

## REVIEW

# Unravelling the Palaeolithic 2017

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'Unravelling the Palaeolithic' brings together research on all aspects of human evolution. This year's conference was held at the University of Liverpool on the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> February 2017, and included a diverse selection of papers on subjects including lithic analysis, Palaeolithic art, taphonomic analysis, and the role of ethnographic data in Palaeolithic studies.

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'Unravelling the Palaeolithic' brings together research from several areas of Palaeolithic archaeology and Palaeoanthropology. This year's conference, held on the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> February at the University of Liverpool, saw a wide range of presentations over seven sessions exploring Palaeolithic art, technology, environment, and behaviour. A central theme throughout the conference was the interaction between Palaeoanthropology and Palaeolithic archaeology, and the relationship of Palaeolithic studies to other disciplines. There was also a great deal of discussion regarding the assumptions and practices that can influence our interpretation of Palaeolithic evidence, and how we might be more aware of these in the future.

Between sessions on both days, an artificial cave installation offered the opportunity to explore a more practical side to Palaeolithic research. It aimed to place Palaeolithic art into the context of its creation, replicating the low, flickering light and uneven surfaces

upon which Palaeolithic art was produced. The cave featured reproductions of art from the Lascaux cave systems, grotte Chauvet, and Altamira, among others, and visitors were also provided with pigments and encouraged to create their own art on the walls. The installation demonstrated the potential of experimental approaches to Palaeolithic studies, and was also the setting for a knapping demonstration by experimental archaeologist James Dilley (University of Southampton).

The first podium session featured three highly engaging presentations on Palaeolithic art from Simone Chisena, Andy Needham, and Callum Scott (all University of York). It also introduced some broader thoughts about Palaeolithic research. Needham's presentation on the debate surrounding Neanderthal art stood out in highlighting how approaches to this controversial topic might be influenced by the cultural perspectives of the era. The presentation drew a contrast between Victorian attitudes of human exceptionalism and the shift in attitudes following the publication of the Neanderthal genome (Green *et al.*,

2010), suggesting the variation in claims for Neanderthal art and its sophistication may have varied in accordance with these wider cultural opinions. Scott's presentation on cognitive variation in hunter-gatherer societies highlighted unexplored areas in Palaeolithic research, namely that the cognitive variation observed today is rarely considered when interpreting the past. These talks prompted the first of many discussions over the weekend encouraging self-awareness of the biases and assumptions in the questions we ask and in the narratives we construct about human evolution. They also considered how adopting approaches from other disciplines such as psychology could benefit Palaeolithic research.

The second session focussed on aspects of reconstructing past behaviours. It was wide ranging, with presentations on cognition and tool use (Joanna Fairlie, University of Liverpool), hunter-gatherer models (Dr Jennifer French, University College London), and inferring diet from dental pathologies (Ian Towle, Liverpool John Moores University). French's presentation on the relationship of Palaeolithic archaeology to hunter-gatherer studies and our use of hunter-gatherer ethnography to interpret archaeological evidence prompted discussion on how and why we use ethnographic data, and what archaeology can bring to wider hunter-gatherer studies that ethnography cannot. Her presentation encouraged greater engagement with current hunter-gatherer studies, and proposed that the time-depth and scale of Palaeolithic research make valuable contributions to the hunter-gatherer field. The third session covered methodological approaches to researching Neanderthal extinction (Anna Westland, University College London), and postcranial indicators of sexual dimorphism in primates (Shelley Farrar, University of Liverpool).

Nils Vanwezer (University College London) opened the fourth session with a paper on the spatial analysis of lithic scatters from Oldowan knapping experiments, observing that characteristic scatters are produced by

freehand and bipolar techniques. Taryn Bell (University of York), who was awarded best speaker, presented a paper on the concept of object attachment and its relevance to objects from the archaeological record. The paper outlined the psychological concepts behind our ability to attach meaning to objects, and how these might have affected human interactions during the Upper Palaeolithic. Like several other presentations throughout the conference, the paper highlighted the incorporation of more varied approaches from other disciplines into Palaeolithic studies.

Mortuary practice dominated the fifth session, with presentations on the status of Sima de los Huesos (Felicity McDowall, Durham University) and the Dinaledi Chamber (Dr Patrick Randolph-Quinney, University of Central Lancashire). Randolph-Quinney's presentation stressed the use of a multi-disciplinary approach during taphonomic analyses to construct depositional scenarios for the Dinaledi chamber. This once again raised the question of how Palaeoanthropology could engage more with other disciplines to improve our interpretation of Palaeolithic sites. The session concluded with a presentation by Rachael Hopkins on the chronology of the Middle to Upper Palaeolithic along the Danube corridor, part of the PalaeoChron research project.

The final two sessions focussed on reconstructing Palaeolithic demography, and exploring hominin relationships with fire. Papers from Dr Matt Grove and Adam Benton (both University of Liverpool) during the demography session led into a discussion, with valuable contributions from Dr Jennifer French, on the definition of demography in a Palaeolithic sense, and the importance of appropriate archaeological proxies to study these processes. The discussion highlighted the danger of using 'demography' as a general explanation for Palaeolithic change, and stressed the importance of using archaeological data as the primary means of testing demographic hypotheses, with

ethnographic data used as supporting evidence.

Overall, this year's conference brought together research from across all areas of Palaeolithic studies, with the panel discussions allowing exchange of ideas between strands of Palaeoanthropology and Palaeolithic archaeology that do not habitually collide. Much of the discourse seemed to focus on problems or assumptions with current approaches or methodologies, but the overall feeling was positive, with consideration of how the discipline could develop in the future. Many papers and discussions demonstrated the merits of interdisciplinary approaches, highlighting the need for Palaeolithic studies to engage with wider research in the future.

### Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

### References

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