



Book Reviews

EARLY HUMANS BY NICHOLAS ASHTON

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This new book on Britain's earliest inhabitants is essential reading for those wishing to understand the diverse, multi-disciplinary approaches taken to investigating this distinct area of archaeology, the current state of knowledge and the research questions which drive such investigations. As such, this a particularly valuable book for non-specialist professional archaeologist, students and interested amateurs. Forming part of the New Naturalist Library series, the book introduces the reader to a subject that crosses the disciplinary boundaries of archaeology, geology, biology and natural sciences.

Chronologically the book covers the earliest evidence for humans in Britain during the early Pleistocene (at around 800,000 years), up to Holocene Mesolithic hunter-gatherer communities. Our understanding of this period has altered dramatically over the last 20 years and bears little resemblance to that outlined in the last contribution to the New Naturalist series, H.J. Fleure's 1951 *A Natural History of Man in Britain*. As is eloquently described in the forward to the book, this renewed understanding is the product of collaborative research by a small, but diverse array of individuals, including the likes of John Wymer and Roger Jacobi, giants of the discipline who are sadly no longer with us. Importantly, though, one of the central leading architects of the step change in knowledge over the past 20 years is the author.

From the outset, this book demonstrates that the study of deep human antiquity is one in which humans and their changing behavioural repertoires are intimately linked to understanding 800,000 years of ecological and landscape change. The introductory chapter vividly describes a family group of some of the first humans to occupy Britain, moving through the mudflats of an estuary edge at Happisburgh, on what is now the coast of Norfolk. From here, the work is organised into two sections. Chapters 2 and 3 provide broad, general background information to the subject, whilst Chapters 4 to 12 take us on a chronological ordered tour of Britain's Pleistocene and early Holocene past.

Chapter 2 provides an historic perspective on the study of early prehistory. It focuses on the biological and geological origins of prehistoric archaeology and provides a brief overview of the late 19th- and 20th-century origins of the discipline. Chapter 3 discusses how the study of the earliest humans in Britain is practiced today. It clearly illustrates that the modern discipline goes beyond research focused solely on hominins and their material cultural, but encompasses understanding the Pleistocene and early Holocene 'natural history' of Britain. When and where were humans present and absent? What were the landscapes like? What were the local and regional environments like? How did the wider plant and animal communities change over time? How can these snapshots be related to wider regional perspective? In order to answer such questions a range of geological, biological, palaeoenvironmental and archaeological evidence can be considered, and these potential sources of information are summarized in this chapter. Both Chapters 2 and 3 are, however, very much introductory overviews which presage the main focus of the book, a chronological overview of current understanding of early human's in Britain.

Chapters 4 to 12 split the Pleistocene and early Holocene settlement history of Britain into chronological packages and present up-to-date reviews of our current understanding of each period. Divisions are based on major environmental changes that impacted on this occupation history. Each chapter is centred around a series of

individual site-based case studies focused on the evidence used to recreate past human behaviours and their associated landscape contexts. Engagingly, the human stories relating to discovery and investigation of these sites are also included. Features of these key datasets are drawn together to demonstrate how they inform wider conclusions relating to the settlement history of Britain. There is a strong sense of how such research is instigated and evolves, whilst this mechanism also allows the reader to gain insight into how this data drives understanding of local and regional patterns of early human behaviour, which in turn allows wider, regional research questions to be addressed.

We begin in Chapter 4 with the earliest evidence of human occupation in Britain, now dated to around 800,000 years ago. Discoveries made over the last 15 years at Happisburgh 3 (including the earliest hominin footprints from outside of Africa) and Pakefield, have radically overhauled our understanding of both the timing and palaeoenvironmental contexts associated the first hominins to occupy northern Europe. This evidence has pushed back the earliest incursion over 300,000 years and placed the British record at the centre of debates concerning the earliest occupation of the Continent. Chapter 5 follows from this and discusses the period between 600–500,000 years, now known to be associated with a rich record of human settlement.

These initial phases of early human activity are followed by one of the most fundamental periods of climatic change to have affected the landscape and settlement history of the British Isles, the Anglian glaciation. As Chapter 6 demonstrates, this was climatically complex period that includes an initial period of climatic instability in which humans clung on in Britain; followed subsequently by peak cold conditions during which ice extended as far south as to the Essex coast, North London and south Wales. Not only did this itself radically alter the landscape of Britain, but it was followed by climatic upturn that initiated the severance of Britain from continental Europe for the first time. Melt waters are thought to have formed a rapidly expanding lake in the southern North Sea basin, the pressure of which led to the initial catastrophic breaching of the Straits of Dover, beginning a process that would fundamentally alter the paleogeography of the British Isles and affect its subsequent settlement history.

Chapter 7 outlines the complex process associated with the reoccupation of Britain in the subsequent interglacial after 400 kya, whilst Chapter 8 reflects on new behaviours, landscapes and environments associated with the emergence of the Neanderthals between 320,000, and 200,000 years ago. Britain has a rich record associated with both these periods, but again our understanding of these periods has evolved rapidly over the last 15 years. These chapter provide a timely summary of recent investigations, including the key sites and evidence.

Chapter 9 discusses the last interglacial (125,000 years ago). This is associated with peak temperate conditions, sea level rise and the beginning of a 65,000-year period of human absence from the landscape. Associated with a rich palaeoenvironmental record, but a seemingly general absence of evidence for human activity, this period reflects a key aspect of the settlement history of Britain. The story of early humans in Britain is one which reflects changing behaviours, in changing environmental conditions, and the fluctuating presence and absence of human populations. However, as this chapter demonstrates, investigating such periods of supposed absence are of primary importance. Do they indeed reflect a complete absence of humans throughout this period (sites of this age are now present throughout this time in northern France, including from peaking interglacial condition during which they were long thought to be absent)? And if this absence is real, what ecological, palaeographical and hominin behavioural practices does such absence reflect?

Chapter 10 reviews the evidence for the reoccupation of Britain after 60,000 years ago, including debates concerning the last Neanderthals to inhabit the region and the appearance of the first Anatomically Modern Humans. This is a period that has been informed by new excavations (Lynford, Beedings, Glaston), along with renewed understanding and dating of extant material. After 30,000 years ago, Britain once again appears to have witnessed a period human

absence, this time during glacial conditions associated with the Dimlington Stadial. Chapter 11 follows from this to summarize the late Pleistocene occupation of Britain between 15 and 11,000 years ago (including recent discoveries of cave engravings in Church Hole, Creswell Crags and evidence for cannibalism at Goughs Cave). The final chronological package tackled in the book is the Mesolithic (Chapter 12), subdividing the early and late Mesolithic occupation of Britain in order to summarize the archaeology of the last hunter-gatherers in Britain.

This is a book which covers a lot of ground and provides up-to date summaries of each key period associated with the early human occupation of Britain. These are extremely useful, particularly to non-specialists and the general reader. However, the real strength and depth of the work lies in its focus on key geoarchaeological case studies to demonstrate how this record has been developed and given clarity by researchers over the last 20 years, not least by the author. Our understanding of all aspects of Britain's early human story have developed immensely over this timeframe, and this work provides a timely and engaging overview, drawing these threads together to demonstrate both our current state of knowledge and the process of discovery.

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