

Special section

Palaeonarratives and palaeopractices: excavating and interpreting deep history

Introduction

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One hundred and sixty years ago, fossilized human remains were discovered in the Neander valley of north-west Germany.¹ Twenty-five years ago, Misia Landau published *Narratives of Human Evolution*, her structural analysis of human origin accounts.² Separating these events were the discoveries of thousands more hominid fossils and hundreds of thousands more stone tools. The interpretation of these remains posed a series of conceptual and methodological challenges for scholars, as they became focal points of interest for many established and nascent scientific disciplines. Anatomists, geologists, archaeologists and palaeontologists all approached the excavated material from different perspectives, and even members of the same disciplines did not themselves necessarily agree. Forceful debate within the academy was matched by intense media and public interest: people were able to follow in near real time via *The Times* and *The Guardian* as excavations and expeditions unearthed new material, while considering at greater leisure the lengthier elucidation of these discoveries by arm-chair or lab-stool savants.

The stones and bones discovered both before and since 1856 have direct implications for the understandings of what constitutes humanity: their analysis and understanding

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1 Paige Madison, 'The most brutal of human skulls: measuring and knowing the first Neanderthal', *BJHS* (2016), this issue, pp. 411–432; George Busk, 'On the crania of the most ancient races of man, by Professor D. Schaaffhausen, of Bonn. With remarks, and original figures, taken from a cast of the Neanderthal cranium', *Natural History Review* (1861) 1, pp. 155–176.

2 Misia Landau, *Narratives of Human Evolution*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991.

can never be contained within a single discipline, nor even within purely academic debate.³ Unsurprisingly, as a result, their study has itself become a significant sub-field of the history and sociology of science. Researchers have considered the origins of the term ‘prehistory’ itself.⁴ They have studied the iconography of the field.⁵ They have analysed specific moments in the study of stone tools.⁶ They have considered the history of individual fossils and particular excavations, and charted the development of relative and absolute dating methods.⁷ Two themes, however, have dominated much of this work, both inspiring and (sometimes) dividing the field: narrative and race.

Landau’s analysis treated human origin accounts as narratives. Showing their structural affinity with myths, legends and fairy stories, she turned her analytical wheel full circle by linking the origins of her own account with the theory that the capacity to create narrative – to tell stories – was a defining characteristic of humanity.⁸ Subsequent work has paid close attention – from structure to metaphor – to the narrative form of accounts of prehistory. Indeed, the significance of narrative is such that

3 Chris Manias, ‘*Simanthropus* in Britain: human origins and international science, 1920–1939’, *BJHS* (2015) 48(2), pp. 289–319; Matthew Goodrum, ‘Crafting a new science: defining paleoanthropology and its relationship to prehistoric archaeology’, *Isis* (2014) 105, pp. 706–733; Goodrum, ‘The history of human origins research and its place in the history of science: research problems and historiography’, *History of Science* (2009) 47, pp. 337–357; Raymond Corbey and Wil Roebroeks (eds.), *Studying Human Origins: Disciplinary History and Epistemology*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2001; Murray Golden, ‘Hobbits, hunters and hydrology: images of a “missing link” and its scientific communication’, *Public Understanding of Science* (2013) 22(50), pp. 575–589.

4 Glyn Daniel, *The Idea of Prehistory*, London: Penguin, 1962; Christopher Chippindale, ‘The invention of words for the idea of “prehistory”’, *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* (1988) 54, pp. 304–314; Norman Clermont and Philip E.L. Smith, ‘Prehistoric, prehistory, prehistorian, who invented the terms’, *Antiquity* (1990) 64, pp. 97–102; A. Bowdoin Van Riper, *Men among the Mammoths: Victorian Science and the Discovery of Prehistory*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993; Peter Rowley-Conwy, ‘The concept of prehistory and the invention of the terms “prehistoric” and “prehistorian”: the Scandinavian origin, 1833–1850’, *European Journal of Archaeology* (2006) 9, 103–130; Matthew Goodrum, ‘The idea of human prehistory: the natural sciences, the human sciences and the problem of human origins in Victorian Britain’, *History and Philosophy of the Life Sciences* (2012) 33, pp. 117–145.

5 Constance A. Clark, *God or Gorilla: Images of Evolution in the Jazz Age*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008; Clarke, “‘You are here’: missing links, chains of being and the language of cartoons”, *Isis* (2009) 100, pp. 571–589; Stephanie Moser, *Ancestral Image: The Iconography of Human Origins*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998; Judith C. Berman, ‘Bad hair days in the Paleolithic: modern (re)constructions of the cave man’, *American Anthropologist* (1999) 101, pp. 288–304; Theodore D. McCown and Kenneth A.R. Kennedy, *Climbing Man’s Family Tree: A Collection of Major Writings on Human Phylogeny, 1699–1971*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1972.

6 R. de Bont, ‘The invention of prehistoric man: Aimé Rutot and the eoliths controversy, 1900–1920’, *Isis* (2003) 94, pp. 604–630; Frank Spencer, ‘Prologue to a scientific forgery: the British eolithic movement from Abbeville to Piltown’, in George Stocking (ed.), *Bones, Bodies, Behaviours: Essays in Behavioural Anthropology*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990, pp. 84–116.

