An alternative explanation for variations in the community composition and structure of fish bone assemblages is presented by Reitz et al. (Chapter 6). In their study of 13,000 years of fishing tradition in coastal Peru, they argue that climatic oscillations and ENSO (El Niño Southern Oscillation) events have had, and continue to have, more profound effects on fish populations than human predation. Finally, Nordic settlers of the North Atlantic (Perdikaris & McGovern, Chapter 9) appear to have had varying effects on sea bird and marine mammal populations in the Faroe Islands, Iceland, and Greenland. Their greatest long-term impact though (see also Bailey et al. Chapter 10) was during the ninth and tenth centuries AD with the introduction of pelagic fishing and the fish trade that laid the foundations for the establishment of modern marine fisheries.

These few examples demonstrate that untangling the effects of human predation within ecological food webs is complex and the outcomes variable, dependent on a multitude of interwoven natural and anthropic factors. But the case studies also reveal that it is possible, in many cases, to identify and interpret the long-standing role people have played in shaping the world in which we live.

Overall, this is a well-presented volume, rich in data and containing plentiful ecological background information and palaeoecological research useful to those studying terrestrial as well as marine ecosystems. It is clearly designed to demonstrate the potential of zooarchaeology for understanding past human impacts to practitioners within the discipline. This is of course a necessary first step: after all it is up to us to convey to the wider scientific community the inter-disciplinary importance of our research. Or in the words of Rick and Erlandson ‘move archaeological data out of the realm of the esoteric and into a field that plays a crucial role in creating a better and more sustainable planet’ – well, let us raise a glass to that!

Reference


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РИЧА ХАЛЬДИЯЛ. Formation processes of the Lower Palaeolithic record in the Hunsgi and Baichbal basins, Gulbarga district, Karnataka. x+182 pages, 53 figures, 4 plates, 59 tables. 2006. Kolkata: Centre for Archaeological Studies and Training, Eastern India; 81-901499-3-8 paperback, Indian rupees 270 (available from Centre for Archaeological Studies and Training, 4 Camac Street, Kolkata 700 016, India).

'The Hunsgi and Baichbal basins occupy a unique place in the Lower Palaeolithic map of the world having yielded rich evidence of hominin occupation in the form of over 200 Acheulean sites'. So begins Richa Jhaldiyal's monograph on the formation processes that led to the preservation and discovery of this material. Before it can be properly assessed, some background information is useful.

The Hunsgi-Baichbal basins in southern India lie in the upper part of the drainage system of the River Krishna, and cover c. 1000 km². These were chosen as a research area over 30 years ago by K.V. Paddayya because they were small, self-contained, and offered excellent prospects for mapping Acheulean material across a well-defined landscape. By studying here, Paddaya pioneered the development of palaeo-landscape studies in India. Most previous work (the first Acheulean artefacts were noted there in as early as the late nineteenth century) had concentrated on finding artefacts in fluvial sequences – these could be dated relatively and sometimes absolutely, but artefacts in these sequences were in secondary contexts, and provided no useful information on hominin behaviour. Paddayya thus chose the Hunsgi-Baichbal basins because there had been very little deposition, and material was found on or near the surface. As a result of over 30 years of patient, assiduous fieldwork, over 200 Acheulean sites have been discovered. (There are also numerous Middle and Upper Palaeolithic finds, as well as many Mesolithic ones). Some Acheulean sites are very large, and were probably settlement sites; some are smaller, and perhaps transit sites, butchery or food processing sites; there is at least one cache (of 24 Acheulean handaxes), and a superlative quarry-cum-workshop at Isampur (see Paddayya et al. 2000). Because most
rainfall in these basins falls in the summer monsoon, the availability of plant foods is strongly seasonal, and Paddayya (1982) argued that this and the availability of water determined hominin mobility patterns: in the dry, winter-spring season, hominins would congregate around the few springs and streams that were perennial, but during the summer monsoon, disperse into small units to harvest plant foods and small game. Although these sites are hard to date, most are probably 300 000-500 000 years old, although a rogue date of 1.27M years ago (based on averaging nine determinations on two teeth from Isampur) should probably be disregarded. The research of Paddayya and his team has been published in numerous outlets, notably his 1982 monograph (arguably one of the best examples of processual Palaeolithic archaeology ever published, and undeservedly neglected outside India), and various synthetic papers in western edited volumes (e.g. Paddayya 2001, 2007). Richa Jhaldiyal was one of Paddayya’s students from Deccan College, and based her doctoral dissertation on her research in the Hunsgi-Baichbal valleys. Here, she mapped the Acheulean material in terms of geological background, topography, soils, drainage and modern land-use. As much of the basin floors are cultivated, she also investigated the extent to which ploughing and tillage disturbed archaeological material. Her monograph has five main chapters. In the first, she defines formation processes, discusses the type of Lower Palaeolithic contexts that are prevalent in the semi-arid parts of India, and outlines the early Palaeolithic record of the Hunsgi-Baichbal basins. Her second chapter discusses the main landscape features: topography, geology, sedimentary features, drainage, climate and land use. In chapter three, Palaeolithic sites are discussed in relation to their topographic and sedimentary contexts, particularly their depositional and post-depositional contexts. The next chapter examines the impact of farming systems on the preservation of material. This was a key part of her doctoral thesis, as there were understandable concerns that ploughing was so destructive that no useful information could be obtained from surface sites in cultivated areas. She examined this through a series of experiments in which an Acheulean site was simulated by using 100 stones resembling handaxes, cleavers, flakes, points and hammerstones. These were painted for easy recognition, and divided into two sets of 50 each, and laid out in two clusters 10-12m apart. The frequency, displacement and damage of these ‘artefacts’ was then monitored over 20 months, during which time there were three episodes of ploughing (with a light ‘madki’ or traditional Indian plough), and five episodes of harrowing. What this showed was that the degree of lateral displacement was less than 2m, and the spatial clusters were still representative of the original ones. Artefact damage was mostly limited to edge nicks and spalls. In a separate set of experiments, she monitored the effect of slope angle and rainfall on the visibility and displacement of artefacts at two Acheulean sites over a period of one to two years. These showed that little lateral displacement occurred on flat surfaces, but that smaller objects could be transported by raindrop impact and slope wash; artefacts on the lower parts of slopes were moved further than those upslope; some artefacts formed artificial clusters if obstructed by bushes or piles of gravels; and artefacts were sometimes orientated relative to slope direction. Her fifth chapter examined the damage, patination and weathering of artefacts in different depositional contexts to ascertain how surface wash and stream flow (the main agents here of deposition and erosion) impacted on the quality of information that was recovered. The monograph ends with a summary of the conclusions, and a classification of sites according to their preservational context.

