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Review of Porr, M.; Matthews, J.M. (2020) Interrogating human origins: decolonisation and the deep human past

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Book Reviews

Porr, M. & Matthews, J.M. (eds) 2020. *Interrogating Human Origins: Decolonisation and the Deep Human Past*. New York: Routledge. 366 pp. ISBN 9781138300439 (paperback). Price UK£24.49.

“These stories don’t hurt anyone” argues Paulette Steeves (Chapter 12) about indigenous ways of knowing. This provides a stark contrast with scientific theories of human evolution as reviewed in the introduction: “[...] scientific research remains inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism [...] The word itself, ‘research’, is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world’s vocabulary” (Martin Porr and Jacqueline Matthews quoting Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Chapter 1). To me – white, male, from a colonising nation and a self-identified scientist – this is painful reading. It is clear though (and well documented in the chapters in this volume) that research into human origins is implicated in great harm brought to indigenous groups across the world in the 19th and 20th centuries. In my opinion then, this is the main take-home message from *Interrogating Human Origins*: it is high time the study of human evolution and Palaeolithic archaeology confronts the way in which it has been co-opted and subverted by and contributed to colonial enterprises in the last two centuries and how, in some ways, this continues to be the case.

The book contributes greatly to increasing the discipline’s self-understanding and points to solutions for the development of alternative, postcolonial approaches. The introductory chapter clearly lays out what is understood by this: postcolonial theory is not, or is no longer, a single ‘thing’ but a movement of theoretical and analytical orientations, and research practices. It developed in opposition to colonial power structures. The focus has more recently shifted to “uncovering and exposing the imperialist system of economic, political and cultural domination with a particular emphasis on the subtle mechanisms of the latter” (Chapter 1, p. 6).

The editors bring together an eclectic collection of chapters, running the gamut from conventional academic texts to a visual essay. These contributions are divided across four main sections, covering investigation of the colonial roots of current research practices (Section 2), the representation of human origins (Section 3), regional case studies (Section 4), and genetics (Section 5). Although the volume’s contents are noticeably slanted towards Australia, Asia and Africa are also well represented. Regional case studies include a fascinating review of the history of research in China by Robin Dennell (Chapter 10), the Indian subcontinent by Parth Chauhan (Chapter 11), and the Americas with a (for me) particularly instructive contribution by a Cree-Métis First Nations scholar, Paulette Steeves (Chapter 12). On the whole, the book represents an important resource for everyone involved or interested in the study of Pleistocene human societies.

To the readership of the *Bulletin*, two contributions focusing on human origins research in Asia and Africa (Sheela Athreya and Rebecca Rogers Ackermann, Chapter 4) and on the development of views on human evolution in post-apartheid South Africa (Amanda Esterhuysen, Chapter 15) will be most immediately relevant. Athreya and Ackermann document the racist roots of the search for ‘origins’ and especially the focus on locating geographic locations of origins in human evolution. They highlight how some current ideas and models directly derive from racist roots of the discipline. They cogently argue that a solution involves moving away from this focus on ‘origins’ and on ‘winner-takes-all’ adaptive

explanations. This needs to be combined with diversifying the community of research and recognising research from non-Western countries and the global South (Athreya & Ackermann, p. 88).

Robin Dennell’s chapter (10) on the history of human origins research in China provides an excellent companion piece. He demonstrates that the place of China in Western human origins discourse changed from absolutely central prior to World War II and the communist revolution to peripheral immediately after it. This shift is shown to be a result of political circumstances rather than of changing views on human evolution alone. Both Athreya and Ackermann, and Dennell argue that in terms of the theoretical development of Western discourse, the isolation meant that outdated concepts (based on a biased reading of the evidence) such as the Movius Line, remained influential for far longer than warranted. Athreya and Ackermann also highlight models that give credence to a complex interplay of different factors allowing for “continuity with hybridisation” (p. 80), developed by Asian researchers. These were overlooked in Western discourse, even though data from Asia were incorporated in that discourse. In Western academia ‘adaptationist’ approaches remained popular instead. With increasing genetic data, ‘winner-takes-all’ models are no longer feasible. In this, I feel that we academics also have a responsibility to better highlight, for society at large, the complex scenarios that we are now considering. Even though within the discipline a competitive explanation for the disappearance of Neanderthals is now least supported by practitioners (Vaesen *et al.* 2020), my impression is that we still put out such models as feasible explanations in press releases and other popular output.

Amanda Esterhuysen (Chapter 15) reviews the history of human origins research in South Africa and focuses on its reception and in some cases rejection by Black Africans as a theory that associates Africa with primitivism. Esterhuysen (p. 286) argues that the field will not be rid of its racism as long the field is a “European intellectual space” whose models and jargons are fatally associated with “‘whiteness’ ‘progress’ and ‘superiority’”. The historical analysis in Esterhuysen’s and many other chapters really brings home the importance of reflection on the history of the discipline and the roots of explanatory models, research practice, but also terminology.

The historical analyses in many of these chapters bring out a confrontation with some blind spots in my knowledge of the discipline in which I have been operating for a number of years. As an eye-opening example (to me), I was unaware of the racist roots of the term ‘Venus’ for the female statues of the European Gravettian. It turns out this is a direct reference to Sarah Baartman. This is just one instance of the connection between contemporary Africans and ‘primitive people’ that characterises much of the research history of human evolution research (Athreya & Ackermann, p. 67).

