

Where do we come from, and how?

Nitecki, M.H. & Nitecki, D.H. (eds) 1994. *Origins of anatomically modern humans*. 341 pp, 20 text-figs, 17 tables. Plenum Press, New York.

This volume of the 'Interdisciplinary Contributions to Archaeology' stems from the Spring Systematics Symposium held in the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago in May, 1991. This symposium gathered most of the leading authorities in palaeoanthropology, who presented their views on current evidence, and attempted to fit them into some general synthesis (though often differing significantly from author to author). Despite its composite nature, the volume forms a consistent whole, thanks to the arrangement of contributions (by 19 authors) and editors' introductions to each section of the book (and the introductory chapter by R.G. Klein) which helped to link them together.

Among the main topics discussed is the interpretation of Middle and Late Palaeolithic fossil evidence, especially in the Mediterranean region. The old question of biological and cultural relationships between the Neanderthals and anatomically modern humans still seems to be far from resolved. The elucidation of the nature of the Middle to Late Palaeolithic transition in Western Europe, in Levant and elsewhere, requires further studies, but many interesting insights can be deduced from what is already at hand. New dating techniques (thermoluminescence and electron spin resonance, filling the gap between applicability of radiocarbon and uranium methods) and progress in radiocarbon methods clarify the chronology of the transition. New sites and more complex analyses of the old ones reveal new data on tool making and use, as well as of the living habits of Late Pleistocene hominids. Together with refined anatomical information, they allow for a new, more complete image of the Neanderthals' unique adaptations and survival strategy in harsh, periglacial conditions, as well as of the possible reasons of their rather stagnating culture and subsequent disappearance (contributions by A.J. Jelinek, C. Farizy, O. Soffer).

The volume also presents up-to-date versions of the two main theories explaining our emergence: the 'Out of Africa' (including 'mitochondrial Eve') theory (R.L. Cann *et al.*), as well as a short synopsis of its historical development (C.B. Stringer), and the multiregional human evolution theory (M.H. Wolpoff *et al.*). Theoretical models of speciation and hybridization of human populations within the framework of the latter model are confronted with the fossil record (T. Simmons, F.H. Smith).

The concluding chapter by F.C. Howell offers a review of important skeletal fossil finds of *Homo*, including a number from less known Asian sites, provided with a detailed chronostratigraphic framework, and taxonomic interpretation based on listed anatomical features of particular fossils. This rich factual data base is then used as a starting point to delineate apparent conclusions as well as pointing to still unresolved questions in need of further research.

The volume is a worthy review of the current state of the main schools of palaeoanthropological thought of the mid-1990s, a useful guide through the plethora of human evolution models proposed in the last few decades, and a valuable bibliographical source of original works. The book shows clearly how much must still be learned about our past before a wide consensus can be reached. It is recommended to all those palaeontologists, evolutionary biologists, and others with some theoretical background in these disciplines who share at least the theoretical interest in the puzzle of the origin of our own species.