

PALAEOLITHIC EUROPE

In this book, Jennifer C. French presents a new synthesis of the archaeological, palaeoanthropological, and palaeogenetic records of the European Palaeolithic, adopting a unique demographic perspective on these first two million years of European prehistory. Unlike prevailing narratives of demographic stasis, she emphasises the dynamism of Palaeolithic populations of both our evolutionary ancestors and members of our own species across four demographic stages, within a context of substantial Pleistocene climatic changes. Integrating evolutionary theory with a socially oriented approach to the Palaeolithic, French bridges biological and cultural factors, with a focus on women and children as the drivers of population change. She shows how, within the physiological constraints on fertility and mortality, social relationships provided the key to enduring demographic success. Through its demographic focus, French combines a ‘big picture’ perspective on human evolution with careful analysis of the day-to-day realities of European Palaeolithic hunter-gatherer communities – their families, their children, and their lives.

Jennifer C. French holds a PhD in Archaeology from the University of Cambridge. Her research on humanity’s early demographic history has been funded by the AHRC, the Leverhulme Trust, and the Wenner-Gren Foundation and published in *Science*, *Evolutionary Anthropology*, *Journal of Archaeological Science*, and *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society*.

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PALAEOLITHIC EUROPE

A Demographic and Social Prehistory

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For Paul
and
Dom

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PREFACE

This book is the culmination of over a decade's worth of studying, thinking, and writing about Palaeolithic population trends and the challenges and opportunities of studying demography in the deep human past. My interest in this topic was originally piqued by the extinction of the Neanderthals, and the subsequent realisation that despite this being the most famous demographic event of the Pleistocene, it was rarely discussed and studied in explicitly demographic terms; in terms of the imbalance between lives and deaths that ultimately underlie the disappearance of a species. Since I started work on this topic back in 2008, archaeological interest in demography has grown. Many factors have contributed to this: the development and refinement of methods to study long-term demographic change in prehistory (although, sadly, not all applicable to Palaeolithic datasets); the increase in the use of agent-based and simulation models to explore the changing birth, death, and migration rates and patterns underlying these trends; the inclusion of evolutionary frameworks that link demographic change with other cultural and biological domains into mainstream archaeological theory; and the growing generation of palaeogenetic data. There is no better research environment in which to write a big-picture, large-scale 'demographic prehistory' than the one that currently prevails, and the work presented here owes an enormous intellectual debt to the wider palaeodemographic research community. In the face of some considerable scepticism, the members of this community have demonstrated successfully both the importance of population histories to our wider understanding of past societies, and how data from archaeology and allied disciplines can be combined to reconstruct and explore these population histories.

At the same time, I have become increasingly aware of the rather detached attitude to prehistoric populations, and the people they comprised, that often accompanies prevailing approaches to palaeodemography. I have found myself unconsciously thinking about Palaeolithic people as 'individuals' who lived in mixed groups of 'males' and 'females' and who 'mated' or 'bred' to produce 'offspring'. There is nothing wrong with these words per se. In fact, they are, in

a biological and evolutionary sense, those that most accurately describe these people and demographic processes. They do, however, strike me as rather odd phrases to use to discuss some of the most meaningful and intimate relationships and events that humans experience. These words can also take on a double meaning when we are discussing archaic hominins (i.e. non-*Homo sapiens*), making – intentionally or not – a statement on the perceived humanity of these people. Let me make my views clear here: while there were obviously differences (both biological and cognitive) between them, in my opinion all hominins who lived during the European Palaeolithic were ‘humans’.

In all human societies, demography and demographic behaviour are structured by biology but are shaped by culture. While we have uniformitarian biological principles to help with understanding how the former controlled and constrained demographic behaviour in prehistory, we have no equivalent to draw on to understand the latter. Furthermore, the Palaeolithic record is a palimpsest that is largely silent about the social factors and individual decisions underlying demography. This is, however, no excuse for ignoring this aspect of Palaeolithic population histories. We can never reconstruct, for example, the marriage customs of Palaeolithic groups, or their cultural attitudes towards sex, but – as I hope this book demonstrates – we can still incorporate social perspectives into the study of Palaeolithic demography, and avoid reducing the behaviour of Palaeolithic people to mere biological impulses wrought against an on-going quest for food. At times my interpretations may stretch the data somewhat, but these ‘leaps of faith’ are required to write a demographic prehistory that doesn’t just populate the Palaeolithic, but also peoples it.

This book is ultimately the book about Palaeolithic demography that I wanted to read while conducting my research over the last ten years. I hope that other members of the community of Palaeolithic students and scholars want to read it too.

★★★★

The type of analytical synthesis represented by this book stands on the shoulders of giants, and I am very grateful to those colleagues who provided me with expertise, information, support, encouragement, and inspiration during the long period of research and writing.

The majority of the research and writing of this book was undertaken at the UCL Institute of Archaeology. Several colleagues there were instrumental in getting this book off the ground: Corisande Fenwick, Stephen Shennan, and David Wengrow. I also gained valuable insights and feedback on many of the ideas that follow from my fellow Palaeolithic archaeologists at the Institute: Ignacio de la Torre, Matt Pope, Tomos Proffitt, James Steele, and especially Andy Garrard, as well as the members of the weekly Palaeolithic Discussion Group. Revision, editing, and proofing were undertaken at the Department of Archaeology, Classics and Egyptology at the University of Liverpool, and I am

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