in last interglacial environments ................................................................. 174
WIL ROEBROEKS AND CORRIE C. BAKELS

11 Late Pleistocene hominin adaptations in Greece ............................................. 189
PARASKEVI ELEFANTI AND GILBERT MARSHALL

12 In search of group identity – Late Pleistocene foragers in Northern China .............................................................................................................................. 214
OFER BAR-YOSEF

13 Handaxe symmetry in the Lower and Middle Palaeolithic: implications for the Acheulean gaze ................................................................. 234
JAMES COLE

14 Landscapes of the dead: The evolution of human mortuary activity from body to place in Palaeolithic Europe ........................................................... 258
PAUL PETTITT

15 Encoding and decoding the message: the case of the Mid Upper Palaeolithic female imagery ................................................................. 275
MARGHERITA MUSSI

16 Contextualising the female image – symbols for common ideas and communal identity in Upper Palaeolithic Societies ............................................. 288
SABINE GAUDZINSKI-WINDHEUSER AND OLAF JÖRIS

17 Taking a gamble: alternative approaches to the Mesolithic of western Scotland .............................................................................................. 315
STEVEN MITHEN

References ........................................................................................................ 342
Index ............................................................................................................. 407
FIGURES

3.1 The relationship between cognitive capacity and infant growth in <i>Pan</i> and in <i>Homo sapiens sapiens</i>. .............................................. page 34
3.2 Graph of encephalisation quotient (EQ) estimates based on hominid fossils and <i>Pan</i> (Chimpanzees). ............................................. 35
3.3 For humans to attain the capacity to conceive of a three-dimensional object (a pebble or stone tool) in three dimensions takes around 2 million years. ................................................................. 38
4.1 Geißenklösterle (Germany): fragmentary ivory statuette of a mammoth. ................................................................. 63
4.2 Vogelherd (Germany): isolated head of a lion with detailed facial feature. ................................................................. 64
4.3 Hohlenstein-Stadel: the entry to the Stadel Cave is located only a few metres above the valley floor and is not visible from the Vogelherd. ................................................................. 66
4.4 Hohlenstein-Stadel (Germany): the large ‘lion-man’ statuette (Löwenmensch) was carved from a complete section of a mammoth tusk. ................................................................. 67
4.5 Krems-Wachtberg (Austria): a modified mammoth shoulder blade was used to cover and seal Burial 1. ................................................................. 71
4.6 Krems-Wachtberg (Austria): find situation of Burial 1 in the field. ................................................................. 72
4.7 Předmostí (Czech Republic): reconstruction of the mass burial area and its vicinity. ................................................................. 73
5.1 Some important Acheulean and Middle Stone Age (MSA) sites in Africa. ................................................................. 76
5.2 The regional context of Kilombe at the south end of the Baringo basin. ................................................................. 77
5.3 Kilombe – the site region showing the exposures of Kilombe and Moricho in relation to Kilombe mountain and the Molo valley. ................................................................. 78
5.4 Kilombe – section of landscape and exposures along a line of 6 km from the River Molo to Kilombe crater. ................................................................. 82
5.5 General section of Kilombe Main site. ................................................................. 82
5.6 A plan of the main site of Kilombe. ................................................................. 86
5.7 Bifaces from Kilombe. ................................................................. 90
5.8 Discriminant analysis of bifaces. ................................................................. 91
6.1 The development of relative expertise from naïve through to master. ................................................................. 99
6.2 The relationship between years of practice and the development of level of expertise. ................................................................. 102
List of figures