7 Peter Kjaergaard, ‘The fossil trade: paying a price for human origins’, *Isis* (2012) 103, pp. 340–355; Matthew Goodrum and Cora Oleson, ‘The quest for absolute chronology in human prehistory: anthropologists, chemists and the fluorine dating method in palaeoanthropology’, *BJHS* (2009) 42(1), pp. 95–114; Marianne Sommer, *Bones and Ochre: The Curious Afterlife of the Red Lady of Paviland*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008.

8 Misia Landau, ‘Human evolution as narrative’, *American Scientist* (1984) 72, pp. 262–268. See also Niles Eldredge and Ian Tattersall, *The Myths of Human Evolution*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1982; Peter Bowler, *Theories of Human Evolution: A Century of Debate, 1844–1944*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1986.

the genre of palaeo-fiction is itself becoming a key topic for those interested in the deep history of human origins, and the role of race in those fictions is as significant as it is to the study of human origins itself.⁹ Racialized thinking permeates the field of human origins research – not just in the ways in which racial prejudice is understood in the present day, but often in a more subtle manner that can startle the unwary reader.¹⁰ From the outset, human communities geographically distant from Europe were assumed to be mentally, socially and technologically synonymous with prehistoric populations, while European fossils were initially analysed in terms of the light they could shed on the racial ancestry of modern populations. Later, race and racial prejudice were treated as crucial to ‘evolutionary progress’, and to the structure and future of human societies: understandably, this has been both a focus and a problem for present-day scholars.

In this anniversary year, however, the contributors to this special section direct their attention to another important element in the study of prehistory and human origins. Without ignoring the significance of narrative and race, which continue to infuse our understandings of the field, these authors have focused their attention more tightly on the question of practice. How were these stones and bones being excavated, studied, interpreted? Madison and Goodrum, for example, consider the ways in which different disciplinary methodologies and conceptual contexts were brought to bear on the understanding of the fossilized human remains that were increasingly available for study after the 1850s. Goodrum draws attention to the significant role that antiquarian excavations of European barrows and chambers played in helping to form the framework within which fossil skulls were interpreted and related to each other. Madison concentrates more tightly on one particular set of fossils – those found on that day in the Neander valley. She shows how different methodological approaches produced different interpretations of that strange skull, wondering, rather intriguingly, what would have happened if Charles Lyell had brought a copy of it back to London alongside casts of all the bones recovered on that day.

Rees and Hochadel examine the circulation of stories about human origins, considering how the writers establish their public credentials as speakers for the past, with

9 Nicholas Ruddick, *The Fire in the Stone: Prehistoric Fiction from Charles Darwin to Jean M. Auel*, Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2009; Charles de Paolo, *Human Prehistory in Fiction*, Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2002; Marianne Sommer, ‘The lost world as laboratory: the politics of evolution between science and fiction in early twentieth-century America’, *Configurations* (2007) 15(3), pp. 299–329.

10 Peter Bowler, ‘From “savage” to “primitive”: Victorian evolutionism and the interpretation of marginalised peoples’, *Antiquity* (1992) 66, pp. 721–729; Nancy Stephan, *The Idea of Race in Science: Great Britain 1800–1960*, London: Macmillan, 1982; George W. Stocking, *Victorian Anthropology*, New York: The Free Press, 1987; David N. Livingstone, *Adam’s Ancestors: Race, Religion and the Politics of Human Origins*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008; R.G. Delisle, ‘Welcome to the twilight zone: a forgotten early phase of human evolutionary studies’, *Endeavour* (2012) 36(2), pp. 55–64; Clive Gamble and Theodora Moutsiou, ‘The time revolution of 1859 and the stratification of the primeval mind’, *Notes and Records of the Royal Society* (2011) 65, pp. 43–63; Paul B. Pettit and Mark J. White, ‘Cave men: stone tools, Victorian science and the “primitive mind” of deep time’, *Notes and Records of the Royal Society* (2011) 65, pp. 25–42; Michael J. Barany, ‘Savage numbers and the evolution of civilisation in Victorian prehistory’, *BJHS* (2014) 47(2), pp. 239–255.

particular attention to their use of methodology, disciplinary boundaries and rhetoric. Hochadel takes for his focus Spain's 'Magical Mountain', Atapuerca, a site established as Spain's post-Franco political structures were coalescing, where the directors of research have consciously deployed both narrative and fiction in their efforts to establish the site's national and global importance. Rees concentrates on the popularization of prehistory in Britain in the earlier twentieth century, showing how researchers deployed evidence and techniques drawn from different disciplines in support of their accounts – which ultimately, however, failed to gain widespread academic or public traction.

Together, these papers address three key questions: how did the methodologies and language of prehistory change over time? How did they relate to intra- and interdisciplinary relationships? And how did scientists themselves consciously deploy narrative as part of their practice? The answers to these questions, as the papers show, have implications not just for understanding human origins, but for our understanding of our own practices as historians of science and our potential contributions to wider academic and public debates.