

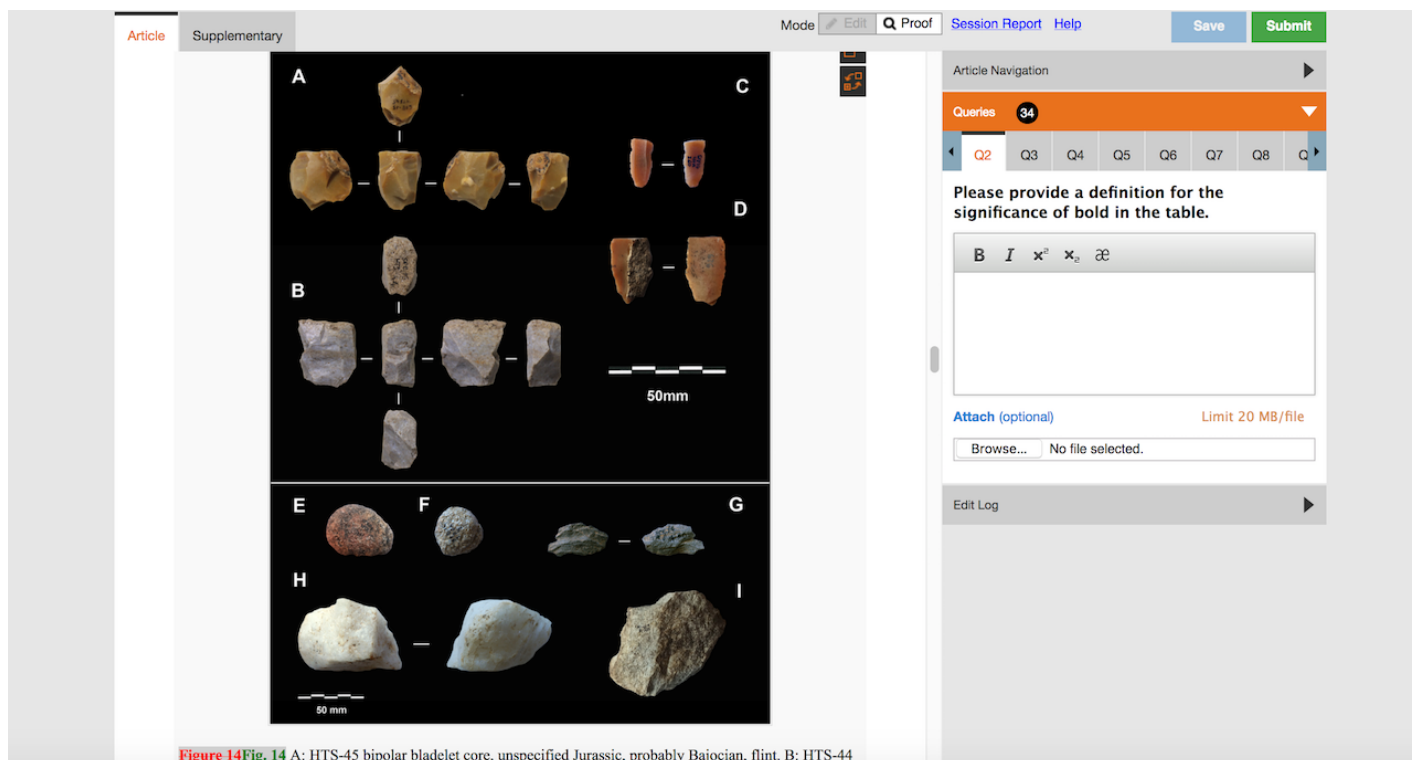
# FROM STREAMS TO DELTAS: NAVIGATING ARCHAEOLOGY CAREERS, 5 YEARS ON

July 28, 2017 Becky Wragg Sykes Day of Archaeology 2017, Digital Archaeology, Explore Posts, Finds, France, Illustration, Landscape Archaeology, Prehistory, Public Archaeology, Publishing books, career in archaeology, exhibition, lithic, Neanderthals, Prehistoric, raising horizons, trowel blazers

In 2012, five years ago, I wrote what was to turn out rather amazingly as **the most popular post** thus far for the Day of Archaeology project. I can't know all the reasons why people might have felt attracted to my words, but the idea of needing a "Plan B" in our careers must have resonated.