6.3 The unique subsistence niche of humans and exemplar skills requirements for the acquisition of different food stuffs. .......... 106
6.4 A possible model for the geographical separation of Solutrean biface reduction during the last glacial maximum. .................. 111
6.5 Marginal returns on investment in practice time for stone toolmakers. 115
7.1 The lithics from Campitello, Italy. .......................... 119
7.2 Piece of birch pitch from Königsaue, Germany. .............. 120
7.3 One possible chaîne opératoire for the production of a birch pitch hafted tool. ...................................... 122
8.1 Map of Europe showing locations mentioned in the text .......... 140
8.2a and b European Lower Pleistocene site locations using modern data. . . . . . 147
9.1 Sites yielding evidence for marine conditions around the southern and southeastern coasts of Britain during MIS 11, MIS 9 and MIS 7. .... 160
9.2 Continuous sea-level estimates from benthonic isotope record and other sea-level indicators, with periods during which Britain was an island indicated. .......................... 161
9.3 Schematic diagram showing tentative phases of colonisation, isolation and abandonment during marine isotope sub-stages from MIS 12 to MIS 6. ........................................ 162
9.4 Summary diagram showing chronological distribution of Acheulean, Levallois and Clactonian industries from MIS 13 to MIS 8. ........ 168
10.1 John Glover (1767–1849), Mill’s Plain, 1836. ................ 177
10.2 A generalised Late Pleistocene and Holocene pollen diagram of the Netherlands. ................................................. 179
10.3 Location of Last Interglacial archaeological sites mentioned in the text. ................................................................. 183
10.4 Pollen percentage curve (selected taxa) for the last interglacial sequence at Neumark-Nord 2. .............................. 185
11.1 The regions of Greece, north, south, east and west. .......... 191
11.2 Reported Palaeolithic sites. ....................................... 192
11.3 Absolute numbers (log) of artefacts per site plotted against elevation. 193
11.4 Reported definite and possible Lower Palaeolithic sites. ......... 194
11.5 Reported Middle Palaeolithic sites. ........................... 197
11.6 Reported Upper Palaeolithic sites. ........................... 199
11.7 Dated Aurignacian sites and those attributed based on the presence of carinated pieces. ........................................ 201
11.8 Dated Gravettian sites and those attributed based on the presence of shouldered pieces and Gravettian points. ................... 202
11.9 Dated Epigravettian sites and those attributed based on the presence of backed pieces. ........................................... 204
12.1 Map of East Asia indicating a schematic subdivision into north-east Asia and south-east Asia including political boundaries. .... 215
12.2 Schematic drawings of core types: ................................ 217
12.2(A) The production of a wedge-shaped core from a bifacial foliate. ... 217
12.2(B) The production of a boat-shaped core shaped from a small nodule covered with cortex. ................................. 217
12.2(C) The production of conical, semi-conical cores and ‘pencil-shaped’ cores. ......................................................... 217
**List of figures**

12.3 Recorded and mostly dated microblade sites. .................. 218
12.4 Hafted microblade fragments in bone handles from Donghulin and Yuanyouanchi. .......................... 231
13.1 Summarising the view of hominin intentionality according to the Social Brain Hypothesis. ................. 240
13.2 Illustrating the basic definitions of the categories of identity present within the identity model and an illustrative example as to how the identity model relates to the orders of intentionality. ..... 242
13.3 Illustrating the seven categories of tip classification. .......... 245
13.4 Illustrating handaxe symmetry and schema for recording. .......... 246
13.5 Summarising the view of hominin intentionality according to the application of the identity model to the archaeological record. .... 257
14.1 Chimpanzee activity around corpses. .......................... 265
15.1 Geographic distribution of the female imagery discussed in the text. 277
15.2 The profile of the head of the Kostenki-Lespgue figurines. ........ 278
15.3 Pointed appendix of the head, at different scales. ............. 279
15.4 The arms. ........................................ 280
15.5 Back and fundament. ................................... 281
15.6 Chimeras. ........................................... 282
16.1 The European Upper Palaeolithic record viewed against climate change recorded in the NGRIP-ice core. .................... 289
16.2 The spatio-temporal contexts of Palaeolithic female depictions. .. 290
16.3 Willendorf-style figurines. .................................. 294
16.4 Willendorf-style bas-reliefs. ................................ 295
16.5 Willendorf-style engravings. ................................ 296
16.6 Willendorf figurine faces. ................................... 297
16.7 Middle Magdalenian and contemporaneous female depictions. .... 298
16.8 Göppersdorf-type engravings shown at different levels of abstraction. ........................................ 299
16.9 Göppersdorf-type engravings. ................................ 300
16.10 Göppersdorf-type engravings of multiple associated figures (‘groups’). 300
16.11 Göppersdorf-type engravings of four hatched figures in alignment. 301
16.12 Göppersdorf-type engravings of female depictions. ............. 301
16.13 Göppersdorf-type engravings and paintings of groups of figures. 302
16.14 Göppersdorf-type statuettes on different raw materials. ......... 303
16.15 Males in Late Magdalenian art depicted in unambiguous group activities. ............................ 307
17.1 Map of western Scotland showing radiocarbon-dated Mesolithic sites. ..................................... 317
17.2 Excavation at Bolsay, Islay, 1992. ............................ 320
17.3 Storakilg, Islay, excavation 2012. ................................. 321
17.4 Large pit at Staosnaig, Colonsay, excavated 1990. .............. 322
17.5 Fiskary Bay, Isle of Coll, at low tide in 2007. .................... 323
17.6 Stone artefacts from Coulerach. ................................ 324
17.7 2010 excavation at Creit Dhu, Isle of Mull. ...................... 325
17.8 Small Isles, Coll, north–west Mull, Sleat of Skye and Ardnamurchan. ......................................... 329
17.9 The Isle of Mull, showing location of Creit Dhu, Croig Field and suggesting route-way to Tenga along the Aros Glen. ............. 330
## List of figures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>17.10</td>
<td>Islay, showing location of Mesolithic sites and probable route-way between Gleann Mor and Bolsay around the edge of Loch a’ Bhogaidh.</td>
<td>331</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17.11</td>
<td>Woodland of Collie Mhor on the east coast of Colonsay.</td>
<td>332</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17.12</td>
<td>The east coast of Oronsay, looking towards the midden of Cnoc Coig.</td>
<td>334</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17.13</td>
<td>The Mesolithic site of Storakaig, 2012.</td>
<td>335</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17.14</td>
<td>Cnoc Sligeach, Oronsay.</td>
<td>337</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17.15</td>
<td>View across Staffin Bay from An Corran, Skye.</td>
<td>338</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17.16</td>
<td>The crags at Quiran, Isle of Skye.</td>
<td>339</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## TABLES

