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 armchair 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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can never be contained within a single discipline, nor even within purely academic debate. They, 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. They have studied the iconography of the field. They have analysed specific moments in the study of stone tools. They have considered the history of individual fossils and particular excavations, and charted the development of relative and absolute dating methods. 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. 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


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


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.