

NEWS FROM ATAPUERCA IN ENGLISH

IN RESPONSE TO WORLDWIDE INTEREST IN ATAPUERCA, this page contains an English-language selection of highlights from the previous issue.



>EXCALIBUR PROPOSED AS THE OLDEST VESTIGE OF THE SYMBIOTIC MIND
>START OF COGNITIVE HUMAN THOUGHT TAKEN BACK TO 400,000 BP
>NEW YORK WORKSHOP FOR WORLD'S LEADING HUMAN EVOLUTION SCIENTISTS

>BONES PIT BIFACE DEBATED

Parallel to the Atapuerca exhibition, the Duques de Soria Foundation convened an international meeting in New York, attended by the world's leading experts in human evolution. One of the major debates was the potential symbolic importance of the recently presented quartzite biface from the Bones Pit, which may have repercussions that reach beyond every previous hypothesis regarding Middle Pleistocene hominid cognition. Dubbed Excalibur, this biface, associated with remains from at least 28 Homo heidelbergensis individuals, has been described and interpreted recently in L'Anthropologie. The authors of the article propose the hypothesis that the biface was left intentionally amongst the hominid remains as a reflection of some type of death-related symbolism.

>BONES PIT BIFACE DEBATED BY EXPERTS IN NY

An historic day > On July 9 in 1998, Ana Gracia leapt from doubt to exaltation. She had just unearthed the first tool in the Bones Pit, a piece of stone chiselled on both sides, called a biface by archaeologists. It was a piece of quartzite with several colours, found alongside a large pile of bear and human bones. It is 400,000 years old, and has puzzled experts trying to find an explanation for its unique presence amongst so many fossils. Despite intensive searching over the last four years, no further tools have been found, suggesting that it may well be a unique item.

The quartzite came from the Olmos de Atapuerca area, and it has been subject to detailed analysis with electron microscopes in Tarragona for traces of

usage. Conclusive evidence has not been possible due to the changes to the edges in the course of time and the clay it was embedded in.

We are suggesting that it was a symbolic object associated with human corpses.

We are not, however, so ingenious as to think that such a far-reaching suggestion could be accepted without a scientific storm. If our field of research is still thrashing out the debate over the acceptance of speech and burial amongst Neanderthals 60,000 years ago, what sort of reaction could we expect to our suggestion that the idea of complex symbolism may date back to 400,000 years ago?

OTHER DEBATES

>The recent definition of Homo georgicus for human remains found in Dmanisi (Georgia).

>Parameters used by palaeoanthropologists to measure intra- and interspecific variation.

>Age of occupation in East Asia, in the light of datings from the Nihewan Valley sites in China (roughly 1.4 million years old).

>CONCLUSIONS

The morphological diversity of Lower Pleistocene hominids is much greater than those amongst Middle Pleistocene individuals. Some experts have suggested that this is the result of an extinction and recolonisation process.

At the end of the meeting, I was left with the impression that palaeoanthropologists not only use different methods to evaluate diversity, almost inevitable in any branch of research, but that they have still not defined a set of parameters to establish significant differences. Typical but nonetheless painful experiences of archaeologists come to mind: having to differentiate between Mode 2 and Mode 3 industries, for example, in those all-too familiar situations where you have no idea where one ends and the next one begins.

On another front, the surprising antiquity of the Chinese sites suggests an extremely early move out

of Africa, possibly related to the one that gelled in Georgia. However, the lack of evidence of occupations prior to 1M BP in the enormous loess sequences in Central Asia, a compulsory point of transit if not occupation on the way to East Asia, leaves the process leading to these population movements unexplained.

One thing was made quite clear to me, at least: whoever the early settlers in Caucasia might have been, contrary to previous conventional wisdom, they did not need an especially large brain. In fact, the larger brain and body size of the African Homo ergaster in comparison to previous forms has been accepted as a sine qua non condition for the incursion of these populations outside Africa. The Dmanisi findings, on the other hand, show that the cranial capacity of these hominids remained between 600 and 700 cc- a standard volume amongst primitive Homo forms.

>SCIENTISTS MEET IN NEW YORK

Funded by the Duques de Soria Foundation under the auspices of the Castilla y León Regional Government, a throng of the worlds most eminent experts in palaeontology, prehistory, archaeology and anthropology from France, the UK, the USA, Georgia, the Netherlands and Spain met in New York. The Spanish delegates were represented by the three Atapuerca co-directors. The common denominator of these experts was their long-standing professional experience in human evolution. Each one had a different theoretical and working approach, ranging from those who believe there are many human types to others who only appreciate gradual evolution; from those who focus on physiology and anatomy to others who analyse technological and cognitive aspects.

Laboratory scientists and field researchers- a deliberate mixture to ensure that different opinions would be exchanged and enriching debates would be stimulated. The goal was not to reach definitive conclusions, but rather to sow the seeds of mutual understanding and friendship with a view to further enriched contacts in the future.

EDITORIAL: ATAPUERCA CONCERNS US ALL >Verónica Martín.

Archaeologist. ARG. Paleo-

rama.

>For some time now, a huge team has expended effort, sacrifice and above all, a huge dose of enthusiasm to ensure that the latest discoveries from Atapuerca reach the general public. The team is made up of people who research and people who transmit their colleagues' research through a wide range of channels: lectures, guided tours, educational activities for school groups, etc.

