

Challenging complacency

If there is a single theme that unites the articles in this issue, it is the impact of new data, or reinterpretations of the familiar, that challenge our preconceptions of hunter-gatherer societies, past and present. In the case of Van Peer et al, recent excavations at Sai Island on the Sudanese Nile have uncovered evidence for unexpectedly complex behaviours in the Middle Pleistocene of ~200,000 years ago. These include, among others, the systematic processing of minerals for use as pigments, the use of a variety of composite tool types and, perhaps most importantly in the context of contemporary African hunter-gatherers, the operation of logistically organised production strategies. We as archaeologists have become complacent in accepting the characterisation of the Bushmen or Hadza as collectors with immediate return economies who represent a timeless model of prehistoric African hunter-gatherers. The interpretation offered here of Sai Island as a special purpose site will go some way towards shaking our preconceptions free of the limitations of the ethnographic present.

Roscoe takes a hard look at a stalwart source of comparative data, Murdock's *Ethnographic Atlas* and argues that the apparent deviance of tropical hunter-gatherers from latitudinal trends in foraging strategies, especially reliance on fishing, is an artefact of biases in the ethnographic database. The *Atlas* presents a skewed sample of hunter-gatherers, with a disproportionately high representation of coastal northern American societies and few tropical groups with access to water. These and other discontinuities in the database appear to account for the so-called 'tropical exception'. Roscoe raises an obvious, but easily overlooked point that many of the world's early states developed along major river systems between 20° – 35° N, and as a consequence we have no ethnographic data for hunter-gatherers who would have lived along these rivers. There is scope here for archaeologists to help redress the balance.

Franco et al take a strongly ecological perspective in their overview of changing hunter-gatherer settlement patterns in southern Patagonia during the Holocene. They present a chronologically based summary of evidence for climate change in the region from the perspective of two locales: a highland lake and stretch of coast and both located in a semi-arid region. The archaeological record of site distributions and artefact content is examined against the background of shifting plant, animal and water resources. The result is a fine-grained analysis that emphasises the impact of slight shifts in available moisture on long-term decision-making about landscape use. Evidence emerges of possible exchange networks operating as risk reducing strategies alongside changes in mobility. These findings may not be surprising, but this is a geographical area of hunter-gatherer prehistory that is poorly known outside specialist circles. The overview incorporates several forthcoming publications and as such presents the latest data available for the region.

Sadr also brings to our attention a relatively little-known topic of research outside southern Africa, namely the role of sheep among late Holocene hunter-gatherer societies. (The concept of a southern African 'Neolithic' will feature in the December issue of *Before Farming*.) Farming and cattle herding were brought to southern Africa by Bantu-speaking peoples who originated around Lake Victoria some 2,000 years ago. This dispersal is well documented archaeologically and supported by genetic and linguistic research, but along the western Cape the keeping of sheep predates the arrival of Bantu-speaking farmers. Sadr addresses the issue of how sheep arrived and what role they may have played among local hunter-gatherers. He develops the challenging argument that given the rich resources of the Cape coast, local hunter-gatherers (Khoe) had no economic imperative to keep sheep, but they could have played a role in enhancing prestige and establishing social rank. These groups with their existing delayed return economies (based on shellfish) were pre-adapted to the development of social differentiation. Sheep were kept for use in feasts where their consumption could have fulfilled various integrative

and competitive social roles. Sadr interprets the faunal record from the hilltop site of Kasteelberg as evidence of a place devoted to feasting in a physically and socially prominent location. The model is compelling and will challenge archaeologists to rethink the existing consensus about sites with sheep and ceramics.

The departmental review by Hobart and Mitchell features the ethnographic and archaeological collections from the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford. Particular emphasis is given to Bushman artefacts collected in the 19th century from the interior of South Africa, long before systematic ethnographic research began in the Kalahari. These collections are uniquely important for they show a diversity of material culture that has been lost to the archaeological record and overshadowed by the pre-eminence of Kalahari-based data gathered since the 1950s. The three objects chosen as case studies demonstrate the much undervalued potential of museum collections to contribute to archaeological and anthropological research. I hope this review will lead us to rethink our preconceptions of such collections as hopelessly biased compilations gathered by agents of colonialism.

If there was any complacency creeping into the palaeoanthropological world about our understanding of recent human evolution, then it has been shattered by the report of a new hominin species from Indonesia, *Homo floresiensis* (see *Nature* 431, 28 October 2004). This diminutive hominin, with a brain a third the size of our own, co-existed with *Homo sapiens* on the island of Flores until 14,000 years ago and appears to have been a hunter of large game and maker of technologically complex tools. This species challenges our assumptions about the relationship between brain size and cognition, and should make us think even more deeply about our use of contemporary ethnographic data for interpreting the behavioural record of another species. We will feature commentary on this remarkable discovery in our forthcoming (December) issue, but let me start discussions by asking why the media image of *floresiensis* is cast as 'man the hunter' – complete with greying beard – when the holotype is a woman? Complacency abounds.

The Editor

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