

Homo Britannicus

The Incredible Story of Human Life in Britain

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This is a coffee-table book with plenty of flashy illustrations in multi-colours, some of them occupying entire spreads. The text is sparsely spaced with uneven right margins. The story to be told is that of human inhabitation of the British Isles since 700'000 BC throughout the ice-ages and their interglacial interludes, leading up to the present age with its global warming and the inherent dangers this pose to all of us being the ultimate message of the book.

Thus what follows is a rather spotty report on the changing climates and the concomitant changes in fauna and flora and how man in his various pre-historic incarnations fitted into it. It is a dramatic story in the sense of being filled with dramatic changes of fortunes, at least from the long perspective, but it is not dramatic in the sense of development. Things come and go, and the succession of glaciations is of course far more complicated than most people care to know. Thus unfortunately there is very little that sticks in the mind, in spite of the gorgeous illustrations the tales told do simply not come to life. True, aspects of it reads like a detective story when the author explains how this and that technique works, and why this and that finding can have this or that interpretation, but those explanations do not follow upon probing questions but are hence unsolicited. From time to time, especially towards the end some interesting questions are phrased and addressed. It is by now accepted that the Neanderthals did not evolve into us modern humanoids but constituted another branch on the tree, a branch which went extinct. Such conclusions rest on statistical DNA analysis, especially that of mitochondrial DNA which allow true evolutionary trees (with no cycles). Similarly one can ask whether the earliest remains of post-glacial humans actually lead to continous links with present inhabitants. In other words have present day inhabitants lived here for ten thousand years, and thus claim a long tenure on the islands, or are they mostly immigrants from other parts of Europe? Such questions do not get any satisfactory answers, part of the problem being technical, it being very hard to get uncontaminated samples of DNA¹, thus the tests are of dubious value. Another part being that given any individual in the distant past, chances are that there will be no unbroken lineage of females linking him (or her) to the present. In fact by purely combinatorial arguments we can posit the existence of a common maternal ancestor (naturally refered to as Eve), meaning that all the contemporary females at that time left no present-day issue through unbroken female geneologies. At the bottom of which

¹ The technical problems of fossilized DNA extraction are fascinating, involving bacterial duplication of available traces. It illustrates the great variety of intricate technical problems that characterizes Natural Science as a huge collective enterprise, each of which, mostly developed by anonymous contributors, would qualify for extended attention by itself

lurks the question of speciation, biology being a messy thing, in which species constitute no well-defined notions² thus there never being any founding couples, but instead genetically drifting populations.

So in the end what remains after reading (and looking) through the book. A bewildering list of names, periods, excavation sites, and fragmented skeletons. Amazing though, a severed head in real life is a real horror, the remnants of a cranium thousands of years later divulged out of the earth, simply a curiosity, fair game to scientific analysis. The sad thing though is that the student of ancient hominids is above everything else a dentist, teeth being what is preserved the best. True with modern sophisticated techniques, a piece of tissue can tell much more than what ocular investigation used to yield. Through analysis of isotopes one can determine the main feed, as we literally are what we eat, as well as detect in teeth formations stages of stunted growth. One lesson to be learned from our ancient forefathers - the Cro-Magnos, is that they were generally quite healthy, taller and sturdier than their modern counterparts. Civilization seems to have involved a physical degeneration of individuals, probably forcing them into a physiologically unhealthy life-style. Life back then was good if unforgiving, and with the rich diversity around them, a kind of Eden.

This leads to the last observation, not touched upon in the book. Human remains are very scarce among the fossilized remains of the past. Animals predominate, the human individual being but a scarce interluder. Literally the searcher for our pre-historical ancestors, have to go through tons of debris stemming from ancient elephants, rhinocera and what not, before the intermittent human fragment may surreptitioulsy present itself to the trained eye. How do people know where to look? Are sites just encountered by chance? Would it be possible to start almost everywhere and dig? Obviously not, human occupancy is not uniform on the land, instead it forms fractal strings, which are further compacted by the natural forces like currents and natural sinks like caves. Digging is expensive and hard, and thus archeologists and paleontologists home in on every modern construction that is undertaken, taking advantage of exposed surfaces, maintaining a tenuous hold, until they are being chased away.

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² there is even the phenomenon of monodromy, as exemplified by some arctic tarn whose overlapping populations encircle the North Pole, being cross-fertile as we go say west, but after one revolution encountering an insurmountable breeding barrier