>From the outset at Paleorama, we have striven to provide the best possible public explanation of the Atapuerca discoveries, and we have pioneered many aspects. In spite of diffi-



become the driving force for local economic development. We would like to take this opportunity to send a message to the local initiatives that are part of this group effort: Atapuerca is a project that concerns all of us, not just those who are researching



culties (lack of appropriate infrastructure- not much more can be done with what we have), we have kept on working enthusiastically to ensure that the research reaches the public in an easy-to-understand format. During the process, we hope to awaken broader interest and provoke curiosity that will lead to a deeper understanding and above all, change people's attitudes.

>Our team of guides and interpreters is the final but by no means the least important link in a great chain of knowledge. We have become an essential part because we are a bridge between the discoveries, the complex research going on and the general public. If the towns of Atapuerca and Ibeas had not decided to take on the enormous responsibility of organizing guided visits, the social project of the sites would now be totally different from its present state, not to mention the economic initiatives that have arisen around the sites. The research and dissemination teams have

or publicising the discoveries. There is absolutely no practical sense or purpose in waiting for others to resolve the common problems that affect us all, or simply adopting a passive attitude to criticise those who are doing something. To paraphrase a certain politician, "It is time to decide what I can do for Atapuerca, instead of asking what Atapuerca can do for me."

>From the pages of this forum, we urge all institutions, authorities, businesses and the media to acknowledge the work we have done so far and are still doing. We are more aware than anybody of the reality facing this area. We know what the shortfalls are, and where they are and what is needed. We know the type of visitor who comes here, what they expect to find, and we know it all because we have been alongside them for more than 7 years, rain hail or shine (the former more often than the latter). So we are truly grateful to the readers, mostly visitors, for their patience

and comprehension if they arrive at the Sierra de Atapuerca and do not find what they expected, if they discover that the massive volume of information mentioned at the start of this article does not exactly match the real situation, if the guides make mistakes or, after several hours' journey to Burgos, visitors find that the sites or the Archaeological Park are closed and nobody is on hand to explain why.

But there is something, or more correctly somebody, still missing from this list: the local people. The villages must become an integrated part of this ambitious project; they must believe in it and they must turn it into a social project that reaches far beyond its scientific and educational goals. Our purpose is no less than the research, dissemination and preservation of this World Heritage site. Ultimately, we are all in the same boat, even when each of us is fighting his or her own battle.

>ATAPUERCA AND BURGOS

HANDBOOK FOR ARCHAEOLOGICAL ROUTES The Regional Tourism Commission has published a guide to the most spectacular archaeological routes in the Burgos Province, spanning periods from the Palaeolithic down to the Middle Ages. The handbook details the services available to visitors, from guided tours and interpretation centres to theme parks.

EXCAVATION AT MUSEUM OF HUMAN EVOLUTION SITE FOCUSED ON CHURCH Excavation at the site of the new Museum of Human Evolution is on track. After unearthing the ancient cloisters where a series of early medieval burials were discovered, work is now centred on the floor plan of the church, which so far has yielded a side nave, part of the central nave and some of the attached chapels. The rest of the plan will be impossible to unearth because it lies under a road and Atapuerca Boulevard.

LEAKEY FOUNDATION GRANT

Genetic scientists study Atapuerca bone DNA >The Evolution and Human Behaviour Unit, part of the Carlos III Institute in Madrid under Director Juan Luis Arsuaga, hopes to date the separation between Neanderthals and Homo sapiens

THESIS DISSERTATION ANDREU OLLÉ AND JOSEP MARÍA VERGÈS

Based on traces and marks of stone tool usage in Pleistocene Mode 1 and 2 sites.

>MORE INFORMATION Ediciones Sierra de Atapuerca, a publishing firm created to publicize the sites.

Asentamientos prehistóricos en la Sierra de Atapuerca. Marta Navazo Ruiz 265 pages. La Cueva de El Mirador Sergio Moral del Hoyo 160 pages Ediciones Sierra de Atapuerca. 18 Euro Orders: 34-947 256061

www.edicionessierradeatapuerca.com

The first two memoranda presented at Burgos University on the Atapuerca sites have been published by Ediciones Sierra de Atapuerca. Marta Navazo has scoured the ground in a 10 km radius across the Range in search of vestiges left by prehistoric groups that may have visited the caves, including prospecting on the Arlanzón River terraces and an analysis of settlements in the area using the stone tool industry. Sergio Moral analyses the contents of El Mirador Cave, particularly items for everyday use made by productive Bronze Age societies which found the ideal conditions in Atapuerca and its surroundings to settle, develop their customs and carry out their funeral rites.

Atapuerca: a privileged window on the past

Láminas de Atapuerca. La prehistoria en imágenes. 6 posters: Homo antecessor: the explorer; Fauna and flora in Atapuerca; Technological evolution; Death rites; Neolithic Period; Pre-historic Humanity [Co-ordinator: Carlos Díez Fernández-Lomana] Size: 40x50 cm Ediciones Sierra de Atapuerca 20 Euro. Ediciones Sierra de Atapuerca. 18 Euro Orders: 34-947 256061

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Atapuerca has been declared a World heritage site by UNESCO. The first step towards its protection and future conservation must, in the words of coordinator Carlos Díez, begin with its understanding, not only in scientific circles but also through its dissemination amongst the general public. Useful for school groups, enthusiasts and all those with a passing interest or who have simply asked themselves about the past.