

## Antiquity Podcast transcript – June 2010

The June *Antiquity* has arrived just in time for you to take on holiday, and consists as usual of 320 pages of juicy stories from the past. These are just a few of them...

David Yates and Richard Bradley show that there is a whole grammar for chucking things into water — in Bronze Age Britain at least. Some people — let's call them 'River warriors' throw their swords and rapiers into major rivers, especially at crossing points; pond warriors, as we might call them, put them into ponds. Hoards including axes, tools, personal ornaments and bits of weapons turn up in bogs — or on dry land alongside piles of fire cracked stones — the so-called burnt mounds. Are these differences just plain functional — warriors fight at fords and lose their swords, and metalsmiths hoard their scrap on dry land but near water, conveniently, and fires? Or are they to do with different kinds of offering and different kinds of worship? By mapping and analysing every find against its ancient landscape, archaeology continues its slow unpeeling of 3000 year old hearts and minds.

What people believed is every bit as important as what they ate and built. Living in every house are dozens of malevolent sprites that push over rubbish bins and lose the car keys — well you don't need archaeology to tell you that. But household sprites too have their history, and they didn't start off mean. In the pre-Christian buildings of Sweden, long before the advent of Ikea, they helped around the house, warned the inmates of danger and guarded the morals of the household.

Archaeologist Vesa-Pekka Herva has been tracking the long relationship between householders and their household spirits, finding pots, axes, bone spoons and bear claws placed in foundations or under floors. He concludes that the spirits came in from the forest with the timbers. The house itself creates a new life for the trees and their genies, — the creaking timber house itself becomes a living creature that protects and supports its occupants. The sprites and hobgoblins turned nasty after the Christian conversion, when they were scorned and dismissed as nonsense.

Except by archaeologists of course — since everything that ever mattered to people is our business.

Few topics intrigue us — or haunt us — more than the arrival of homo sapiens — our own species — and the way they apparently exterminated all the earlier humans already living on the earth between 100 and 30 thousand years ago. Was this a gigantic primate land grab? Systematic ethnic cleansing? The survival of the fittest? Some tentative DNA evidence has been announced that ancient and modern humans interbred in the Middle East; but if coexistence was a possibility in the Levant - and it must have been a fact in Africa, in Europe and Asia the current view is that the one replaced the other with an extraordinarily thorough, rapid and total finality. In Eurasia we know these earlier humans as Neanderthals, and their tool kit — the way we track them — turns up in caves all over. But rarely do the traces of these Middle Palaeolithic Neanderthals, coincide on the same site with those of the Upper Palaeolithic Sapiens. So we are still looking for the theatres in which these piecemeal annihilations took place, out with the old and in with the new, completely and for ever.

Now cut to the Caucasus, that great land bridge between Europe and Asia, between the Black and the Caspian Seas. Here are three caves in which sequences from Middle to Upper Palaeolithic have been discovered. But at each one the transition is abrupt. Sometime after 40 000 years ago the Neanderthal stone tools disappeared and a new industry suddenly arrived, not only with a new tool kits in stone, but in bone too — hundreds of points, awls, needles, and polishers; and with them carved bone ornaments — pendants, beads and needle cases decorated with criss-cross bands.

There were no signs of a struggle — so what can have happened? Satisfyingly it seems nature was to blame. The new dates coincide with the massive volcanic eruptions in the Phlegrean Fields of Italy. Liubov Golovanova and her team see these as destroying the ecological niche of the Caucasian Neanderthals. The area was then reoccupied after an interval by the arrival of a new population of anatomically

modern humans – probably from somewhere in the south where dextrous leather-working and beatifying the body was already part of life's normalities. So the cave of Mezmaiskaya was the theatre of a revolution — but one that happened offstage, spread over the turbulent centuries before the last glacial maximum.

Here in the deep past of 40 000 years ago, the foundations of the modern human family were being laid, its hungers, its ingenuity, its politics, its power struggles — between people of different sex, different appearance, places, beliefs — how can this *not* be important to us today?

*Antiquity* journal does method too: methods of digging, methods of survey, methods for analysing behaviour and the environment. Archaeologists have recently turned their attention to methods for combating looting, that thorn in the side of scientific study. As Flinders Petrie remarked in 1904, 'spoiling the past has an acute moral wrong in it'. One hundred years later we have made a little progress — but looting is still widespread, and so are other sorts of clumsy, hasty and unscientific excavation.

In some countries, the problem is not only knowing where sites are in advance and protecting them but in proving that looting is happening. *Antiquity* has now carried several articles showing how satellite surveyance can help convince the most sceptical governments how bad things are: in 2008 Elizabeth Stone showed how looting had flourished in the Iraq war. Now Daniel Contreras of the Stanford University Archaeology Center has taken on the looters in Peru, in archaeology terms one of the world's richest countries, in terms of the control of looting one of its poorest. The new pictures from Google earth show areas of burial sites peppered with pits with fresh upcast beside them. Furthermore, since the pictures are dated, the looting episodes can be given date brackets too. The Virú Valley in northern Peru was made famous by Gordon Willey who conducted one of archaeology's first systematic surface surveys there in the 1940s. Of the 315 sites he located, 34 had been looted. In 2006, Google Earth found 263 looted sites, and at least one looting could be bracketed between 1997 and 2006. The point of striving for all this

precision, is that episodes of looting can be tied to upsurges in the international antiquities market, leaving no doubt, if there was any, that the two are connected.

Well happy reading everybody. I haven't mentioned the thousands of years of cave art found at Kurmool in India, or Australia's remarkable range of painted birds in Arnhem Land, or the new Biskupin type sites from Poland, or the settlement of escaped slaves in Suriname, or the traces of Lawrence of Arabia's war in the desert. And don't forget to visit the Project Gallery that shows what's going to happen next in the study of the past. It's on open access, so you can go straight there from here. And send me your ideas and comments and wish lists to [editor@antiquity.ac.uk](mailto:editor@antiquity.ac.uk).