

THE PALAEOLOGIC SETTLEMENT OF ASIA

This book provides the first analysis and synthesis of the evidence of the earliest inhabitants of Asia before the appearance of modern humans 100,000 years ago. Asia has received far less attention than Africa and Europe in the search for human origins, but it is no longer considered to be of marginal importance. Indeed, a global perspective on human origins cannot be properly attained without a detailed consideration of the largest continent. In this study, Robin Dennell examines a variety of sources, including the archaeological evidence, the fossil hominin record, and the environmental and climatic background from Southwest, Central, South, and Southeast Asia, as well as China. He presents an authoritative and comprehensive framework for investigations of Asia's oldest societies, challenges many long-standing assumptions about its earliest inhabitants, and places Asia centrally in the discussion of human evolution in the past two million years.

Robin Dennell is Professor of Human Origins at the University of Sheffield. A former Leverhulme Senior Research Fellow and British Academy Research Professor, he is the author of *European Economic Prehistory* and *Early Hominin Landscapes in Northern Pakistan: Investigations in the Pabbi Hills*.

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THE PALAEOLOGIC SETTLEMENT
OF ASIA

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For all those – past, present, and future – interested in the early prehistory of Asia.

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PREFACE

In this book, I have tried to summarise and integrate the archaeological, fossil hominin, and climatic records of Asia before it was colonised by modern humans ca. 100 ka. I first thought about writing this book ten to fifteen years ago, but had to delay the attempt until I had published the results of the fieldwork I had directed in the Pabbi Hills, Pakistan (Dennell 2004a), and also until I had escaped the burdens of departmental administration. There are several reasons that I have long wanted to write a synthesis of Asia's early prehistory. The first is that (surprisingly) no one has ever written one, despite the fact that Asia, as the largest continent, was where a substantial part of early human prehistory took place in the last two million years, and it thus deserves to be treated in its own right as much as that of Europe or Africa. Second, and as a result of this neglect, most accounts of early human prehistory are biased towards evidence from Europe and Africa, with often only brief mention of what is known from Asia. One unfortunate result of this bias is the prominence that is usually ascribed to European evidence. Europe is little more than the western peninsula of Asia, and was often a very small tail wagged by a much larger dog. Much of what happened to hominins (and the rest of the fauna) in Europe in the Middle Pleistocene was an extension of climatic and faunal developments further east, and better understanding of these would probably benefit perceptions of Europe's own early prehistory. A third reason behind this book is that, within Asia, there are several researchers who know an immense amount about their own regions, but far less about neighbouring ones. This is entirely understandable given the size and diversity of the continent, but it has inhibited attempts to see Asia's prehistory at a continental as well as a regional level. The climatic data now available (especially from the last decade) make this not only possible, but positively exciting in terms of how regional records for early hominins reflect large-scale changes in Asia's climate (and often topography) over the last two million years or more.

A driving influence behind this book has been the wish to combine the details of local regional records with a continental perspective – to see both the

individual trees and the overall forest in which they are found. Although much of the book is necessarily about regional archaeological records, particularly for the Levant (Chapters 4 and 8), India (Chapter 9), Southeast Asia (Chapters 5 and 8), and North China (Chapters 5 and 10), I have tried also to assess these in relation to what is known about Asia's climatic record before the last interglacial (Chapters 3 and 7). There is now an immense literature on the history of Asia's climate, particularly the monsoon, and this deserves to be as well known as the European record of glaciations and interglacials. The fossil evidence for hominin evolution in Asia is often very poor, and has often been synthesised entirely as a self-contained set of material, and without any attempt to place it in an environmental and climatic context. As I hope I show in Chapters 6 and especially 11, there is much to be gained by studying the Asian fossil hominin record at a continental level in relation to its climatic and environmental context.

In writing this book, I have tried to rely upon primary sources as much as possible. Because the literature on the early prehistory of Asia (including its climatic and fossil hominin record) is so diverse and scattered, the book includes an extensive bibliography that I hope will be useful to those wishing to proceed further. It is not exhaustive, but I hope it provides a reasonable selection of current evidence. As is evident from the bibliography, the sources used are overwhelmingly in English, although I have used French, German, and Russian ones when appropriate. The main omission is unfortunately the enormous amount of material published in Chinese that I cannot (yet) read. In finishing this book, I am aware that I am in the position of someone leaving a large party in full swing: some conversations are routine, some may even be tedious, but others are highly animated and unpredictable. In such a position, all one can do is to summarise and evaluate the current situation, even though some aspects may have changed by the time the book is published. In a large, diverse, and active field, this is normal, so readers should expect parts of this book to age rapidly; I hope that the greater part will do so gradually.

