

Homo Britannicus. The Incredible Story of Human Life in Britain

Chris Stringer

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I should lay my cards on the table at the outset. I am an 'associate' of the Ancient Human Occupation of Britain (AHOB) project, but I am not an employee, nor do I receive any financial assistance from them. Associates can be called on if there is need for their expertise (which in my case there is not). I wanted to make this clear in case anyone visiting the AHOB website wonders what an associate of the project was doing reviewing a project book.

It is also important to situate the book in its appropriate context right from the beginning. The book is intended as a popular review of the evidence for the Paleolithic occupation of Britain. It is found in the popular history section, or 'pop science' shelves of major book retail chains. One of its other agendas is to promote the AHOB project, which it does very effectively.

A short prologue sets the scene for the chapters that follow, laying out the scope and general pattern the book will follow. Then comes an introduction to the history of the study of human origins (particularly in Britain). This is largely focused on the accepted version of events and developed through personalities and key figures rather than broader historical processes, but none the worse for that. It is a good solid chapter with a fair balance of paleoanthropology and archaeology. Why it is an introduction is beyond me, it should have been the first chapter.

Chapter 1 looks at the earliest occupation of Britain prior to the Anglian glaciation of ca. 450,000 years ago. It sets the scene with some dramatic hominin fossil discoveries from Dmanisi in Georgia, Atapuerca in Spain, and elsewhere, then moves on to equally dramatic archaeological and paleontological discoveries from the rapidly eroding cliff-line of East Anglia, eastern England, where AHOB excavations have taken place. The sections are clearly written and informative, and much of it will be new to interested members of the general public, so the chapter acts as an important platform for bringing out data that has up until now only circulated in the specialist literature or more focused student text books. It presents this information in an easily digestible form.

But here I will highlight my first criticism of the book. There is a tendency in the chapter, and indeed then throughout the book, to focus on AHOB contributions only. Obviously in a promotional vehicle this is to be expected, but other work and other workers are not credited as much as they should be in my opinion. When I read that sites like High Lodge and Warren Hill are AHOB sites, I

must confess I get a little annoyed. Yes, current AHOB personnel may have worked on the sites (in some cases before they were AHOB members), but so have a lot of other people; so these are definitely *not* AHOB sites. This is not the place to enlarge on this point other than to highlight a general concern (one that I have heard from other people as well). How we present the subject to the general public is important and must be done carefully. Reading this book you could easily walk away from it with a belief that only AHOB is working in the subject, or perhaps that AHOB are the only ones doing the cutting edge research these days. I am sure no one in AHOB or anyone else in the 'know' believes that, or would want to give that impression to the general public. The reason we need to be careful is that whether we intend it or not, books like this do influence how the public perceive our subject. The public represent our ultimate paymasters. Politicians (only interested in exploitable short-term results) and those who represent the public's interest are the conduits through which funding reaches the discipline. As non-specialists they too are influenced by what they read. It does not take a big stretch of the imagination to conceive of public and private funding bodies coming to believe that in times of financial difficulty, the best work can only be done through large all-inclusive projects that effectively preclude the smaller projects from access to ever dwindling resources.

The next chapter uses the Anglian glaciation as a springboard to introduce glacial theory, notions of orbital forcing, and a basic introduction to the cyclical nature of Pleistocene climate. I can imagine this is a difficult chapter to write, the hard thing to decide is just what to leave out, while including enough to make sure the punter has got the big picture. To my mind this chapter is a little rushed and does not quite succeed in this, but it is very much a matter of personal opinion. What might have helped was a diagram of glacial/interglacial time. The classic AHOB diagram is present in the back of the book (p.300 in the hard back), but it is not really referenced enough in the text, and it does not convey the glacial vs. interglacial character of Pleistocene climate all that well. This can be difficult for non-specialists to engage with at first, and a simple but clear visual *aid memoir*, which runs through a text can make all the difference.

On the other hand the chapter engages with detail and gives the reader data, while discussing the framework in which it is set. This engagement with detail is a very strong

plus-point for this chapter and is, equally, a hallmark of the whole book. Stringer is to be congratulated for resisting the temptation to write a 'low-fat' sound bite style pop-science text. The public is smart and it can cope with complexity; it deserves more books like this.

Chapter 3, 'The Great Interglacial,' is a solid rendering of much of the basic information on MIS 11, using Swanscombe as the springboard this time. The chapter links to *Homo heidelbergensis*, and the archaeology discussed is that of this particular hominin. Again there is attention to detail, and I think a successful attempt to framework this in terms of *H. heidelbergensis* behavior. It is appropriate here to mention the figures and plates. In the hardback they are just fantastic. Clear, large format images, and positioned well so as to enhance the text. I thought the placement of the images in this chapter were the most effective of the whole hardback edition. Do I have a gripe about this chapter? Well, yes. Brushing aside occasional AHOB imperialism (you would think the only valuable work done at Hoxne was AHOB's! – not that it was not good), this chapter fair screamed for a river terrace diagram and some background explanation. I think an important gap in the book as a whole is the lack of engagement with geology and, in particular, river terrace data. This is so central to what we do that it should have been integrated into the text more—AHOB is not short of geologists, on the contrary it has got some quite good ones.