3.1 Evolution of stone tool manufacture from the earliest tools to complex blade technologies. .............................................. page 36
5.1 Summary of key data, expressed as means and standard deviations. .......... 86
5.2 Biface data from Kilombe EH and Kilombe GH. ........................................ 87
5.3 Supplementary data for the discriminant analysis. .......................... 87
6.1 The ways in which experts excel and in which they fall short. ................. 100
6.2 Possible archaeological signatures for the existence of expert performance in the Palaeolithic. ........................................ 109
7.1 A formal description of the process of birch hafting outlined in the chaîne opératoire in Figure 17.3. ........................................ 124
9.1 Evidence for marine conditions around the southern and south-eastern coasts of Britain during MIS 11, MIS 9 and MIS 7. .......................... 158
9.2 British handaxe traditions according to Roe (1968a) with inferred ages. ...... 171
11.1 Number of recorded Palaeolithic cave and open-air sites. ...................... 192
11.2 Numbers of reported artefacts per site. ........................................ 193
11.3 Palaeolithic sites with material or contexts attributed to specific periods. ... 194
11.4 Directly dated and attributed Lower Palaeolithic sites. ......................... 196
11.5 Dated Middle Palaeolithic sites. ............................................... 198
11.6 Dated Aurignacian sites. .................................................... 201
11.7 Dated Gravettian sites. ....................................................... 203
11.8 Dated Epigravettian sites. ................................................... 205
12.1 Radiometric dates of Late UP. ............................................... 224
13.1 The total number of handaxes examined from each site arranged in chronological order. ........................................... 244
13.2 The broadly chronological relationship between sites and the variability of handaxe tip shape, and symmetry present therein. ................ 248
13.3 The relationship between site and tips with a symmetrical element. ......... 252
13.4 The relationship between site, tips with a convergent element and symmetry. ..................................................... 253
14.1 Evidence and possible evidence of mortuary activity among European pre-modern hominins. ........................................ 270
16.1 Principal differences between Willendorf-style and Gößnersdorf-type female depictions. ............................................. 305
16.2 The two principal conceptual schemes for Willendorf-style and Gößnersdorf-type female depictions. ..................................... 311
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FOREWORD

What Roman villa has such in situ evidence for behaviour? What Iron Age rubbish pit allows the archaeologist to construct the shortest of inferential chains concerning the role of hominin behaviour among the process of site formation? ... The preservation of landscapes with a comparably high spatial resolution is rare indeed outside the Lower Palaeolithic.