One detail that should be clarified at this point in order to circumvent accusations of geographical inexactitude concerns my definition of Asia. "Asia", like "Africa" and "Europe", is a construct of classical and postclassical Western thought, and its boundaries reflect shifting cultural, political, and historical perceptions. In the Roman Empire, "Africa" denoted Roman territories on the southern side of the Mediterranean (apart from Egypt, which was seen as unique), whereas "Asia" referred to territories on and beyond the eastern Mediterranean. In the sixteenth century, Europeans tended to expand the term "Asia" to include all areas east of the Mediterranean, and later, east of the Urals. The edges of Asia are blurred, especially for those interested in the Pleistocene or recent history. In the mid-nineteenth century, the English writer Kinglake regarded Belgrade, Serbia, as the European frontier with Asia because the Balkans were then under "Asiatic" Ottoman rule. Because of various wars

before 1914, the Balkans became European, as might Turkey if it becomes part of the European Union. The Caucasus region between the Black and Caspian Seas is another region where geography, history, and religion have resulted in a contested identity – European, Asian, neither, or both.

Asia appears sharply demarcated from Alaska by the Bering Strait, yet they were united for much of the Pleistocene, at times of low sea level, by the coastal shelf of Beringia. Likewise, Australia seems neatly divided from Southeast Asia, but its faunal and floral boundaries were blurred when the Sunda and Sahul Shelves were exposed when sea levels dropped. My approach is unexceptional and heuristic: Istanbul for me remains the gateway to Asia from Europe¹; the southern Caucasus is included in Asia because it would make no sense to exclude Dmanisi and the cave sequences of this region from a discussion of Asian prehistory²; Flores remains the southeast endpoint of Asia regarding early hominins; and Beringia is irrelevant to this book, as hominins prior to the last interglacial never reached it.

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¹ As one crosses the Bosphorus at Istanbul, there is (or used to be) a signpost pointing one way to Europe (i.e., Istanbul) and the other way to Asia; I see no reason to disagree with this geographical boundary. Nevertheless, I discuss in Chapter 8 the evidence from Yarimbuzurgaz, on the European side of the Bosphorus, as it is one of the few excavated Early Palaeolithic sites in Turkey.

² As example of the ambiguous status of this region, all these sites are discussed in the volume on the Early Palaeolithic of Europe, edited by Roebroeks and Kolfschoten (1995).

depth on Chapter 9; Professors Huang Weiwen and Gao Xing of the Institute of Vertebrate Palaeontology and Palaeoanthropology (IVPP), Beijing, for sharing their knowledge of the Early Palaeolithic of China (Chapters 5 and 10); and Professor Bermúdez de Castro and Dr. Martín-Torres (Centro Nacional de Investigación sobre Evolución Humana [CENIEH] Burgos) for their comments and advice on Chapter 11, which considers the Middle Pleistocene fossil hominin record of Asia and its neighbours. I also owe much to the friendship of Professor Wil Roebroeks of the Faculty of Archaeology, Leiden, especially for his support in developing some of the ideas in Chapter 6 that underpinned our joint review paper in *Nature* (2005), and for his invitation to give a series of postgraduate seminars in Leiden on the first half of the book in 2006. Dr. Paul Pettitt read and commented upon advanced drafts of the entire text and has been faultless as a departmental colleague, critic, sounding board, and friend throughout this project, and Norman Yoffee and Tom Dillehay provided useful suggestions on amendments and additions to the final script. Needless to say, I have only myself to blame for any shortcomings and errors that have accrued.

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A brief note on the spelling of names is appropriate. In some instances, sites and people are known by different spellings (for example, Dmanisi, Dmanissi; Gabunia, Gabounia; Tien Shan, Tianshan), and I have tried to standardise these. I have listed Chinese names in full in the bibliography wherever possible, and as they appeared in lists of authors. Because the Chinese place the family name before the given one, there is much confusion over which is which in many journal publications; for example, Gao Xing can be listed as Xing Gao, Gao X., or Xing G. Apologies to any Chinese colleagues whose names have appeared incorrectly. Regarding acknowledgements to those figures and tables that have been reproduced, in a few instances it proved impossible to trace the owners of copyright material, and thus I take this opportunity to offer my apologies to any copyright holders whose rights I may have unwittingly infringed.

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