

Palaeolithic Archaeology Teaching Resource Box

Palaeolithic Lifestyles & Behaviour: Advanced

***Homo heidelbergensis* and the Lower Palaeolithic: a behavioural enigma?**

Homo heidelbergensis remains rather an enigmatic hominin species: their tools (flake tools, handaxes and wooden spears) show impressive tool-making abilities, while sites such as Boxgrove and *Schöningen* have provided evidence for the hunting of large and dangerous animals such as horse and rhinoceros. Yet at the same time there is little convincing evidence for permanent or semi-permanent campsites (with the possible exception of the site of *Bilzingsleben* in Germany), and few examples of stone-built hearths or storage pits (although the site of Beeches Pit has produced convincing evidence for the controlled use of fire).

One possible impression is of a skillful tool-maker and hunter, living a highly mobile lifestyle. Although it is extremely difficult to reconstruct language abilities for this time period, it is notable that there is almost no convincing evidence for the use of symbols (which have often been linked to complex language use) during the Lower Palaeolithic. There is also little obvious change in the stone tools (which dominate the archaeological record) made and used by *Homo heidelbergensis* during this period: this perhaps suggests a hominin species living an effective, but relatively limited, lifestyle in which there was little need for symbols, complex language or for new innovations.

The Neanderthals: how complex are their burials?

Although in the most basic elements Neanderthal life was similar to that of the Lower Palaeolithic (the production of stone tools and the hunting of animals), the Middle Palaeolithic period also sees a number of new behavioural elements associated with the Neanderthals: while still making flake tools (the number of handaxes decreases), there is also evidence for the persistent production of specific types of tools. Some archaeologists have suggested that these various types reflect different Neanderthal groups, while others see them as the different task-specific components of specialist tool-kits.

This period also sees an increasing use of organic tools (including bone tools), the use of caves and rock-shelters, the controlled use of fire (including stone-built hearths towards the very end of the period), targeted hunting (there is evidence for the hunting of specific species in specific locations at specific times of the year), and the habitual use of larger landscapes and territories.

Perhaps most famous of all is the evidence for Neanderthal burial: although there are only around 35 burials this is the first time that the deliberate disposal of the dead is clearly seen in the Palaeolithic. However, unlike the graves of the Upper Palaeolithic (and later prehistoric periods such as the Bronze Age) there is no evidence for symbolic grave goods: and this, along with the absence of any deliberate art, has led some archaeologists to suggest that language was still relatively limited at this time.

Modern humans: a familiar behavioural package?

The appearance of modern human behaviour in the Upper Palaeolithic introduces a series of traits that are very familiar to us today: the first art is produced, most famously in the animal cave paintings of south-west France and northern Spain at sites such as *Lascaux*. This art, rich in symbols and messages, has been used by many archaeologists to suggest that the modern humans of the Upper Palaeolithic had complex, spoken language: this is also supported by the many burials of the period that are rich in grave goods, which perhaps suggest important individuals and/or a belief in some sort of after-life.

Alongside the art and burials this period also sees the production of very intricate and delicate stone tools, and wooden and bone tools adorned with animal carvings: archaeologists have suggested that this means that tools were not only made simply to do a job in this period, but that they also carried messages (in other words they were symbolic items). Finally, the Upper Palaeolithic also saw the first villages and houses, the long-distance exchange of *exotic raw materials* for the making of jewellery and other objects, and the colonisation of new lands (during this period modern humans reached Australia and the Americas).

Terminology:

Bilzingsleben: one of the few possible examples of a Lower Palaeolithic campsite, claims have been made for huts and hearths at this 400,000 year old site, although some of the evidence is rather controversial.

Schöningen: a Lower Palaeolithic hunting site from Germany. Around 400,000 years old, this site has produced eight wooden spears (experiments suggest that they could have been thrown over distances up to 60m), four possible hearths, and evidence for the hunting and butchery of an entire herd of horses.

Exotic raw materials: these include items such as obsidian (a volcanic glass with excellent flaking properties) or sea shells, acquired from far distant sources for the production of stone tools or items of jewellery such as pendants. It is thought that they were acquired through some form of trade and/or exchange, and that the rarity of the items gave them value. During the Upper Palaeolithic such exotic items occur up to several hundred kilometres away from their sources.

Lascaux: a key Upper Palaeolithic cave site in south-west France, featuring large numbers of cave paintings (including the Great Hall of the Bulls) and engravings.

Quiz Questions:

1. Would wooden spears or stone handaxes have been more valuable to a Lower Palaeolithic hominin?
2. What knowledge would the targeted hunting (of specific species in specific places at specific times of the year) of the Middle Palaeolithic require?
3. Is art the most important innovation of the Palaeolithic period?

Further Resources:

<http://www.britarch.ac.uk/ba/ba1/ba1feat.html#gamble> [Prof. Clive Gamble's view of Boxgrove Man]

<http://www.britarch.ac.uk/ba/ba18/ba18feat.html#roberts> [Mark Roberts' view of Boxgrove Man (Part I)]

<http://www.britarch.ac.uk/ba/ba19/ba19feat.html#roberts> [Mark Roberts' view of Boxgrove Man (Part II)]

<http://www.culture.gouv.fr/culture/arcnat/lascaux/en/> [Official website of the Lascaux cave art site in southern France]