My annual posts since then track a career path of unexpected turns – I'm probably somewhere on Plan E by now, although that makes it all sound rather more controlled and systematic than the organic reality. Things have certainly gone pretty off-road from the seemingly obvious, standard route that 18-year-old me understood took place, should one be lucky enough to progress from an undergraduate degree to the dreamed-about status of lecturer and researcher. Maybe I was naive, but I don't think I was alone, and my 2012 post tried to see the positive sides to a confusing (and at times disheartening) outcome.

Five years on, I've realised that this untenured, untethered, and often uncertain situation is the new normal, for me and many others in archaeology. Winning an incredibly prestigious postdoc wasn't enough to guarantee an academic position or even other research grants, and I'm not the only one who is now technically unemployed, but somehow working full time. So for this final year, join me at the helm to see what my working life looks like, doing archaeology in many different ways.



*Exotic flints from the silcrete quarry workshop*

First task of the day is checking the proofs of a journal article which was accepted a couple of days ago. It reports the results of my postdoc fieldwork (covered for Day of Archaeology in 2015 [here](#)) and subsequent analysis of the stone tools from a prehistoric silcrete source and quarry-workshop in the Massif central, south east France. This was a really challenging site to excavate and study, as while hugely abundant (there are probably over 500,000 knapped objects), the technology is very informal, making dating activity very difficult. We did however find some possible hints of direct extraction from the bedrock using pits, as well as some extremely interesting flint artefacts that were what we call 'exotic': imported to the site from four different flint sources up to 70 km away. It would have been nice to know when this was happening, so we could tie it into the archaeological record for different prehistoric periods in the region – I was especially hoping for some evidence of Neanderthal lithic transport- but the sample we recovered did not allow us to do that. Still, I'm really proud of the paper, especially as it's part of a special issue in the journal all about silcrete use around the world, which I co-edited.

Once the proofs are all approved, my next job is catching up on correspondence for multiple related projects linked to my work with [TrowelBlazers](#), an organisation focused on cheerleading women in archaeology, geology and palaeontology. The past year my focus has mostly been on our [Raising Horizons](#) exhibition (which we were busy planning in [the last post for Day of Archaeology](#)). As a collective of four women, we each have evolved different areas of responsibility to develop what TrowelBlazers does, which means we can all take ownership of what excites us most, while benefiting hugely from brainstorming, positive critiques and endless support of each other's work (not to epic and hilarious email threads). It's the most continually fun and inspiring work I've done as an archaeologist, and I'm incredibly proud of what we achieved with Raising Horizons, one of my two babies of 2016 (the other being an actual *Homo sapiens* infant). We're most of the way through a UK tour for the exhibition, having successfully crowdfunded the entire enterprise thanks to the fantastic engagement and generosity of our community. I'm working on contract documentation and final planning for three upcoming showings at the British Science Festival, the Lapworth Museum in Birmingham, and the annual conference of the Palaeontological Association (one of our major sponsors).