This volume seeks to promote a social and ecological narrative of early hominin evolution, one which is theoretically informed yet empirically based and which links conventional material and geographic perspectives on the early archaeological record with the more elusive, social, cognitive and symbolic landscapes. All of the volume’s contributors seek to move beyond limiting notions of early hominin culture and behaviour as imposed on, or dictated by, an external world. Instead, they present the early hominin world, and human evolution, as the outcome of a dynamic interaction between the ‘external’ landscape of habitat, physical environment and other animals and the ‘internal landscape’ of the perception and experience of the world.

Many of the chapters in this volume focus on the settlement and social relations of early hominins as intrinsic to their ecological situation in the physical world and the process of human evolution. Others explore how communal identities and cognitive landscapes become embedded in, and constructed through, the material environment, addressing the role of material objects and the physical landscape, not as a backdrop or vehicle for social relations and symbolic behaviour, but rather as active participants in the construction and evolution of society. All, however, demonstrate that any hard-and-fast distinction between these perspectives is neither inevitable nor, indeed, sustainable. Palaeolithic archaeology is the richer for combining these ultimately complementary and mutually reinforcing lines of evidence to create more than the sum of their parts.

An introductory chapter by Gosden reviews and critiques recent attempts at moving Palaeolithic studies closer to current social and cultural theory, and in addressing the big question of what it means to be human, provides an overview of many of the big themes of the volume: the nature of consciousness and intelligence; the importance of sociality and the embeddedness of
humans in the world, as well as the role of material culture, technology and skill as modes of interacting with it.

ECOSYSTEMS, SETTLEMENT AND MIGRATION

This theme of the ecological situatedness of hominins and humans in the world is the starting – but certainly not the end – point for a number of contributions which focus first and foremost on the significance of ecological factors in the study of prehistoric societies, hominin evolution and the co-evolution of hominins and humans. However, each of these recognises the relevance of social factors as a driver for, rather than simply a by-product of, both physical evolution and cultural development. Dunbar and Grove explore the interplay between ecological and social factors in the evolution of cognition and behaviour, with specific reference to the socio-ecological context of fission–fusion in primate societies. They predict a series of thresholds in hominin cognitive evolution that can be evaluated against both the archaeological and fossil records of the Palaeolithic.

Gowlett and colleagues apply landscape and network perspectives to the major African Acheulean site of Kilombe. Combined with new work which has extended the site’s archaeological timescales and landscapes, this chapter demonstrates how human activities can be mapped onto a framework comprised simultaneously of physical landscape, social constructs and cognitive routines.

At the other end of the Acheulean world, Ashton reviews the evidence for early human occupations of a diverse range of environments in northern Europe over 800 ka. Despite variations in climate and regional vegetation cover, he argues, hominins selected distinct ecological niches, predominantly in open grassland, close to a range of fresh-water habitats. However, these distinct niches are also argued to reflect pioneering populations who ultimately failed to successfully colonise northern latitudes until after 500 ka, when more sustained occupations may be the result of changes in technology, cognition or social structure, perhaps as part of a biological process of speciation.

The character of the more sustained post 500 ka occupation of northwest Europe is reviewed by Roebroeks and Bakels, whose contribution asks whether pre–sapiens hominins were capable of surviving in the forest environments that characterised European warm stages. New data from the Last Interglacial site of Neumark-Nord 2 is presented which suggests that not only were hominins able to survive in such habitats, but indeed that Neanderthals should perhaps be seen as active transformers of their surroundings, rather than passive pieces of ‘forest furniture’. The impacts of challenging environments are also explored in the Balkans by Elefanti and Marshall, who discuss the contrasts between settlement in southeast Europe in the Middle and early Upper Palaeolithic and suggest that the region provided refugia during the
cold phases of MIS 3 and 4 and thus became the possible origin for founder populations in subsequent warmer phases.

The nature of the post-500 ka settlement in northern Europe – specifically the British Isles – is explored further by White, who utilises recent sea-level reconstructions and sub-stage climatic cycles to explore the settlement patterns documented by the British archaeological record from this period. White argues that the piecemeal and broken record of settlement, abandonment and recolonisation is one of intermittent population renewal, driven largely by hominin responses to climatic change and sea-level fluctuations, and broadens out his focus from the physical landscape to investigate how the ecological processes of habitat and landscape change interdigitate with question of demography, social network and processes of cultural transmission and learning via the cultural patterning evident in in modes of handaxe manufacture and handaxe shape.

