

ANOTHER KIND OF HUMAN: RESEARCHING NEANDERTHAL ARCHAEOLOGY

July 29, 2011 Becky Wragg Sykes Day of Archaeology, Day of Archaeology 2011, Finds, Prehistory Belgium, Britain, Digging for Britain, France, La Cotte de St Brelade, lithic analysis, Lithic Studies Society, Mousterian, Neanderthal, Neanderthal extinction hypotheses, Neanderthals, Paleolithic, Prehistoric Society, Recent single origin hypothesis, Research, researcher, Saint Brelade, stone tools, Upper Paleolithic

As I described in my first post, my research is on the last Neanderthals, a field I find fascinating through the ‘alternate universe’ of hunter-gatherer adaptations and lifeways they represent as a different kind of human. I’m a lithics geek, which means I study, in loving detail, the stone tools that Neanderthals made and which were fundamental to their everyday lives. My PhD involved looking at the evidence from Britain of the re-occupation by Neanderthals of this landscape around 55,000 years ago, after they had been absent for about a hundred thousand years. This meant in practice spending a year visiting a LOT of museums, to record information from over 1000 stone tools. This might sound like a big number, but in fact it’s a very small sample when you’re talking about sites which probably span over 10,000 years in time. Big French cave sites of the same period can have ten times that amount of lithics from a single occupation layer.

After this recording phase was another year (or two...) of data crunching to find out what the stones were telling me. The results showed that Neanderthals moving into Britain during a very unstable climatic period (termed Marine Isotope Stage 3; we’re now at Stage 1, and the last proper ice age was Stage 2) were living very mobile lives, with a highly organized technological strategy that promoted flexibility in their tool production and maintenance. So where am I now two years later, on 29th July in 2011?

At the moment I have several different projects, and multi-tasking is definitely something as a researcher you need to get to grips with. I've just got back from three-weeks of fieldwork in Jersey, as part of a really exciting project called the [Quaternary Archaeology and Environments of Jersey](#), which will be featured in the first episode of the new Digging for Britain tv series. Although Jersey is a small island, it has a fantastically rich archaeological record. We're interested in the hunter-gatherers who lived there from the Neanderthals right up to the people who lived in the forested landscapes after the last ice age. My part in the project is to study the lithics (stone tools) from the upper layers of one of the most important Neanderthal sites in the world, a collapsed cave/ravine called La Cotte de St Brelade.



La Cotte de St Brelade, Jersey. The original excavations were underneath and behind the rock arch, originally thought to be a cave until the roof of sediment collapsed in the early 20th century.

Despite being periodically excavated and researched for over 100 years, La Cotte still has a lot to tell us, not only from new work at the site we've been undertaking the past two summers, but by looking again at the enormous collections of stone tools and animal bones. We are applying cutting edge methods of analysis to answer important questions about Neanderthals, including

whether how they were hunting, and what kinds of activities were going on at the site and in the wider landscape.

The lithics I am working on represent the last Neanderthals to live at La Cotte. They were excavated in the early 20th century, which means that much of the contextual information we would record now was lost. But the collection of around 4500 stone artefacts still represents a really important resource not only for understanding what Neanderthals were doing at the site and how they were connected to their surrounding landscapes, but what the relationship between them and other Neanderthals in Britain, France and Belgium at the same time was. I'm using methods I applied in my PhD to extract the maximum information from this collection.



Tiny flint core from La Cotte de St Brelade, showing Neanderthal economics in action

Although I've received some funding from the [Prehistoric Society](#) and [Lithic Studies Society](#) which has covered some of the costs to start recording the stone tool collections, today I am working on starting a new application for a Postdoctoral position which would mean I could join a University department and work on the project full time for two years. Several deadlines are coming up soon, so I'm re-writing past applications to update them based on what I achieved this July.

My next post will be about another exciting project I'm working on, which uses isotopic analysis to study the migration of ice age animals and work out how Neanderthals might have been moving around the landscape to hunt them.