



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/shpsc

The problematic construction of 'Palaeolithic Man': The Old Stone Age and the difficulties of the comparative method, 1859–1914



Chris Manias

Department of History, University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9PL, UK

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Available online 4 March 2015

Keywords:
Anthropology
Prehistory
Evolution
Primitivism
Development
Britain

ABSTRACT

The growth of a prehistoric timescale was one of the most dramatic developments in nineteenth-century ideas of humanity, massively extending the assumed course of human development and placing it within the deep chronologies of geological time. A dominant motif linking prehistory with wider studies of humanity and notions of historical change was the 'comparative method'—the idea that modern 'savages' were analogous to prehistoric Europeans, and that the two sets of peoples could explain one another. The importance of this mode of reasoning has been well-studied, and shown to have had great significance for concepts of progress and social evolution. What has been less investigated are cases when the comparative method broke down, and where 'modern savages' and 'prehistoric man' seemed to be dissimilar and analogies hard to make. This paper examines how a series of authors engaged with problems in the comparative method when they attempted to place human development within this deep prehistoric past. In doing so, it highlights the changing interactions between the Victorian deep time sciences and the 'sciences of man,' and how notions of European prehistory and modern 'primitives' often rested on a notion of variability in the 'savage' condition.

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When citing this paper, please use the full journal title *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences*

1. Introduction

One of the most important modes in Victorian ethnographic and social evolutionist understandings of humans and their place within historical (and increasingly naturalistic frameworks) was the so-called 'comparative method.' This was a notion which assumed that all human groups across time and space could be slotted onto the same scale of development, which moved through a series of stages from the 'lowest savagery' to modern, industrial civilization. It followed from this that peoples judged to be on similar positions on the scale could be used to 'shed light' on one another. The comparative method has been presented as a key component of the growing dominance of social evolutionist models in the mid-nineteenth century, which increasingly rested on 'ladder theories' of human development and linear models of social and material progress, and as deeply significant—even essential—to

Victorian concepts of 'savagery' (and its key binary of 'civilization').¹ Comparative analogies were widely used, not only to comprehend the evidence of social and technological development, but also abstract issues around the essentials of human nature, ranging from toolmaking to numeracy.² This form of reasoning bridged understandings of past and present 'primitive' populations, defining them within the same framework, and relegated modern 'savages' to the past as superseded phases of development.³ Analogies linking ancient and modern 'primitives' were far from new in the Victorian period: similar comparisons, such as between ancient Britons and native Americans, or between the migrating tribes at the fall of the Roman empire and central Asian nomads, had been prevalent in both early modern antiquarianism⁴ and the conjectural histories of the Enlightenment.⁵ However, the growth of a new field of human prehistory from the 1850s and 1860s onwards, which sought to combine evidence from archaeology, palaeontology, geology and ethnology to reconstruct a vast prehistoric human past within the geological eras, drove these analogies with a new force and into a new structure.⁶ Not only did the synthetic

E-mail address: Chris.maniash@manchester.ac.uk.

nature of these studies depend on comparing and reconciling different forms of evidence, but the fragmentary records of European prehistory often left significant ‘gaps,’ which led to a search for additional analogical material.

Despite this use and mid-century invigoration, the comparative method was not entirely unproblematic: linking up archaeological evidence with ethnographic objects and the accounts of travellers and ethnographers, not to mention the wide debates over concepts of ‘savagery’ and social evolution in Victorian society, was not always straightforward. Indeed, the key nineteenth-century texts promoting comparative analyses were littered with statements of the difficulties posed by the evidence, numerous conspicuous absences in its actual use and variable assessments of different types of ‘savages,’ which made clear equivalences difficult. There were also numerous conceptual issues around comparing modern ‘savages’ with prehistoric peoples. The almost unimaginable length of the geological chronologies of prehistory, which went down to the absolute lowest stages of development, meant that the ladder of human progress needed to be stretched almost to breaking point. Additionally, the prehistoric environment presented by geology and palaeontology, which showed an alien Ice Age landscape inhabited by mammoths, cave lions and other strange beasts, made it difficult to ascertain exactly which ‘modern savages’ were most likely to be analogous to prehistoric Europeans. Explaining what linked ancient and modern representatives of the ‘primitive’ state, and how and why they differed, became an important means of engaging with the more ambiguities over the earliest human development.

