

# 1 The Dawn of Woman

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## The Ascent of Mankind

Two and a half million years ago, as early man surveyed his surroundings, could he ever have guessed that the whole world would one day become his domain? That he himself would become master of it all. Yet he had all ready made the first great step towards that end, for he had learned to master stone. It was two and a half million years ago that man first started chipping away at river pebbles to shape tools, and this allowed him to finally defend himself and his family from predators, as well as gain a means to hunt and kill.

Yet, this small essay of mine is using some very politically incorrect terminology. I dared to say ‘Mankind’, ‘Him’ and ‘His’. This is not the done thing at all, we must not mention genders and sexes when we look at the past; though to be honest, I hardly noticed I had done it, because all the narratives I read as a child were like this. I read about the evolution of man. I learned about when men discovered fire, how men painted on cave walls, how men shaped tools, how men hunted mammoths and how men invented farming and irrigation. I also saw pictures in my books of Australopithecine man evolving into Erectus man, then modern man, all of them very beardy and muscular, and standing increasingly upright.

I remember seeing women too in pictures in the books, sometimes anyway, sat gazing upwards, babies in arms, behind their spear-wielding men-folk. I remember hearing on the radio in the 90s why women had taken such a backseat during our evolution. A helpful American anthropologist (I cannot remember who and have hunted for his comment ever since) had explained that we would have been unable to build and hunt because our breasts would get in the way. Ah, I see. Another worthy expert also said that we were a very important reproductive resource for these busy men. That is good then. Nowadays such talk of the past is very frowned upon, and archaeology texts speak of ‘humans’ and ‘they’ and ‘us’ and ‘ours’ and religiously avoid the dreaded word ‘he’. Some call this ‘political correctness gone mad’. Well, if so, the male-centric terminology is harmless enough, and therefore me switching the term ‘man’ for ‘woman’ in my easy-reading narrative on evolution will be perfectly harmless.

## The Ascent of Woman a guide to the evolution of womankind

Two and a half million years ago, as early woman surveyed her surroundings, could she ever have guessed that the whole world would one day become her domain? That she herself would become master of it all. Yet she had all ready made the first great step towards that end, for she had learned to master stone. It was two and a half million years ago that woman first started chipping away at river pebbles to shape tools, and this allowed her to finally defend herself and her family from predators, as well as gain a means to hunt and kill. Before this point, women probably sheltered in trees, descending only to scavenge unwanted meat, and gather plant foods. Woman was also preyed upon, as can be seen in the

fossil record, and this may have been how she began to stand upright. Ancient woman would have seen predators better if she stood upright in the grasses of the African savannah that was her home. There has been a suggestion that these early women, Australopithecine afarensis, were also using stone tools, after butchery marks were found on dated fossil bones from three and half million years ago in Ethiopia, timing with the presence of the afarensis (McPherron et al. 2010). But by two and a half million years ago, woman was standing upright, running, making stone tools, hunting and experiencing much growth in her brain. However, we do not know if she was yet building huts, wearing clothes or lighting fires because no evidence has been found, but it is not considered to be very likely. Her name was now *Homo habilis*, meaning 'handy-woman'.

A million years later, an exciting change took place. Her brain had dramatically increased in size. Some say the extra protein in meat from her hunting abilities may have caused the growth, or it may have been that the movement of her hands in shaping stone tools spurred the brain to change: the hand movement and language areas of the brain are very closely connected (Ambrose 2001). Her name was now *Homo erectus* (upright woman). In fact, she had already been walking for a long time, but she had started doing some strange new things, for she had discovered fire. This was very important because it meant that she could leave the hot climate of Africa and enter Asia. Without shelters, she needed to light fires on Asian nights to keep warm, and we know from fossils that *erectus* women travelled all over the world, except for the Americas and Australia. At times, the planet would have been much warmer too, and at those times, ancient woman may even have reached the shores of England. East Anglia was supposedly connected by land to Europe then, so it would not have been difficult for these ancient women to get there. Also, *erectus* woman had started shaping her stone tools in a strange new way. They were becoming more and more symmetrical and some experts think this is a sign of the brain getting more developed and even starting to form into left and right hemispheres (Wynn 2002). A symmetrical stone tool like the ones made by ancient woman are known as handaxes. Its shape is called a 'biface'.