Also highly relevant for the southern African community are multiple contributions reviewing the concept of ‘modern human behaviour’. Perhaps most notable is one of the originators of the concept: Iain Davidson (Chapter 2). His eminently readable review concludes that ‘none of us did very well’ when he reviews attempts to compile trait lists to identify modern human behaviour in the archaeological record. His recognition of the complex relationships between anatomy, behaviour, the development of mind, and the production of complex spoken language leads to a call for more sophisticated theoretical frameworks, and a call to decolonise the subject from the

power of anatomists (who colonise the field from an “anatomy comes first point of view”) (p. 49). As an archaeologist, this call to arms obviously resonates with me, as does Davidson’s argument that many archaeological approaches that view agriculture as a natural ‘outcome’ of hunter-gatherer development and intensification are inherently colonial, and alternative trajectories are not considered equally. The role of defining ‘modern human behaviour’ from any region and then comparing the ‘package’ to the archaeological record elsewhere has deep roots in our discipline and remains pernicious. In Chapter 5, Ian McNiven argues that the observation that some of the hallmarks of modern behaviour are not present in Australia’s earliest archaeological record fits within a long research tradition approaching the Aboriginal Australian archaeological record as primitive. The contribution forcefully brings home a major fallacy in the ‘package’ approach. With passing time and increasing distance, behaviours are expected to change. New behaviours will be introduced, others may be abandoned. Hence, when comparing *any* place of origin with locations of increasing distance, a number of behaviours of the original set will be absent in further removed locations. However, innovations also occurred. Comparing the presence of a pre-specified set across distant locations really cannot say anything about the sophistication of the societies that made decisions to fit their needs tens of thousands of years ago.

Interrogating Human Origins is a very instructive introduction to a broad suite of topics. I am convinced of the need to develop postcolonial approaches to studying human origins. But, as ever, I do not agree with every single word of every chapter. Is our recognition of patterning in the fossil record really a case of ‘apophenia’ (the recognition of a pattern when in reality there is none)? (Jonathan Marks, Chapter 14). I do think some patterning represents a real phenomenon, even if there is much we do not yet know. Mostly, I struggle with the relativism implied in many of the chapters. My general approach to scientific knowledge and other ways of knowing has been based on Stephen Jay Gould’s (1999) proposal to treat them as equal but separate (non-overlapping) magisteria. This fits with ideas on multivocality, presenting scientific and Indigenous interpretations side by side (Chapter 1, p. 77). Nevertheless, Craig Muller and Joe Dortch (Chapter 15, p. 320), in the context of a chapter on collaborative DNA research with Aboriginal Australians, argue that this still leaves Indigenous People and their knowledge as ‘other’. They conclude that this means that “[t]he two knowledge systems should be synthesized to the extent possible”. This represents an important challenge for the discipline, and no clear solution for situations where interpretations are at odds is given.

It seems that deep time archaeology is lagging in developing postcolonial approaches compared with our colleagues in other fields of archaeology. Porr and Matthews point out in the volume’s introduction that “[e]ven if we understand ‘human origins’ research very broadly, it is noticeable that contributions dealing with these themes are virtually absent in the postcolonial or decolonising literature within archaeology” (p. 4). On reflection, I find it striking that the field that has the least and most fragmentary data of all areas of archaeology, sees itself as the most data-driven and appears least willing to critically examine its problematic past and its hidden assumptions and biases rooted in colonial thought.

References

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Main, M. & Huffman, T. 2021. *Palaces of Stone: Uncovering Ancient Southern African Kingdoms*. Cape Town: Penguin Random House. 176 pp. ISBN 978-1-775-84614-7 (paperback). Price ZAR220.00.

Palaces of Stone by Mike Main and Thomas Huffman offers a narrative of the rise of African kingdoms and their palatial seats of power, and the sequence of capitals that succeeded one another between AD 900 and 1840. It provides further detail of the importance of symbols, rain, ritual, trade, and craftsmanship throughout this period. At the end of the introduction, the authors state that “[i]t does seem, though, that these striking ruins exist in a public vacuum: though broadly known to archaeologists with an interest in the field, they are largely unappreciated because their story has not yet been told to a large enough audience. To help put that right is the purpose of this book” (p. 7). This is a necessary aim in the context of promoting the discipline in the public domain. But does the book do this aim justice?

Palaces of Stone comprises ten chapters and an introduction. The introduction provides an overview of the book, covering its chronology and offering insight into its focus: the stone-walled palaces in southern Africa. A useful timeline is presented at the beginning of the book, starting at AD 900 and marking a number of significant developments in the appearance and spread of the Zimbabwe Culture. At the end of the introduction, a map shows the area in question along with selected settlements and stone-walled sites (pp. 7–8). This is extremely useful for visualising the geography of the Zimbabwe Culture’s landscape.

Chapters 1 through 10 present the stone palaces in succession, with some chapters that develop certain concepts further, such as rain control and Great Zimbabwe in modern times. It begins with Schroda, the largest Zhizo site, and progresses through K2 and the rise of state level society and the Zimbabwe Culture, which based itself at Mapungubwe. From there the book discusses at considerable length Great Zimbabwe, before finishing on palaces dating to the second half of the second millennium AD, including the Torwa, Mutapa and Rozwi states. The concluding chapter details ‘the end of an era’, the final stages of the Zimbabwe Culture. It finishes by mentioning the Venda and their history following the Zimbabwe Culture until at least the 1930s. A useful appendix follows and presents some sites that can be visited by the public.

The book provides the reader with a perspective, for the most part, that stone palace sequences are well known and solidly established. However, there is still much to learn of the succession of capitals, shifts in peopling, the development and spread of wealth, a chief’s traditional and spiritual power, rain-control or partitioning, local historiographies, and social relations in the valley, and the book does not adequately negotiate competing views. Examples of this, which feature in the text, are the debates between Shadreck Chirikure, Innocent Pikirayi and Thomas Huffman about the Great Zimbabwe