This paper approaches the Victorian comparative method from this angle, examining how it was used by some of its leading practitioners, but focussing on instances where analogies between modern and prehistoric ‘savages’ either did not seem to fit, or where different types of ‘primitive’ people were judged as quite distinct from one another. It will move through: the works of Lubbock and Daniel Wilson in the period around the ‘establishment of human antiquity’ in the 1850s and 1860s; William Boyd Dawkins and George Worthington Smith, who in the later-nineteenth century attempted to deepen comparative approaches by aligning them with palaeontology and new archaeological methods; and finally William Johnson Sollas, whose 1911 work *Ancient Hunters and their Modern Representatives* illustrates the expansion but also difficulties of the method in the face of expanding studies of human evolution and anthropological research on non-European populations. This of course only gives a partial impression of the field of human prehistory in this period. As has been shown by Anne O’Connor and Bowdoin van Riper,⁷ many of these studies were disseminated through scholarly association, journal publications, museum displays, and letters and unpublished writings. Also, as illustrated in the large European historiography on these matters, these developments occurred in a framework which was as international as it was specifically British.⁸ This piece also leaves open the interesting and important issue (certainly worth further study) of how mid- and late-Victorian ethnographic observers and travel writers used comparisons informed by European prehistory in their accounts of modern peoples. However, this focus permits a clear set of case-studies which were predicated around comparative methodologies. The works investigated, often intended as ‘state of the field’ presentations, collated and reconciled large amounts of evidence, and the issues of aligning diverse material came to the fore. This will permit a broader discussion of how a series of Victorian thinkers, with different disciplinary backgrounds and emphases, attempted to historicize ‘primitive’ humanity through interpreting the relations between social evolution, climate and environment, and assumed racial and biological characters. The tensions between these areas illustrates that while the comparative method certainly

bolstered ‘ladder theories’ of human development and placed ‘savage’ humans within a unified condition, it also forced a conception of how differences between human groupings arose. Within the often linear progressive concepts of history involved in these studies, there was also a continual awareness of differentiation and variety within different states and stages.

2. Ethnographic observation and prehistoric comparison: John Lubbock and Daniel Wilson

As noted above, the extensive use of the comparative method depended on the growth of a concept of human prehistory in the middle of the nineteenth century.⁹ The classic narrative places the years 1859–1861 as the fulcrum period for this, in which a series of finds in France and Britain showed the presence of human stone tools in ancient geological strata alongside the remains of extinct animals.¹⁰ In Britain, these discoveries were presented within the major learned associations and were rapidly accepted within intellectual circles. This took human existence out of the 6000 years of Scripturally deduced chronology and into the much vaster reaches of the geological eras. However, while the idea of human prehistory was domesticated quite quickly, there remained significant difficulties within this new research. While the archaeological excavation of stone tools was crucial to the establishment of the field, there was very little other evidence of prehistoric humans other than these artifacts before the late-1860s. This meant that all reconstructions of prehistoric lifestyles needed to rest on basic forms of material culture, with only a small number of skeletal remains and habitation sites giving corroborating information.

Conceptions of prehistoric Europeans also combined with a general interest in ethnography and the patterns of ‘savage life’ in this period, which were extensively discussed through textual sources such as travel literature and within ethnological, geographical and anthropological associations. In these years, conceptions of ‘savagery,’ the primitive and human difference in general were in something of a state of flux. The institutions devoted to studying these matters were undergoing considerable redefinition in the 1860s, particularly with the famous conflict between the ‘Anthropological’ and ‘Ethnological’ associations in London, and wider debates on how best to conceptualise and study modern human diversity.¹¹ Owing to these shifts, there is something of a historiographical question around the extent to which traditional ‘civilizational’ ideas informed by religious conceptions and Enlightenment stadial theories were being replaced by harder racist notions drawing from sharpened colonial divisions, more deterministic conceptions of human biological difference, and new techniques derived from physical anthropology.¹² This ensured that when scholars turned to comparative analogies between prehistoric and modern peoples, they needed to reconcile not only problems of evidence, but also conceptual issues around what human difference actually implied, and how culture and civilization interacted with ‘race.’

Comparative approaches to the deepest human past were therefore bound up in the ‘Victorian time revolution’ and ethnographic discussions of the ‘primitive.’ And indeed, these issues were closely engaged with by the two scholars most responsible for promoting the term ‘prehistory’ itself. The first of these to be investigated here is the Scottish antiquary Daniel Wilson (1816–1892). Wilson was the son of an Edinburgh engraver who had risen through the ranks of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland to become the director of the society’s museum, where he came particularly under the influence of Scandinavian approaches to archaeology and museum arrangement (leading most directly to his adoption of the Christian Thomsen’s schema of Stone, Bronze and Iron ages to define archaeological development). His 1851

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