



Book Reviews

THE FIRST AFRICANS: AFRICAN ARCHAEOLOGY FROM THE EARLIEST TOOLMAKERS TO THE MOST RECENT FORAGERS, BY LAWRENCE BARHAM AND PETER MITCHELL

Cambridge University Press, 2008. 601pp; 117 figs, 5 tables, pb ISBN 978-0-521-61265-4 (£18.99), hb 978-0-521-84796-4 (£50)

The latest volume in the Cambridge World Archaeology series is ambitious, aiming to summarize and synthesize what we know of the archaeology of the whole of Africa from the emergence of our lineage to (as the title says) contemporary foragers. Food-producers are excluded (except in as far as they interacted with foragers). This allows much more in-depth engagement with the earlier part of the archaeological record than recent surveys of African archaeology that also cover farmers (eg, Phillipson 2005; Stahl 2005). The writing is admirably concise, yet readable, packing a great deal of information into a volume of modest size.

The book begins with a brief introduction to African geography, ecology, climates and environments, and the way these have shifted over the past seven million years. There are useful short summaries of the evidence from the deep-sea record and the terrestrial record, and descriptions of the most important dating techniques. Here, as elsewhere in the book, I thought that the authors did a very good job of summarizing without over-simplifying. The more narrative chapters begin at Chapter 3, 'First Tool-Users and Makers', and continue through chapters entitled 'Early Pleistocene Technologies and Societies', 'Mid-Pleistocene Foragers', 'Transitions and Origins', 'The Big Dry: the archaeology of marine isotope stages 4-2', 'Transitions: from the Pleistocene into the Holocene', 'Hunting, Gathering, Intensifying: the mid-Holocene record' and 'Foragers in a World of Farmers'. The final chapter is 'The Future of the First Africans' Past'. As these titles indicate, the authors have chosen to use the global climate record as their chronological baseline, and to discuss technological developments in terms of Clark's five modes, rather than the frequently-used categories Early, Middle and Later Stone Age, thus avoiding tired debates about (for example) the transition from the Middle to Later Stone Age. This works well for early time periods, but as the authors themselves note (p. 288), many later African artefact-making traditions do not fit into Clark's five modes; the same is probably true of other parts of the world outside Europe. One frustration was the lack of a diagram of marine isotope stages to remind one of important dates. This should be included in future editions.

The text is punctuated by occasional boxes focussing on topics worthy of treatment in greater depth, eg, 'Earliest hominins' pp. 70-3, 'Isotopes and diet' pp. 85-7, 'Landscape use' pp. 148-51, 'Hunting, scavenging and central places' pp. 152-4 and especially 'Gene-based phylogenies and demographic histories' pp. 206-10. This last is a longer than usual box with an admirably clear outline of the genetic evidence for modern human origins, material that many non-geneticists find notoriously difficult to come to grips with.

I detected a few errors in the topics and areas I know best. It is not true that C₄ plants do not discriminate against the uptake of atmospheric ¹³C (p. 86) – they do, just not to the same extent as C₃ plants. The age of 260 kya for the Florisbad cranium comes from ESR dating of tooth enamel, not luminescence dating of the surrounding deposits (p. 217). There were a few statements I found puzzling. On p. 205, the authors write 'A basic geographical point needs reiterating in this context [population movements]: Africa's biomes are distributed longitudinally between 36°N and 35°S, in contrast to the latitudinal distribution of Eurasia's biomes (Foley & Lahr 1997). At a continental scale, expansions and contractions of Africa's environments would have drawn in or pushed out human populations from north to south, or *vice versa*, as well as eastwards into Eurasia during times of expansion or retreat from glacial aridity.' On re-reading Foley and Lahr, I cannot find this argument. As Barham and Mitchell's own Fig. 2.2 (the vegetation map) shows, most of Africa's biomes are *not* distributed 'longitudinally'; since biomes depend to a great extent on temperature and other climatic variables, this pattern would be unusual. Studies of the spread of food production in Africa have noted that the major axis of the continent is north-south, and that this cross-cuts biomes, thus hindering the spread of crops and, to some extent, domesticated animals (Diamond 1997, see also Gifford-Gonzalez 2000; Marshall & Hildebrand 2002) – exactly the opposite of Barham and Mitchell's point. There may be some geographical features (eg, the Nile?) that served as corridors for north-south population movements, but these would have been limited.

I liked the authors' treatment of the controversial topic of the emergence of behavioural modernity on pp. 255-7. My one reservation about this section is the interpretation of the first direct evidence of the consumption of marine foods (in the form of shellfish), dated to glacial MIS 6, 164 kya at Mossel Bay. This observation is not in question. It is, however, a stretch to argue that 'The development of a shellfish-based foraging system may have been a distinctive local response to lowered regional productivity during glacial MIS 6' (p. 253). This hypothesis is based not on evidence of the absence of shellfish consumption in earlier times, but on absence of evidence. Shellfishing may have developed much earlier – we simply don't have coastal sites with sufficiently good preservation to know. I find it hard

to believe that, if baboons can collect and eat shellfish, as has been documented in the Cape of Good Hope Nature Reserve, people began to do the same only at such a late stage of our history.

The chapters on the Pleistocene-Holocene transition and on the Holocene itself provide useful summaries of the evidence from different parts of the continent, presented region-by-region. Much of this discussion is about artefacts, but also incorporates inferences from organic remains, where these have been preserved. In more recent periods, as the record becomes richer, one can draw on evidence not only from food remains, but also burials, rock art, etc. I wished that this last topic could have been covered in a little more depth – while there are obviously major constraints on the length of a book like this, rock art studies occupy such an important place in African archaeology that it seems a pity not to highlight them. In particular, I thought that the work of David Lewis-Williams and colleagues could have been described more clearly, especially in view of the way that this has subsequently become a model for rock art studies in other parts of the world. Recent challenges to Lewis-Williams *et al.*, too, raise fascinating questions about the limitations of these approaches.

These are, however, relatively minor criticisms. Overall, I was very impressed by this book, which is an invaluable text for anyone looking for an authoritative, up-to-date overview of African archaeology. It synthesises a very large body of work in a readable manner, and I did not - as is often the case in two-author books - notice a jarring disjunction between the earlier chapters (written primarily by Barham) and the later ones (written mostly by Mitchell). The treatment of the material is sufficiently detailed to convey complexities and contradictions, where these exist, without losing the overall thread of the narrative. Controversial topics are, on the whole, treated insightfully and even-handedly. This volume will, I am sure, be widely used in senior undergraduate and postgraduate university courses. We will certainly be using it in our classes.

The study of British rock art is flourishing as never before, and these two books are both outstanding contributions to the field, although markedly different in content and approach.

References

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