Jhaldiyal’s monograph provides the detailed background data that underpins the general statements in those synthetic papers by Paddayya that non-Indian Palaeolithic specialists may already know. It also has a general significance because it provides a template that can easily be applied to other areas both inside and outside India. In short, it is a textbook example of how Palaeolithic settlement systems can be studied, and how much information can be obtained from surface material through simple but careful mapping and recording of key variables. Her chapters on artefact movement are models of their kind in showing how much can be learnt by carefully-framed, patiently conducted and low-cost experiments. We often tend to be distracted by the ‘flagship’ sites such as Bilzingsleben, Boxgrove and Schöningen, with their superb preservation of lithic and faunal material, but at the expense of the less spectacular surface sites that make up most of the Palaeolithic record. Ideally, of course, we would have accessible palaeo-landscapes that included ‘flagship’ sites as well as the other types; as it is, we usually have to make do with the type of data covered in this volume. I thus recommend this book to anyone studying Palaeolithic land use or experimental
archaeology anywhere, whether in Britain, mainland Europe, Africa or Asia: it deserves a wide recognition. As a final point, it is absurdly cheap – on current exchange rates, around £3.

References


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Fifty-five years ago this reviewer walked into the cave of Lascaux – no guide, no supervision – and explored and admired the vivid paintings that most of us know well from numerous books and papers. Lascaux today is not so brilliant due to the serious effects of various polluting agencies. But the thousands of earlier visits included many photographers whose work is ever-more important in the documentation of the artistry not only of Lascaux but also of many cavern walls bearing paintings and engravings of Late Glacial times. Here in this book, called simply Cave Art, the paramount French specialist of the subject has assembled over 300 pictures, both old and new, of images painted and engraved, arranged in a general chronological system which some may dispute.

At first glance, Cave Art looks like a coffee-table tome, large, thick and heavy, full of colour and captions, with seemingly little in the way of discursive text. But this book is more than an ornament: in its Introduction the author sets out his structural approach and his opinion on a wide variety of important subjects, starting out with chronology and retaining the classic West European sequence of Aurignacian, Gravettian, Solutrean and Magdalenian. There follows a comment on the distribution of sites, predominantly in France and Spain, but also incorporating ‘a minor engraved site in England (Creswell Crags)’ as well as comparable small sites elsewhere in western Europe. Here is where the book’s title is convenient but misleading, as contemporary open-air sites are included; few of these generally receive the prominence of the decorated caves. The technologies of painting, engraving and carving are briefly addressed and then the author identifies the principal ‘themes’ in the art, the word ‘themes’ perhaps overgenerous as he seems more realistically to be listing individual subjects – geometrics, herbivores, humans, and indeterminates including composites. To comprehend a ‘theme’ within the repertoire needs more on matters such as context, position, association, size and quality, in this reviewer’s opinion. And here again the book’s Cave Art concept is extended to include mobiliary art, well-illustrated among the pictures of wall-based paintings and engravings. The mobiliary art is crucially important as support for the author’s chronological scheme noted below.

The author then lists three areas of research that concern him – themes and techniques, cultural and environmental contexts, and ethnological comparisons – in the expectation that these will aid our quest for a meaning behind it all. Here it must be said that both geographical width and chronological depth act to defeat the emergence of any demonstrable ‘truths’, and the three approaches are not fully integrated, nor ever could have been for such a subject. The author does his best to avoid dogmatism in his final introductory pages where a historical approach is adopted for the ever-beguiling and never-conclusive subject of Interpretations.

The various theories, from Art for Art through Sympathetic Magic to Structuralist concepts are replaced now, in the author’s view, by Shamanic Religion. Anticipating some opposition to this
decades Palaeolithic research viewed the development of early modern human behaviour as largely one of progress down a path towards the “modernity” of the present. The European Palaeolithic sequence, the most extensively studied, was more.

More Info: Authors: Marc F. Oxenham, Philip J. Piper, Peter Bellwood, Chi Hoang Bui, Khanh Trung Kien Nguyen, Quoc Manh Nguyen, Fredeliza Campos, Cristina Castillo, Rachel Wood, Carmen Sarjeant, Noel Amano, Anna Willis, Jasminda Ceron.