Technology, skill and learning

Such questions, focused around the socio-ecological context in which adaptations for technology, skill and learning are selected for is another significant theme that emerges from several other papers. Read and van der Leeuw’s bold contribution takes a ‘big picture’ view of the issue, surveying the broad sweep of human socio-technological evolution from the Palaeolithic right through to the Industrial Revolution and indeed the present day. They argue that cognitive evolution itself is only explicable in terms of the relationship between the ‘external’ and ‘internal’ worlds, themselves experienced via socio-technological ‘idea’ systems. During human evolution these systems developed from individual engagements with the world into communal social systems of shared categorical relations, thus freeing us from the constraints of our own individual brains and resulting in the runaway social and technological innovation that has marked human (pre-)history.

Sinclair’s contribution focuses in on the knowledge, know-how and embodied skills required to create such elaborate material cultures. He notes that to date such work has lacked an appreciation of the social support for the lifelong development of individuals’ experience, but also that there is clear, albeit fragmentary, evidence for the identification of expertise in the Upper Palaeolithic. The question of the potential adaptive cost of complex cognition and the acquisition of knowledge and skill explored by Sinclair provides an interesting counterpoint to Grove and Dunbar’s more ecologically-based take on a similar theme.

Wragg Sykes’ contribution focuses in on a specific example of specialist Palaeolithic knowledge from Neanderthal society: that of composite technologies and the use of birch bark pitch as a hafting mastic, and the implications for Neanderthal cognition, memory and spatial and temporal perception of...
landscapes. Her focus on the ways in which micro-scale engagement with material culture can inform on the social and cognitive construction of wider landscapes echoes themes developed in Porr’s contribution. Here the familiar Palaeolithic theme of hominin/human interaction with ‘the environment’ is given a relational and constructivist perspective more usually associated with the social archaeology of later prehistory, in order to investigate what such perspectives can add to our understandings of human evolution and early prehistoric hunter-gatherer society by extending our conceptualisation of ‘social relations’ beyond conspecifics to encompass other animal species.

Cole’s contribution, meanwhile, ostensibly technological in focus, presents a new theoretical perspective exploring the potential links among hominin cognition, behavioural complexity and the development of language in terms of their significance for the production of material culture and its potential symbolising role in complex social interactions and hominin identity construction.

Identity and representation

These issues of the significance of technology as a potential means of construction of identity is also explored alongside more traditional Palaeolithic questions regarding the migration and colonisation of ecosystems by prehistoric hunter-gatherer groups by Bar Yosef, with reference to the little-known (at least in the West) Late Pleistocene foragers of China, Korea and Japan. Their ‘micro-blade’ industries provide a means of exploring the interaction between technological and ecological adaptations as a possible means of identifying and tracking the spread of specific groups, forming a complementary line of evidence to the genetic evidence for the migration of modern humans into East Asia, and to the palaeobotanical evidence for the emergence of cultivation in the China central plain.

The papers by Pettitt, Mussi and Gaudzinski-Windheuser and Jöris further develop the examination of the symbolising role played by material culture during social relations, and specifically the significance of overt symbolising practices, codes and behaviours. Although each tackles what could be rather over-familiar Palaeolithic topics such as Neanderthal burial and Palaeolithic female imagery, the papers investigate how interactions with others – living and dead – are part of the process of, and reflect the tensions between, the construction of individual and group identities and broader cultural repertoires. Incorporating ideas about the relationships between demographic factors, cultural transmission and social processes, Mussi and Gaudzinski-Windheuser provide very different perspectives on the interpretation of human (particularly female) representations in Ice Age art of the European Upper Palaeolithic, Mussi proposes that subtle differences among the ‘Venus’ figurines provide evidence for the existence of formal rules of representation. However, misunderstandings during information transmission resulted in progressive distortion,
resulting in the exaggerated anatomical features which characterise many of the ‘Venuses’. In contrast, Gaudzinski-Windheuser and Jöris compare the stylistic, spatial and temporal characteristics of Mid Upper Palaeolithic and late Magdalenian figurines to suggest that the schematic style of the latest Upper Palaeolithic figurines represents an artistic reflection of changes in the social role of women during a period of rapid population expansion.

