Storied landscapes makes us (Modern) Human: Landscape socialisation in the Palaeolithic and consequences for the archaeological record

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ABSTRACT

The unusual nature of the Neanderthal archaeological record has attracted the attention of archaeologists for the past 150 years. On the one hand, the technical skill apparent in their lithic technology, the practice of symbolic cultural behaviours (such as burials), and their successful survival in harsh environmental conditions for more than 200,000 years demonstrate the adaptive success and underlying humanity of the Neanderthal populations. On the other hand, the apparent lack of abundant and repeated use of symbolic material culture has resulted in a number of researchers arguing that these populations were largely incapable of symbolism – a conclusion with significant implications for social organisation. This paper reviews ideas regarding the use of 'place' or 'landscape' by Neanderthals and argues that the identified differences between the archaeological records of Neanderthals and late Pleistocene Modern Humans is not so much the result of significant variance in cognitive capacities, but rather the use of contrasting approaches to interaction with the physical landscape. 'Landscape socialisation' is a Modern Human universal, but what if Neanderthals did not participate in this kind of landscape interaction? Would this difference in behaviour result in the apparently contradictory archaeological record which has been created? The ideas presented in this paper are drawn together as a hypothesis to be developed and tested.

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Introduction

Adequately explaining the contradictory nature of the Neanderthal archaeological record has preoccupied archaeologists in recent times (e.g. Caron et al., 2011; d'Errico, 2003; d'Errico et al., 1998, 2003; Hovers and Belfer-Cohen, 2006; Klein, 2003; Mellars, 2005, 2010; Stringer and Gamble, 1993; White, 2001; Zilhão, 2007; Zilhão and d'Errico, 1999; Zilhão et al., 2006, 2010).

On the one hand, there is evidence that Neanderthals were cognitively capable of language and manipulating symbolic material culture as demonstrated by their use of pigments (Bordes, 1961, 1972; Cârciumaru and Ţuţuianu-Cârciumaru, 2009; Cârciumaru et al., 2002; d'Errico and Soressi, 2002; Marshack, 1976; Mellars, 1996; Roebroeks et al., 2012; Vertés, 1964; Villa and d'Errico, 2001; Zilhão et al., 2010), abstract markings on various raw materials (Bednarik, 1992; Capitan and Peyrony, 1921; Crémades et al., 1995; d'Errico et al., 2008; d'Errico and Villa, 1997; Fiore et al., 2004; Gaudzinski, 2004; Leonardi, 1983, 1988; Marshack, 1976, 1989, 1990, 1996; Mellars, 1986, 1996), personal ornamentation (both bone and shell beads as well as the use of feathers) (d'Errico and Villa, 1997; Mellars, 1996; Mottl, 1951; Peresani et al., 2011;

Zilhão et al., 2010), and burials, some including items suggested to constitute grave goods (Akazawa et al., 1995; Hovers et al., 1995, 1996, 2000; Mellars, 1986, 1988, 1996; Riel-Salvatore and Clark, 2001; Senut, 1985; Smirnov, 1989; Solecki, 1971, 1975; Stewart, 1977; Valladas et al., 1986, 1987, 1988; Zilhão, 2007). This material culture based evidence is supported by anatomical remains which also indicate that Neanderthals were physically capable of speech (Arensburg et al., 1989).

On the other hand, however, these archaeological remains (while present) are found to be significantly less abundant in the Neanderthal archaeological record than in contemporary (or near contemporary) archaeological records of Modern Human populations located in Africa, Eurasia and Australasia (e.g. Chase and Dibble, 1987; Duff et al., 1992; Langley, in press; Mellars, 2005). These identified differences cannot be solely explained by taphonomic processes, archaeological sampling strategies, and/or changes in demographic pressure, and thus, the presence of symbolic material culture but the lack of an abundant and repeated use of these items has created confusion over how this archaeological record is best interpreted.

In this paper I will draw together and highlight a number of ideas concerning Neanderthal social behaviour which have implications for explaining the unique character of the Neanderthal archaeological record, but which have generally been posed piecemeal by a number of authors (Arsuaga, 2003; Donald, 1991;

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Gamble, 1999; Gosden, 1994; Lewis-Williams, 2002; Mellars, 1996; Mithen, 2005) rather than systematically. When drawn together, these notions, which concern how Neanderthal individuals and groups socially interacted with the surrounding physical environment, add up to an interesting research agenda meriting further work.

In more detail, this paper will discuss how the construction of the archaeological record may be effected by a 'story-less' interaction with the physical environment (by Neanderthals) as opposed to the meaning imbued ('storied') landscape approach created by Modern Humans. Although it has long been recognised that differences in the structure of alliances and the changes these networks underwent throughout the Palaeolithic would have varying consequences for the patterning in material culture and consequently the archaeological record (e.g. Gamble, 1982), the social relationships people constructed with their landscape ('landscape socialisation') and its archaeological consequences has only ever been briefly addressed in the Palaeolithic literature. Moreover, the articulation of these concepts to the archaeology of Neanderthals has never been clearly made.

