

Antiquity Podcast transcript – December 2011

For many of us, human beings started with Adam and Eve and that's that – no more explanations are necessary; moreover it happened pretty recently; Adam and Eve found each other to be good and went off to increase and multiply about 6000 years ago, giving themselves the twinkling of an eye to domesticate plants and animals, make tools of stone, bronze and iron and invent the city, government, contraception, alcoholic drinks – and the podcast.

Science has other ideas; humans had a murky origin among the primates and evolved by fits and starts to arrive at today's specimen with its bald head and sneakers. If this science is wrong then so is the rest of it – oil doesn't burn, radioactive matter doesn't decay, the earth doesn't go round the sun – so it looks as though we are lumbered. The new narrative can be equally cheerful, though. Against all the odds the mighty hominin braves ice and drought and eats everything, in order to populate the planet and make it safe for man, the ultimate herd animal.

But supposing it wasn't quite such a story of success? Year by year we at Antiquity are being made aware of false starts and dead ends in human evolution. It's long been known that the primary species of humans, the so-called 'ancients' – homo erectus, Neanderthal man, disappeared in Europe around 40,000 and not only in Europe, but probably the world over, to be replaced by the 'moderns' – homo sapiens. This can also be written up as a successful conquest: homo sapiens, the *wise* or more appropriately the *crafty*, was victorious over an inferior species whose head was too big or tongue too small. But no – ancients and moderns are now being found together – in the Levant for example – it wasn't a race war, there at least. So the mystery remains.

Worse is to come: even when homo sapiens emerges 100,000 years ago, there is it seems set back after set back. Marlize Lombard and Laura Philipson showed that in Southern Africa sapiens invented the bow and arrow at least 64000 years ago. Smart move – they could now kill animals – and each other of course – at a distance. But in the new *Antiquity* Marlize and Isabelle Parsons show that the bow and arrow was subsequently disinvented, lost to use and with it the bright new stone tool kit. What was going on? Did the human mind regress and lose its way? They think not. While the hominins remained decidedly modern in other ways, there was some technology they no longer needed – and not because they had better means of killing or chopping. Steve Kuhn visualised a “rugged mental territory” where you invented what you needed when you needed it, on the hills, in the grasslands, in the swamp. It's the same with us I suppose – if all food grew everywhere, you wouldn't need supermarket lorries.

Why do scientist have to make things so complicated? They don't. Things *are* complicated, scientists make them simple. We just have a new narrative to replace the old: no sudden descent from heaven, no relentless triumph for mankind; just trials and tribulations, set backs and failures, expansions and contractions, a drama like the rest of life in fact – a Comedy of Errors. And does it have a happy ending? Who can tell?

Part of the human problem – then as now – as that we always see ourselves as in the grip of some extra-terrestrial power. Gods and demons share our days, lord it over our nights. When Lawrence Straus and his team found a burial in the cave of El Miron in northern Spain, there was little doubt that the body, dating 15 and a half thousand years ago, had been buried with ceremony and belief. The bones had been defleshed, and painted with red ochre and sprinkled with fragments of galena and quartz. The flat surfaces of the adjacent cave wall and a fallen boulder were also painted with ochre and there was a frenetic mass of criss-cross lines scratched on the boulder, under which were more human bones. Not just an accident then, but possibly the response to one – fear and propitiation.

If we fast forward ten thousand years or so and make a long jump to China, we can see that fear and propitiation have become something of an industry. Bronze Age Anyang was the great capital of the Shang dynasty, flourishing around 1200 BC at the time when Troy was sacked and the Aegean entering its Dark Age. Anyang was more than 6 km across and contained palaces, temples and the dependents that served them. Governance depended largely the leadership of shamans, inspired by divination and sacrifice. The bones of more than 10000 humans have been excavated from Shang period pits and animals too were ritually dispatched in their thousands. Divination took the form of inspecting cracks made on an ox shoulder blade – sometimes helpfully inscribed with a text. One of those recovered by Roderick Campbell and his team read “Wu Wu cracked, Ke divined: If we hunt at Gui we will capture game. And indeed the king hunted and killed one tiger, forty deer, and two hundred and sixty foxes...” On another scapula it said “Divined: in performing the exorcism ritual, we should offer 300 cattle.”

So what became of all this meat and bones? The Beijing, Anyang and Oxford archaeologists took a big step forward in 2006, when modern road-making took the lid off a massive bone working area extending over over two hectares. There were 151 tombs, 12 structures and over 34000kg of animal bone. Analysing this assemblage was a challenge to say the least, but they soon found that this was no rubbish dump, but an industrial quarter. The bones of 113,000 cattle, roughly two a day for the 150 years of the business, had been degreased, chopped up and turned into – pins. Pins, that was the principal output, with a minor product line in arrow heads and awls. These highly-skilled bone workers lived in their own village; the structures were their workshops and the tombs their tombs. The pins were polished and shapely, with bird’s head and button tops – but these fine objects were destined to go elsewhere. They turn up in the lavishly furnished tombs of aristocratic women laid to rest in the Royal cemetery. So, in Shang society, emperor, consorts, shamans, sacrifice, cattle and bone-workers were all locked into in an integrated economic system underpinned by superstition. Not like us of course.

Another kind of superstitious dependency is exhibited by your gambler, always hoping their luck will turn, enjoying the buzz offered by the rattle of the dice or the flip of the card. Even better, when the luck is steered by skill, as in competitive board games. As some of *Antiquity*’s authors have shown in earlier Antiquities, board games were beloved past-times, particularly of Roman and Arabic soldiers – their boards are scratched on pavements and steps all over the Middle East. In the new issue, Mark Hall and Katherine Forsyth show that this was no chance occurrence. Board games really do seem to have emanated from there – at least as far as western Europe is concerned. The so called gamblers’ grave at

Knowth in Ireland contained twin brothers of about 30 with 13 pegged playing pieces, 21 pebbles, two of them stained blue, and three dice. We don't know what these games were doing. At the so called doctor's grave at Stanway in Essex there were two rows of 13 glass counters laid out for play, though the board had rotted away. These and other examples date around the time that Britain was invaded by the Romans, and seem to belong to Roman-type games like *alea* (ie. spear) and *latrunculi* (or bandits) in which the pieces set out on the board and the moves designed to capture the opposition. The linguistic evidence too suggests that Celtic and Norse terms for board games were coined in the first millennium AD. But strangely, they didn't use Latin loan words, so the games must have been adopted before the language. As the authors elegantly demonstrate, games have their own universal meaning and you can play a game without speaking the language. Despite the immense language barrier, American soldiers in the Iraq conflict learnt to play a game from the Kurds, where stones of two different colours fought it out on a grid. The Americans called it 'rock', reported sergeant Kayla Williams, though this was certainly not its real name; "they got pretty good at it too, and would win once in while against the Peshmergas".

Poor old Celts; their military gamble didn't come off; the Romans stayed for 400 years. But they got board games and these stayed two thousand years. Indeed we will all be playing them here at Christmas, and I hope you will too. And so, from all of us at *Antiquity*, a happy holiday and successful New Year and of course we hope to have brought you the best of archaeological reading too.