A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO THE HISTORY OF EARLY HUMANS

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Chapter 3 of *The Dawn Of Everything* begins with a history of the human species, starting three million years ago. David Graeber and David Wengrow remind us that we have practically no information about most of this period, a few bones or teeth, a piece of shaped flint, a footprint. There were a number of different forms of ancestral and early humans, but we know little or nothing about them, their origins or their way of living. I focus on three points that recur in the book.

1. **The new story of human evolution.**

The basic story we all know is that Homo Sapiens emerged from a single site in Africa perhaps 500K years ago and gradually spread out over the continent. About 80K years ago H. Sapiens Sapiesn, our species, started to move out of Africa.

Graeber and Wengrow reject that story. They agree that H. Sapiens emerged as a separate species about 500K years ago. This species included a large number of bpdy types, called morphologies. These groups interbred. From time to time, groups were isolated from each other by environmental changes or migration, sometimes for millenia. Then they reconnected, and interbred. The full panoply of physical characteristics of modern humans did not fully emerge until perhaps 100 to 40 ka (thousands of years before the present).

Here are two papers discussing this: link; and

link. The first paper is cited by the authors; it’s very readable. The second is harder. It describes current understanding and areas needing further research. There’s a chart showing the spread of humans out of Africa, and a discussion of the possible admixture of Neanderthal and Denisovan populations which are now extinct. This question is unsettled.

These articles and the book describe a few fossils thought to relate to H. Sapiens, but there aren’t all that many. Here’s a Wikipedia entry on major fossils. This paper describes current thinking about the development of Homo sapiens Sapiens (sometimes called modern humans). The abstract and the first part may be of interest. I just skimmed over the rest.

2. **Evidence of early human culture.**

We have practically no evidence about human culture before about 100 ka ago. We don’t know much about how H. Sapiens evolved, or exactly when we became an identifiable species. But our authors assert that “as soon as we were human we started doing human things.”. P. 83. They think groups of H. Sapiens moved around and became separated from other groups. They assume that each group decided how to organize itself, considering their environment and the state of their technology. They assume that decisions were made consciously, intentionally, with specific goals in mind. This is what they mean by “doing human things”.

They assume that different groups made different decisions. They simply can’t imagine that all over Africa all the groups made the same choices about hierarchy, ritual, gender relations, child-rearing practices, diet, dress, and so on. Then when they came together, permanently or not, they shared their decisions snd newly acquired knowledge and technology; and, they assume, adopted new ideas.

There is agreement on one point. Until about 300 ka ago, humans used hand tools such as hand axes. Then suddenly all across Africa there was

a shift to microliths. These are flakes chipped off stones and shaped for tools and weapons. The flakes are attached to wood and bone by glue and threads, instead of being held in the hand. That’s about all we know with reasonable certainty, until about 80 to 100 ka ago

Starting perhaps 100 ka ago we begin to see hints of the culture of our ancestors. We have worked beads and shells, and decorated clothes, some found in burial sites, others in caves. We do not find cemeteries or common grave sites, but there are some “rich burials”, with purposeful arrangements of corpses and grave goods. We also find remnants of comparatively large structures.

However, the authors say that there is little evidence of the kinds of things one would expect in hierarchal societies. There are no permanent monumental structures. The rich burials seem to be young people, or physically deformed people. There is at least one apparently young woman buried with pelvic and stomach plates. These aren’t the robust individuals we’d expect to see in a hierarchal society.

The authors don’t describe any rituals, which might be evidence of a sort of priestly hierarchy. They don’t believe we have enough evidence to support any particular view of social structures. Instead, they suggest there was a wide range of social practices.

3. **Seasonal Changes And Gatherings.**

The authors think that our ancestors lived in small bands part of the year and gathered together once a year or so. The say indigenous American groups lived this way, in small bands of hunter-foragers part of the year, and in large groups for hunting migrating animals, or to winter over safely. They describe African cultures that lived this way. Ethnographic studies show that the hierarchical structures of these more recent groups was different in the two settings. The authors think this was likely the case with our prehistoric ancestors.

There is evidence of regular gatherings of large numbers of people from at least 40 ka ago. For example, there is evidence that people gathered in the Perigord Region of Southern France near the confluence of the Vezere and the Dordogne Rivers, where it appears that there were large migrations of reindeer. This would be perhaps 25 to 35 ka ago during the last ice age. Fn. 38, p. 542. There are similar sites in Eurasia and Turkey.

Discussion

1. Before I read all this I had this idea that people lived in small bands near each other until they moved out of Africa. A moment's thought would tell me that's not a realistic plan. If people stayed in a single group, the mutations from interbreeding would pile up until we died out. The story told by Graeber and Wengrow and the other scientists cited here makes a lot more sense.

For one thing, the annual meetings of the small groups would be good opportunities for finding mates outside the small group, insuring against inbreeding. There is evidence of coordination at these meetings. Some seem to be related to migrations of large animals. It would be easier to hunt these in large groups. There is evidence of semi-permanent construction of large buildings. Both of these suggest that people were planning ahead so there would be food and shelter for the gatherings, and were organized in some way for these complex operations.

For much of the year, people lived through foraging and hunting small game. It would be much easier to do this in small units. A large group would eat everything in a given area more quickly, requiring more travel, and more scouting for food. Getting a larger number of people going is a cat-herding exercise. Larger groups require more coordination than smaller groups.

2. I hadn't thought much about the fossil record. I knew there are large gaps, but somehow

I didn’t notice that having several thousand fossils isn’t much to go on. Looking at the more technical papers, I realized that every story about our evolution comes from speculation based on close examination of a relatively small number of fossils. It really makes you think about this passage from the book:

> We should be clear: there’s nothing wrong with myths. Likely as not, the tendency to make up stories about the distant past as a way of reflecting on the nature of our species is itself, like art and poetry, one of those distinctly human traits that began to crystallize in deep prehistory. And no doubt some of these stories — for instance, feminist theories that see distinctly human sociability as originating in collective child-rearing practices — can indeed tell us something important about the paths that converged in modern humanity.8 But such insights can only ever be partial because there was no Garden of Eden, and a single Eve never existed. P. 82-3.