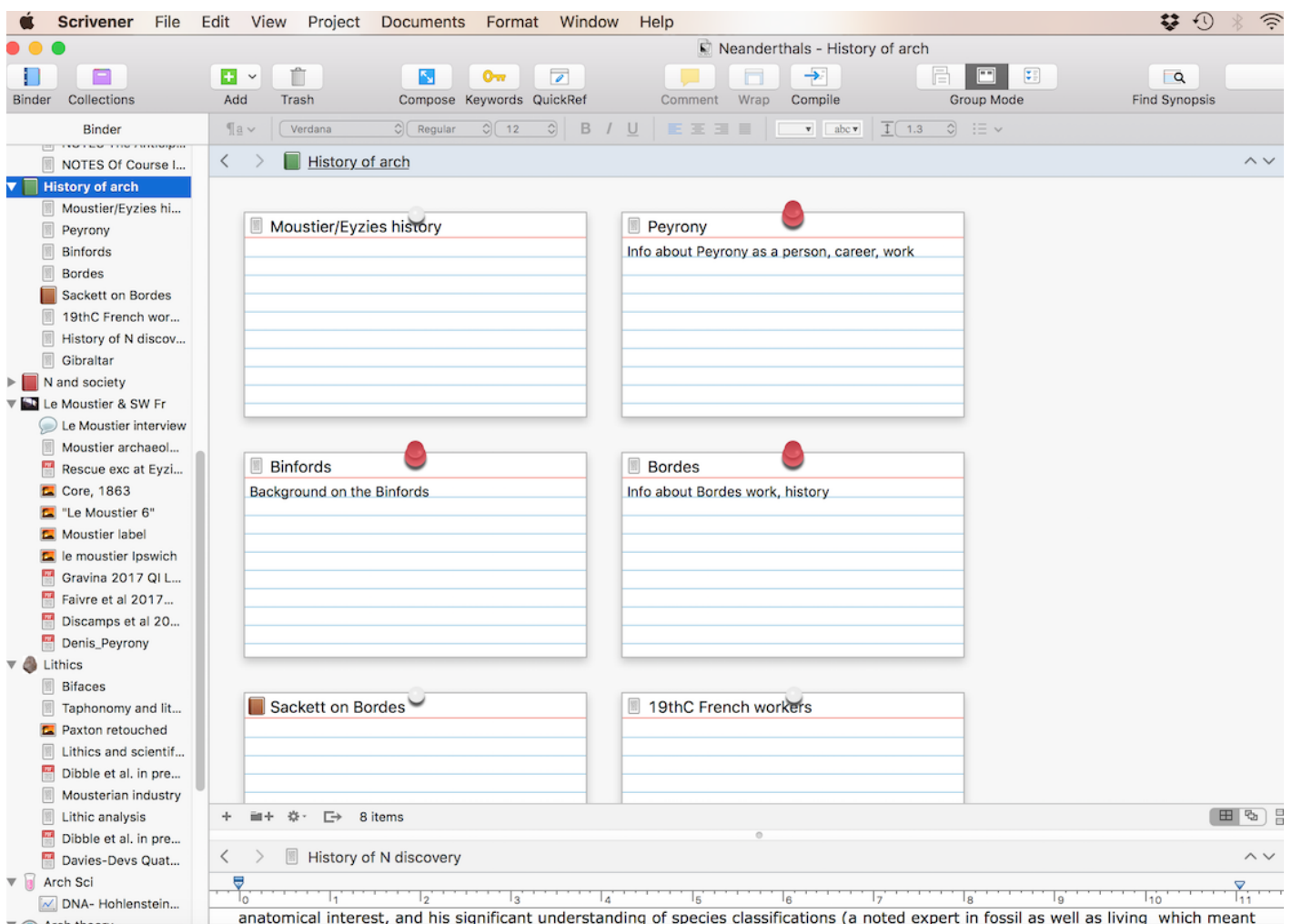
*At the Raising Horizons exhibition launch, February 2017*

After the Raising Horizons admin is out of the way, I can get a bit creative in thinking about two potential new projects linked to TrowelBlazers: first a consultation on working with a hugely significant archaeological site in the UK to tell the story of the women who worked there, and second, mapping out possibilities for a collaborative grant application to create an entirely new exhibition on particular women who made key contributions to both science and society. I'll be having skype meetings for both these projects next week, so the main task is preparing for those conversations. Project management and exhibition work is not something I had thought much about before the chance opportunity to develop



Raising Horizons appeared, but it turns out it's something I love (fascinating deep research, coupled with creative connections and juxtapositions), and am really good at.

