African Exodus: the Origins of Modern Humanity

Chris Stringer and Robin McKie


Review by Janet Fletcher

African Exodus provides a vehicle for Stringer and McKie to continue some of the themes seen in In Search of the Neanderthals (Chris Stringer and Clive Gamble, Thames and Hudson, 1993) and to exercise Stringer's interpretation of the evolutionary origins of anatomically modern humans.

This is clearly a book intended to reach a far wider audience than those already familiar with the controversy over the origins of modern humans. Aimed at an interested audience who lack background in this branch of palaeoanthropology, it largely presents a well guided walk through human evolutionary history, documenting both the scientific evidence and the controversy surrounding the enigma of our immediate ancestry. In this some chapters inevitably succeed better than others.

Chapter 1 introduces us to the Kibish hominid, dating to around 130,000 years ago and yet "clearly identifiable as Homo sapiens, our own species" (p3) and the book is neatly rounded by tying together the Kibish fossil with Alex Haley's search for his roots. "He [the Kibish hominid] is us, and we are him" (p234). This assertion of the 'oneness' of our species is a message that prevails throughout the book and strikes a timely and appealing chord of empathy for those of us who had to suffer the rampant xenophobia engendered by the European Football Championship.

By Chapter 6 we are introduced to the crux of the Out of Africa hypothesis, the evidence from mitochondrial and nuclear DNA. Though not entirely the fault of the authors, this is one of the chapters that doesn't quite succeed. DNA is a complicated subject to present and more so in relation to the theory being put forward here. The chapter fails in part because of an attempt to oversimplify, but it also fails because the invective against individual proponents of the opposing, Multi-Regionalist theory, leaves one feeling uncomfortable, and may possibly mislead those unfamiliar with the subject. Wolpoff and Thorne, two leading multiregionalists quoted by Stringer and McKie, do not espouse the racist 'apartheid' standpoint. Rather, they argue "Human evolution happened everywhere because every area was always part of the whole" (p137).

However, Stringer and McKie quite successfully bring out some of the conclusions DNA appears to be making about our species, stressing both our uniform origins and the indications that racial characteristics are in fact a very recent feature to emerge as part of the development of Homo sapiens. In fact the attacks by the authors on racism (and to a lesser extent, sexism), and particularly the academic perpetrators of it, are undertaken with almost crusading zeal. The notion that the concept of separate racial development provides fuel for racist fires to an extent explains the vigour with which the Multi-Regionalist theory is attacked. Stringer and McKie dismiss the racist theories by thorough and effective presentation of the facts surrounding the myths. The dominant theme of the book is a
dismissal of the arguments that divide humans on the grounds of race, colour and intelligence, and in this regard it succeeds.

There is a crescendo of praise for human achievement in Chapter 9, which presents an exploration and celebration of the technological achievements that spring from the intellectual and aesthetic development of *Homo sapiens*. The chapter also presents a clear discussion of the evidence for this development from a social, cultural and neurological perspective, and succeeds without over-sentimentalising the issues.

The final chapter provides a contrast to Chapter 9, reviewing our propensity and ability for destruction, both of ourselves and our environment, while explaining how our achievements are also negative. We have travelled in time and technology but cannot escape our evolutionary legacy because that legacy is not far enough in the past to cease to influence our behaviour. "We may simply have stopped short of the full changes needed to control our own Promethean creations"(p 229).

The book as a whole is informative and entertaining, with a personal tour of European hominid collections (Chapter 4) via a battered Morris Minor, accompanied by tent and wife, providing an amusing if somewhat distracting insight into Chris Stringer's passion for his subject.

One major criticism is aimed not at the authors, but at the publishers. I like pictures in a book, and my personal enjoyment was largely spoiled by the very limited space allocated on the pages where drawings and photographs were placed, about a quarter of a page. As a consequence of this limited space, some of the drawings and all of the photographs were ill-defined and quite pointless. The format appeared to be either a quarter or whole page and no compromise. The illustrations were not on the whole essential to the understanding of the text and the format would have benefitted from situating the plates collectively at some point and allocating at least a half page format to the photographs.

Despite the problems encountered with some aspects of presentation, *African Exodus* is an excellent read for scientist and layperson alike. Enjoy.

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