

Pathogens and petroglyphs

The character of the journal for 2003 has, so far, been largely defined by two general themes: hunter-gatherer rock-art and diet, but in this issue the Palaeolithic makes a welcome reappearance. The rock-art component – with a strong Australian flavour – continues, but the dietary studies draw to a close for the time being. Our final paper for 2003 from the CHAGS 9 session on diet, demography and health from Susan Kent is a posthumous publication: 'The health of sedentism, sharing and diet and the illnesses of aggregation'. This paper did not pass through the full peer review process before her untimely death, but with the editorial help of Malcolm Lillie and Helen Fenwick we present a final tribute to a remarkable interdisciplinary career. (I thank her colleagues at Old Dominion for giving their consent to publication.) Sue's paper integrates some of her long-standing research interests on sharing networks, mobility and health in egalitarian societies. The result is a counter-intuitive and challenging argument.

Susan Kent makes another controversial contribution in this issue, though unintended on her part. Edwin Wilmsen reviews her final edited volume *Ethnicity, hunter-gatherers, and the 'other': association or assimilation in Africa* (2002) and for followers of the long-running 'Kalahari debate' the tenor of his comments will come as no surprise. If those involved in the volume wish to respond to the review you are invited to do so – *Before Farming* is intended to be a forum for discussion as well as a source of news and current research.

Among the rock-art contributions is a news item from Paul Pettitt which elaborates on the significance of the first engraved Palaeolithic images to be found in Britain. The discovery of Magdalenian-like imagery in England should not blind us to the fact that petroglyphs are in fact widespread throughout Britain and Ireland, but they are the works of Neolithic and Bronze Age societies and technically outside the scope of *Before Farming*. Carol Martin in her contribution to this issue, 'Marks of contemplation: cup-and-ring rock-art from Ireland', uses the spatial distribution of Australian 'Panaramitee' style petroglyphs combined with personal interviews of Aboriginal artists to model the use and even the meaning of cup-and-ring marks in the Irish landscape. Such a wide-ranging and ambitious use of analogy will undoubtedly provoke strong reactions, and for those innately sceptical of this kind argument, I recommend a close reading. Paul Faulstich in 'Dreaming the country and burning the land: rock-art and ecological knowledge' reminds us that hunter-gatherers rather than being passive custodians of their natural environments are actively involved in its modification and maintenance. The spatial context and content of rock-art offers an avenue for investigating culturally constructed models of human interaction with the natural world, past and present. The examples used are largely Australian, but the general principles are of wider application. Taçon et al in 'Changing ecological concerns in the rock-art subject matter of north Australia's Keep River region' provide a regional case study that demonstrates how changing imagery can be used to build a relative chronology, but equally importantly they show how that imagery reflects changes in the environment and human perception of those changes.

The prominence of Australian rock-art in recent issues of *Before Farming* reflects the depth of ethnographic and archaeological information available for this one aspect of Aboriginal symbolic life. Ian Keen in 'Aboriginal economy and society at the threshold of colonisation: a comparative study' offers a sweeping survey of pre-contact Australia set against a backdrop of continent-wide ecological variability from tropical north to desert interior. The project highlights broad underlying economic behaviours that unite these disparate societies, but also the great variability in the structure of kinship and cosmologies. This wide-ranging study offers something for everyone interested in hunter-gatherers and the methodology of cross-cultural analysis.

We haven't forgotten the Palaeolithic core of our readership. Sally McBrearty in her extended news item takes the recent discovery of Middle Pleistocene *Homo sapiens* in the Middle Awash region of Ethiopia as a starting point to discuss an emerging and intriguing pattern in the African archaeological record. The transition from the Acheulean to the Middle Stone Age was not a simple linear development of the new replacing the old. The two

technologies overlapped in time and space by more than 100,000 years. How do we interpret this variability in the context of the current conflicting models of the evolution of behavioural modernity, however defined?

The Palaeolithic is also represented, or personified, in our 'Benefit of Foresight' from Derek Roe. Derek is well-known for his innovative methodological research on Acheulean handaxes, but perhaps less so for his close involvement with the final publications of the great African sites of Olduvai Gorge and Kalambo Falls. He casts a candid and at times bitter gaze over a distinguished career at Oxford and to the future of Palaeolithic archaeology. The latter may make for uncomfortable reading, especially for the budding archaeologist, but this feature is meant to be a personal view.

The National Museum of Ethnology in Japan can boast that among its 75 full-time research staff, 12 are devoted to hunter-gatherer ethnology and archaeology. Ikeya and Matthews in their Department Review take us through the history of the institution and introduce the broad range of current research interests and related publications from the many symposia held at Senri Expo Park.

With the next issue of *Before Farming* our regional coverage expands still further with the first of a series of papers on the archaeology and anthropology of South America. I suspect this vast region is largely *terra incognita* for those of us not working in the Americas, and I look forward to shedding some layers of ignorance.

The Editor

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