The aim of this paper, therefore, is not to impose yet another dichotomy between Neanderthal and Modern Human behaviour, but to consider another variation of human behaviour never before seriously considered in the Palaeolithic literature.

'Socialised Landscapes' versus 'Landscape Socialisation'

First, the important distinction between the 'socialised landscapes' and 'landscape socialisation' concepts must be made. While these two aspects of social interaction are interrelated, they are also separate concepts and have distinct and differing implications for the formation of the archaeological record (Fig. 1).

Socialised landscapes are people to people interactions woven into networks which are mapped onto and over the physical landscape and which join various locales together through paths and track ways (Gamble, 1998; also see Conkey, 1984). These networks connect individuals and groups (of various sizes) to each other through the use of shared cultural values and/or norms. These networks primarily act to minimise risk during localised resource stress, as well as provide access to mates, information and resources (Gamble, 1999).

Gamble (1998) has argued that social landscapes appeared between 100,000 and 60,000 years ago and consisted of social networks of various sizes: 3–7 persons ('intimate network'), 10–25 persons ('effective network') and 100–400 persons ('extended network') (Gamble, 1999, 2011; Zhou et al., 2004). He explains that information flows along these channels which are defined and maintained through the negotiation of alliances (Gamble, 1991, 1998), and that symbolic resources (including material culture) will be primarily dedicated to the effective and extended networks (as in Wobst's (1977) model of stylistic behaviour).

In Gamble's (1998, pp. 440–441) words, these "paths, rather than the surface area territories which surround them, are the important elements in the forager's socially constructed landscapes". This quote pins down the central difference between social landscapes and landscape socialisation: the former indirectly affected by the physical landscape by being woven over the physical structure of the earth in order to make connections between peoples. The latter, on the other hand, refers to the impregnating of meaning into features of the terrain (mountains, plains, rivers, oceans, night skies, etc.) which then transform into 'landscape' or 'place' (Fig. 1), where these terms are used to describe a locale which while "in the first instance empty of meaning...is transformed into 'place' [or 'landscape'] through human intervention" (Thomas, 2001, p. 174; also see Bender, 2006; Ingold, 1992). Landscape socialisation, then, is the direct social interaction between people and topography where meaning is imbued into the physical features of the terrain by its human viewers and inhabitants.

The process of landscape socialisation begins when a population enters a new geographical area. These people embark on the process of 'landscape learning' in which they locate the distribution of resources and assess accessibility and abundance. These resources, which may constitute a supply of food stuffs, raw materials for tool production, a service provided by other (often skilled) individuals or groups, or even a purely spiritual aspect, will be located at spatially discrete locations ('sites') in the landscape.

Having located these resources, the incoming peoples then begin building a social relationship with each 'site', impregnating meaning into each location and its resources resulting in the construction of rules and stories tied to each specific site. This process then allows for the regulation of access to both raw materials (foods and tool making materials) and locations perceived to have
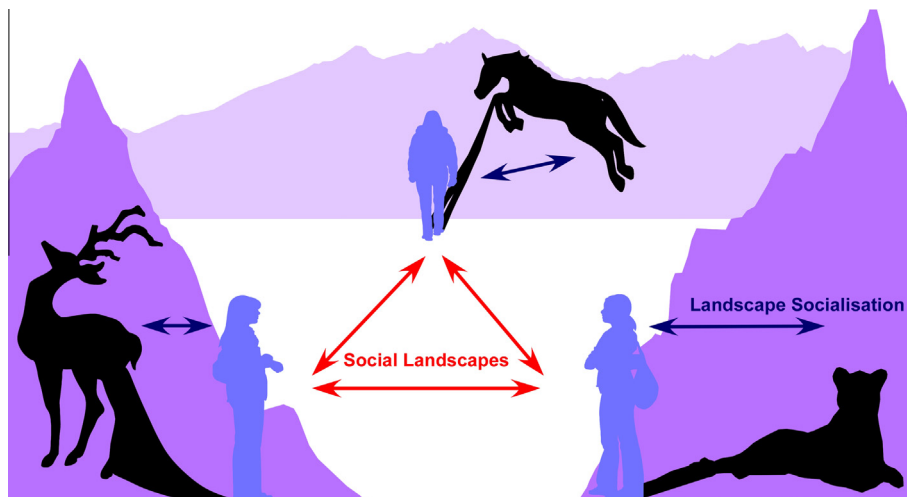

Fig. 1. Distinction between 'social landscapes' and 'landscape socialisation'. The red arrows between people representing the social networks laid *over* the landscape (social landscapes) and the blue arrows indicating the relationship between people and their landscape (landscape socialisation). Here the zoomorphised shadow of each individual is simply used to represent differing stories and identities imbued into each landscape and not 'tribes' with different animal totems, etc.