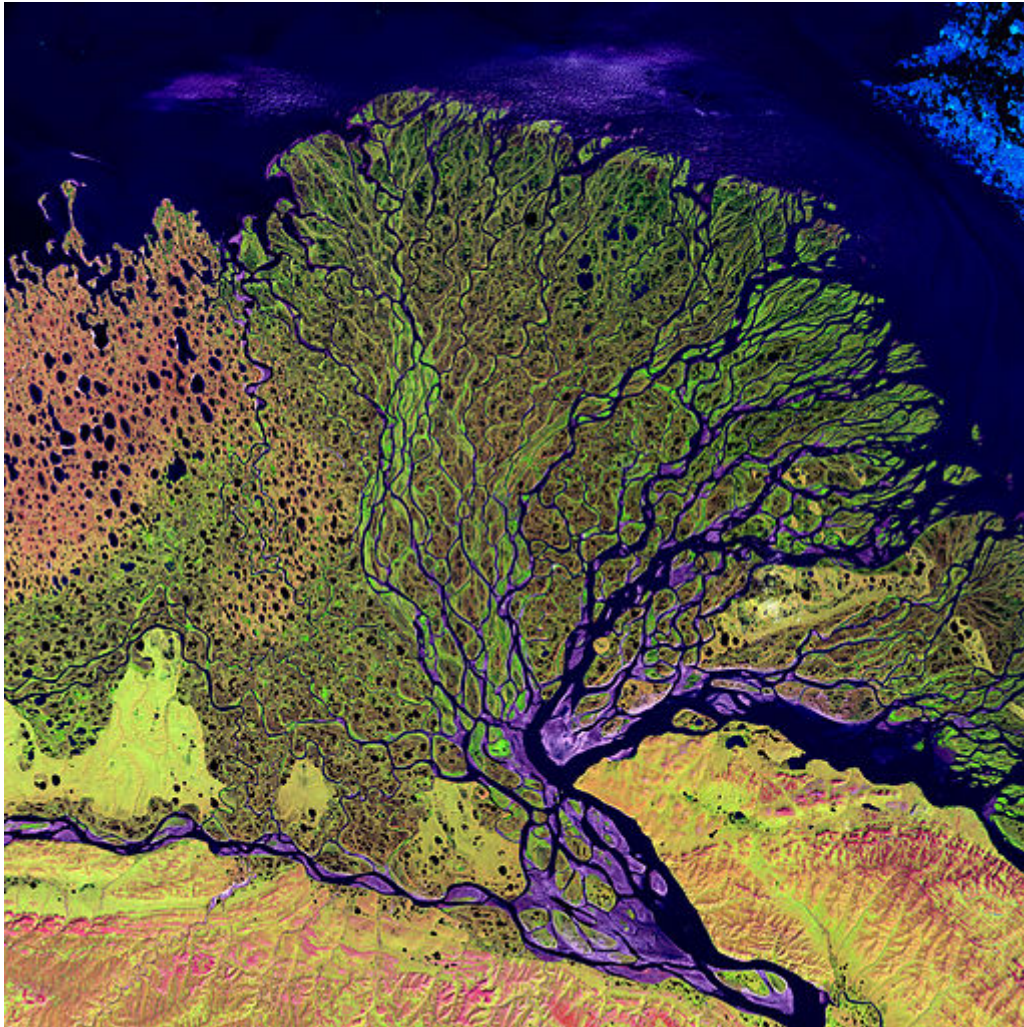
After a lunch break (with the luxury of working close enough to home to visit my family and share a meal), my afternoon is all about the Big Book Project. An earlier contract with Sigma Science for a book on birds in prehistory is temporarily on ice, but my incredible editor is marvelously supportive, and so I have a second contract for a popular science extravaganza on my official area of expertise, the Neanderthals. With the manuscript due this autumn, most of my days are focused on delving into the nitty gritty of their archaeology, and packing in all the unexpected and compelling stuff we know about this species, plus *how* we know, and why we seem so obsessed with them. It's a dream project, and right now we're close to being able to share the title which is immensely exciting (and also terrifying, in a rollercoaster-over-the-edge way).



*Snapshot of book writing; Scrivener software totally recommended!*

Can what I do now still be called archaeology? I've not done any fieldwork for the past two years, and I have a bad case of trowel itch. Yet even without an active excavation or current analytical research project, all my time and energy is spent on archaeology in one way or another. Increasingly that includes working to improve it as a discipline, both for the people in this field, and to make what we do mean something, beyond intellectual curiosity. The answer to my question in 2012, "once an archaeologist...?" is definitely, yes, always. My biggest lesson since starting out is that everything in archaeological careers

is about luck. But, you also have the ability to load your own dice, and the more throws you give yourself, the better chance you have of rolling a good score. My own professional course been less of a single-stream, focused trajectory, and more of a braided river delta, where the lie of the land means diversifying expertise, taking chances when they come, and reaching the horizon in more ways than you imagined.



*Lena River Delta. Image: Public domain, NASA, via Wikimedia Commons*