Finally, Mithen’s concluding chapter compares and contrasts the two interpretative approaches all the contributions to this volume have sought to reconcile in their very different ways: the ‘archaeology of settlement’ (as derived from Binford’s ethnoarchaeological work) and the ‘archaeology of society’, with reference to late Pleistocene/early Holocene lithic evidence from western Scotland.

CLIVE GAMBLE IN MIND: THE ECOLOGICAL, SOCIAL AND SYMBOLIC ROLE OF A PALAEOLITHIC RESEARCHER

As most readers will notice, the following contributions draw heavily from the pioneering work of a major figure in Palaeolithic archaeology: Professor Clive Gamble. In his research and teaching career to date Clive has reinvented the Palaeolithic with his typically lively and often radical work integrating ‘traditional’ geographical and ecological approaches to prehistory with an approach which foregrounds the social and cognitive aspects of Palaeolithic life. In doing so, he has fundamentally altered the ecosystem of Palaeolithic archaeology, and forced us all to adapt. The early, influential The Palaeolithic Settlement of Europe (Gamble 1986) and the typically provocative ‘Man the Shoveler’ (Gamble 1987), demonstrated how Palaeolithic archaeology could move beyond a sterile description of early European prehistory as a succession of lithic cultural traditions, where chimpanzees enter an environmentally driven conveyor belt at one end to emerge at the other as Homo sapiens, to an understanding of the interplay between the material archaeological record and the socio-ecology of hominins and early hunter-gatherers on a global scale. Subsequent work has widely traversed the landscape of Prehistoric discourse, ranging in scope from the social context of Upper Palaeolithic art to large-scale patterns and mechanisms of global colonisation, via some minor early digressions into Bronze Age Greece. Publication in 1999 of The Palaeolithic Societies of Europe exemplified wider archaeological concerns over the role of human agency and social interactions as drivers of the material record, and led the way in bringing the study of the Palaeolithic and early hominin societies into the mainstream archaeological fold, stressing the significance of both physical and social environments for human evolution. Since then, exploring the social underpinnings of hominin evolution and colonisation has formed a primary axis of Palaeolithic research, crossing over into anthropology, psychology and sociology to investigate the roots of hominin sociality and the social brain, for instance
through the British Academy’s Centenary Research Project From Lucy to Language.

However, the goal of this volume is not simply to celebrate Clive’s previous work. The papers collected here are presented to act as a catalyst for distinctive and highly productive directions for new research into some key areas of hominin evolution, and new understanding of Palaeolithic societies across the globe and across the timespan of the Palaeolithic. In particular we hope that all of the papers stress an underlying theme of Clive’s work, that research into the hunter-gatherers of the Palaeolithic and Mesolithic need not be limited to ‘stomach-led’ and ‘brain-dead’ models (Gamble 1999: 426). Instead the contributions to this volume seek to address the ways in which human social action and creativity are, and have always been, part and parcel of broader ecological patterns of adaptation to the world in which we live. This volume is offered in part as celebration of Clive’s work, as a ‘state-of-the-art’ snapshot of work in the field of Palaeolithic archaeology and human evolution more generally, but also as a manifesto and call-to-arms to stimulate future research that will build on this to inspire future researchers to continue to push Palaeolithic research forward into new territory.

A PERSONAL NOTE

To paraphrase an un-named colleague of one of the editors: ‘the Palaeolithic is much more interesting than when I used to teach it in the ’80s’. Clive’s inspirational research, teaching and leadership over the last four decades has been a huge factor in these changes, impacting upon academics, students, the wider public and, last but by no means least, funding bodies. Clive’s hugely significant symbolic role in championing of the Palaeolithic through his involvement with such august institutions as the British Academy, the British Museum, the Royal Anthropological Institute, the REF panel and indeed Channel 5 has had a huge impact on the recognition and standing of all disciplines involved in Palaeolithic research. In addition, all the editors can attest to his significant social role in training, supporting and inspiring a new generation of Palaeolithic researchers.

We hope that Clive will recognise his own research in the roots of the papers presented here and not find too much evidence of ‘dancing to the rhythms of the Pleistocene’, and that his future will continue to bring us many new and thought-provoking contributions, perhaps on the wisdom of Arsenal buying Gareth Bale instead of Theo Walcott when pillaging Southampton’s impressive youth setup, and ideally via Nevis and an occasional test match seat at Sabina Park.

Thank you

FIONA, ROB, MATT AND FRANCIS