

Weigh and consider

'Read not to contradict and confute, nor to believe and take for granted, nor to find talk and discourse, but to weigh and consider.'

Francis Bacon 1625

The words of Bacon, Renaissance scholar and early champion of scientific reasoning, set the context for this issue. *Before Farming*, with its typically eclectic content, owes something to the Renaissance spirit of wide-ranging curiosity harnessed towards investigating nature and humanity through critical analysis and testing. The explicit lack of regional or methodological focus of this journal is its strength and weakness. Diversity in content is intended to stimulate cross-fertilisation of ideas, or at the very least bring to the reader's attention developments outside their own area of research. The reality of disciplinary specialisation makes this blend something of an acquired taste.

In recent issues we've been trying to introduce regions of research that have remained marginal for lack of sustained exposure, such as Patagonia, and topics that look to be highly specialised – the 'hunters with sheep' debate in southern Africa – but which raise broad methodological issues of interpretation. At the same time we have tried to give rock-art research and post-glacial societies a higher profile because both subjects tend to bridge the archaeology/anthropology divide. The current issue continues each of these trends. Two years ago Richard Fullagar (*Before Farming* 2004/2) provided an overview of contemporary issues in Australian prehistory, and this paper is recommended reading for those new to the topic before engaging with the series of papers in this and the next issue.* Darren Curnoe provides an introduction to the eight papers in this series that deals with modern human origins in Australia, a topic that has been an active and often contentious area of research for more than 100 years. The related issues of when humans first colonised the continent, where they came from, and what impact they had on the environment are all brought bang up-to-date here. We don't as a matter of policy normally include papers on matters biological, but the fossil and genetic records are central datasets for understanding the prehistory of Australia. They also bring to the fore a fascinating and long-running epistemological divide between supporters of a single versus multiple population origin. The divide is exemplified here by Pardoe who argues for a single colonisation episode followed by *in situ* evolutionary development that explains the biological diversity seen today and prehistorically. Curnoe and Curnoe & Thorne interpret the fossil record of 'robust' and 'gracile' populations as representatives of more than one founding population that subsequently diversified within Australia. Both sides of the abyss find support in the mitochondrial DNA evidence (von Holst Pellekaan & Harding) of a time depth of more than 40,000 years for the settlement of the continent, with the possibility of one or more founding lineages left open to further research. I recommend this paper in particular to those unfamiliar with the current state of play in mitochondrial research, including ancient DNA analysis, as used to reconstruct population histories. The conceptual and methodological issues raised by the two contrasting interpretations of the biological data parallel those that characterise the wider Out of Africa debate on the origin and dispersal of *Homo sapiens*. The Australian record, like that of Eurasian Neanderthals, is a bellwether of intellectual movement, or stasis, on the subject. Bacon's advice to weigh and consider rather than contradict and confute is poignantly prescient.

Both the news and review contributions receive the Baconian seal of approval as they engage with the field of rock-art research at its vibrant best. The biological identity of individual rock-artists has eluded researchers who have relied on assumptions about the sizes of handprints to identify male, female, mature or young artists at work. A critical but encouraging assessment is given by Nelson et al to a recent report that digit length ratios as recorded on handprints has been used to distinguish male from female artists. This quantitative approach has the potential to engender (and humanise) rock-art, and the guidelines offered here should improve the reliability of digit ratio analyses.

Compare your own ring and forefinger lengths and see for yourself how reliable a predictor this can be. Sven Ouzman reports on the coming of age of rock-art research as a subject engaged in multiple and constructive dialogues between archaeologists, ethnographers, indigenous communities (however defined) and a wider public. These two papers reflect the healthy state of rock-art research as a subject engaged in the unending cycle of weighing and considering.

The Editor

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