

MAN THE HUNTER OR MAN THE SCAVENGER?

By

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The great majority of people would take considerable pride in being able to identify personages of eminence in their ancestral lines. Some people have this feeling in such excess that they invent new family trees for themselves, suitably decorated with luminaries. Conversely, who would not be bothered if he found the perches on his ancestral tree bedecked with villains?

Such personal feelings are mirrored on a large scale when humanity reflects on its own ancestry.

About 140 years ago Darwin and Wallace published their revolutionary theory of evolution by natural selection. One of the proposals of this theory is that mankind's immediate ancestor was an ape-like creature. While the theory was warmly welcomed by many biologists and other scientists capable of appreciating the powerful evidence on which it stands, it also generated widespread controversy and opposition. The opposition was engendered, at least in part, by the general distaste felt about the idea of being 'descended from an ape'. The Bishop of Oxford must have felt he was 'getting off a cracker' on behalf of many people when he asked Thomas Huxley (a staunch defender of Darwin's theory) in a famous public debate - 'Is it through his grandfather or his grandmother that Dr. Huxley claims descent from an ape?'

Nowadays the general validity of Darwin's theory is widely accepted. Darwin envisaged that hunting was a major activity of the male members of early man (hominids): These men would sally forth from base camps and hunt, armed only with sharp pointed sticks and sharp stone implements. They successfully competed for prey against other predators using their intelligence and speed. After a successful hunt the killed animals were dismembered and brought back to base camp for sharing with the main group. The women of the group mostly stayed around base camp. Many would be pregnant, others nursing babies or minding small children. The women also found time to gather a wide variety of nutritious berries, ground-nuts and tubers that, by and large, formed the staple ongoing diet for the entire group.

This concept of Man The Hunter has always exerted a powerful grip on the imagination. The noble savage, taking from nature just enough to satisfy his needs, and bravely using his wit and speed to compete with other predators is an attractive idea with which it is easy to identify. However, recent evidence paints a different picture of the lifestyle of early man.

A powerful recent criticism of the traditional picture of Man The Hunter is that the details of this picture are too closely informed by the practices of present day hunter-gatherer societies. The habits of such present day tribes must surely differ considerably from those of early man. Modern hunter-gatherers are larger in size than early man, share their environments with fewer large competitors, use fire, often keep domesticated animals such as dogs to help in hunting, and generally display sophisticated ingenuity in coping with stark and primitive conditions. The modern argument holds that it is wrong, indeed racist, to assume that modern 'primitive' tribes, many of whom operate a hunter-gatherer society similar to that previously described for Man The Hunter, are simply unaltered relics of the past. The habits of early man were most likely very different from modern tribes.

The first fossil evidence of early man was unearthed at Neander in Germany in 1856. Neanderthal Man lived 35,000 to 100,000 years ago, and although generally considered to be a separate species (*Homo neanderthalensis*) from ourselves (*Homo sapiens*), nevertheless showed

great similarities to modern humans. Each subsequent major find of hominid fossils was of increasingly greater age - a major find in the 1970s in Ethiopia and Tanzania yielding remains of hominids who lived between 3 and 4 million years ago and classed by many scientists as a species ancestral to all later hominids, including modern man. The fact that fossil remains have been discovered in order of increasing age and the fact that the first remains found - Neanderthal Man - were so similar to modern man, has biased anthropological research in favour of seeking similarities rather than differences between ourselves and our early ancestors.

Research by Professor Pat Shipman, Johns Hopkins University (and others), on fossil remains 1.5 to 2 million years old found in Tanzania is yielding a new picture of our early ancestors. Marks on fossilised animal bones found together with the hominid bones have microscopic characteristics that allows them to be classified either as arising from the action of an animal carnivore, e.g. a tiger, or from the use of sharp stone cutting tools used by early man. Also, if both types of mark are present at the same spot, careful scrutiny can tell which mark was made first.

An analysis was made of the anatomical locations of stone tools marks on the animal bones. The distribution of the marks was markedly different to the patterns found on bones of animals butchered by modern hunter-gatherers. Many of the marks were found in 'illogical' places such as the lower parts of animals legs where there is little or no meat. Few marks were found on bones near major joints where experience with modern tribes shows there are many marks made when the animal is dismembered prior to transportation. Also, in many cases it was seen that, in places where carnivore teeth marks and stone cutting marks coincided, the teeth marks were made first.

All of this evidence is inconsistent with a hunting lifestyle but it does fit a scavenging habit. In other words, our earliest ancestors, instead of directly hunting their own prey, watched and waited on their chance to pick up scraps remaining after other hunting species were finished with their kill. Many of these scraps would be the lean pickings on lower limb bones. The upright stance of the early hominids may have been somewhat accelerated in its development by the scavenging lifestyle. It is particularly suitable mechanically for covering wide areas efficiently while looking for opportunities, and is also particularly good for allowing careful and detailed searches of limited chosen areas.

People are comfortable with the idea of Man The Hunter who seems brave and confident in dealing with his environment. At worst one can identify with him on the basis that 'he was poor but he was honest'. On the other hand, Man The Scavenger seems to lack confidence, to lead a fearful and furtive existence, and is a difficult model to identify with - not nearly 'macho' enough. I must say that I have no difficulty in entertaining the warmest feelings towards the poor devil, who seems to have made the best of difficult circumstances. Evidently the strategy was eminently successful. The proof of this is that I am here writing about it and you are here reading about it.

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