Chapter 3 closes with Levallois and the theme is picked up in the next chapter. Without a simple glacial/interglacial diagram some readers may lose the progression from briefly introduced Levallois and MIS 9 (end of Chapter 3), into Purfleet (continuing MIS 9) at the start of Chapter 4, and then into MIS 7. I must admit I got a bit lost here. River terraces are introduced here, but not sufficiently elaborated on in my opinion. This chapter makes an interesting point. With the appearance of Levallois in late MIS 9, are we dealing with a new hominin or new movements of *H. heidelbergensis* into Britain and north-western Europe? Stringer says no. Anatomically there is no evidence for it. He prefers a slow *in-situ* 'Neanderthalization' of *Homo heidelbergensis*, as opposed to the migrationist take of the Mode 3 hypothesis (I think Stringer is right here). But it does leave some intriguing questions. Levallois is a complicated technology to simply reinvent, locally, several times over in different parts of the globe, especially convergent/point Levallois, which may, in my opinion, come in a little later (McNabb 2007). The chapter finishes with a discussion on the formation and date of the English Channel, the last interglacial, island Britain, and deserted Britain. Here again the illustrations augment the discussion and the maps are especially helpful in visualising new geographical ideas.

Chapters 5 and 6 find us on Stringer's home turf. Chapter 5 is on Neanderthals and early modern humans. This is a big picture chapter, with Britain rather swamped by the European data. But it is a good solid summary and moves along briskly, drawing and engaging with a wide variety of direct and multi-proxy evidence. The chapter links in nicely with the next on the post-glacial return of humans to

Britain and the British Creswellian and later assemblages. Much of this is drawn from Stringer's pre-AHOB days and represents work that he and colleagues such as Roger Jacobi, Andy Carrant, and others have developed over many years. These two chapters say a lot more, because there is more to be said. There is also some interesting detail and speculations, and some new observations on the discoveries in Gough's Cave at Cheddar—at least I had not come across them before (I also was not aware that Kendrick's Cave in Llandudno, North Wales, was considered contemporary with the Creswellian!—though the grounds for this were not made clear). The chapter concludes with a good summary of the DNA evidence for the post-glacial occupation of Britain by successive haploid groups. This really is fascinating stuff, and its write-up is simple but informative. Again, throughout these chapters there is detail and data, and, refreshingly, ambiguity in the record is not ignored or papered over.

For the more traditionally minded Paleolithic archaeologist, Chapter 7, on the impact of modern global climate change may seem out of place, but I think it is very much in place. It is a chilling read, and Stringer is quite uncompromising. Politicians, the God-like power the market place seems to hold over the modern mind, and old-fashioned greed (on the part of all of us) are the stumbling blocks to essential change. The book was published before G.W. Bush and the Republican party lost the American election, but Stringer highlights comments by the then president denying the reality of climate change, and intimates that his senior science advisors appeared more motivated by concerns over the global markets than the cost to our grandchildren's quality of life. We have greater hopes for Obama, but politicians change, and policies can too. I think this is Stringer's sub-text here; despite shifting political fortunes, it is essential that reforms stay in place.

Stringer contextualizes the link between past and present like this, "...Britain was colonised by human populations at least eight times in 700,000 years, but seven of those were ultimately unsuccessful in the face of severe climate change..." (hardback pp.268f). And just in case you think that modern humans will be OK because they are smarter than the other dumb hominins, well Stringer's got that covered too. Here in the UK we cannot feed ourselves, we just do not grow enough food. The countries we import from will be equally hit, as crop yields decline, and temperatures soar preventing the planting of traditional staples, as well as necessary exports. The global market place will start to melt. What will the West do when the countries that feed it start to divert their own production to feed their own people? I make all my students read this last chapter.

So far I have only discussed the hardback. My advice is to avoid the paperback if you can, it is a rather inferior product. Many of the color figures have been dispensed with. Those that remain have been reduced in size and consequently so has their effectiveness. Most of the images that make it into the paperback are in grey tones and are too small to convey the detail. The color images that survive into the paperback are collected into a series of plate-style

sections far away from the text they are meant to illustrate. A good example is the AHOB timeline. It is now moved to the front (hooray). But it is so small and monotone as to be next to impossible to read (doh!).

So, what of the big picture? I do not want to give the impression I hated this book, I did not. Quite the opposite. It is a good book, clear and well-written in an engaging style. As I said, it embraces detail and does not shy away from presenting the public with complex issues. The book is a flag waving exercise for AHOB as well as an attempt to

provide the general public with an easily accessible overview of its earliest Paleolithic history. In both camps I think it is a successful book. I have it on my reading lists for my students, and I would have no hesitation in recommending it to you to do the same.

REFERENCE

McNabb, J. 2007. *The British Lower Palaeolithic: Stones in Contention*. London. Routledge.