### **Woman and her Stone Tool: an ancient and special relationship**

This primitive woman had also become a skilled hunter, and this could tell us something about her developing social abilities. Women would have hunted in groups, and this needed planning and communication. She would have had ways to communicate and plan with the other hunters, and it may be that this was an early sign of human language. No one yet knows though, how or why ancient woman first spoke, but one amusing idea is that she started shouting different angry sounds when hurting her hands while making tools! We do not know if we evolved from *Homo erectus*. It may be that this hominid was a cousin who reached a dead-end and became extinct after being out-competed. The most recently known *Homo erectus* was still alive around 13,000 years ago, on a remote Island called Flores (Brown and Maeda 2009). She and her kind had shrunk to a very small size, which can happen on Islands, and she even hunted miniature elephants. Most interesting of all is that the Island is not known to have been ever connected to land. She must have crossed water to get there, so it could be that *Homo erectus* had even invented rafts. She was

clearly a very capable 'ape-woman' and perhaps we should not under-estimate this interesting cousin and her clever mind. Our own brains are much bigger, but so are our bodies. This ancient woman was very small and short, and when her brain size is calculated as a ratio of her body size, her brain is almost as big as ours (Mithen 2005). In fact, the smallest brains of modern woman are about the same ratio to body size as the largest erectus woman brains.

The next actress on the scene is the *Homo heidelbergensis* (Heidelberg woman). This ancient woman was almost certainly a descendent of the Neanderthals, and she lived in Europe. She may have evolved from the *Homo ergaster* (the 'workwoman'). The *Homo ergaster* is a species that is often viewed as modern woman's direct ancestor, but we cannot be sure if she was. Finding fossils of ancient woman is very much a game of luck, and the chances of ancient woman's skeleton becoming fossilised are rare too. We may never find our true ancestor, but we do have a series of dated fossils that show that apes were changing, that their brains were growing and that they were getting more technological. There may have been many thousands of different species of hominids over this period of time, and only one line, possibly lost in the dark mists of time, resulted in modern woman. *Homo heidelbergensis* is interesting because of her presence in the UK, at the site of Boxgrove in Surrey, 500,000 yrs ago. (Stringer 2006) This site indicates a date when England was a peninsula of Europe, with a warm temperate climate that included hippos, crocodiles and lions. This warm climate allowed ancient women to migrate there before the invention of clothing (via needles and cognitive awareness of one's bodyshape). Interestingly, these ancient females appear to have been able to outcompete major predators and butcher prey animals, as well as knap symmetrical handaxes. A controversial horse skull with possible spear damage indicates they may even have been actively hunting, which means that woman may have had some level of language. Sadly, the repeated ice-age events of the Palaeolithic glaciated the UK, making our nation sometimes completely uninhabitable, and these women may have perished, or may have relocated further south.

The time now moves to around 150,000 yrs ago, and women are fairly neatly distributed around three continents: Europe, Asia and Africa. In Africa, genetics suggest that the first modern women had appeared. Neanderthal woman ruled Europe and Erectus woman was strongly present in Asia. There are some signs of Modern woman starting to leave Africa via Sinai and into the Fertile Crescent at around 120,000 years ago and this created encounters with Neanderthal women. Neanderthal women appear to have outcompeted Modern women at that time though, and the presence of Moderns in the Levant seems to disappear from the record. There were as yet no signs of Modern humans in Europe. This was possibly stopped by a very intense volcanic eruption 72,000 years ago (Rose and Chesner 1990). Toba was violent enough to change the climate and start an extinction level event. We do not know how this affected Neanderthal women but genetics suggest that Modern women may have almost faced extinction, with only one surviving group of women living in caves on the Southern cape of Africa (Gibbons 2003). We may all be descended from these women. They leave an interesting signal in the archaeological record though, which is that these women were creating art. The creation of art seems to be unique to modern woman, and at the Southern cape of Africa, in Blombos cave, woman left behind her a carved piece of ochre which has survived to the present

day.

Modern women seemed to find their footing again after 70,000 yrs ago. Maybe their more complex minds and social behaviour had given them advantages. They returned to the Levant and out-competed Neanderthal woman, they eliminated or replaced Erectus woman in Asia, crossed an ocean to reach Australia and then, around 40,000 yrs ago, spread into Europe, the icy cold and treacherous Ice Age domain of Neanderthal woman. Neanderthal women are a mystery to us now. Only a few skeletons are at hand, because the dry conditions of Europe at this time were not conducive for preservation. The Ice Age had gripped Europe and a large amount of water was trapped in the ice sheets, causing a global drought. This was a treacherous terrain and Neanderthal woman had become physically adapted to it, with broad faces, large noses, powerful muscles, short bodies, large heads and thick bones. These women were powerful enough to leap onto large prey and physically tackle them with thrusting spears, riding them like rodeo-rider (Berger and Trinkaus 1995). Neanderthal woman reveals this in her bones and the many injuries that she would sustain over her lifetime. She had also mastered fire, which was essential for survival in such a cold land, and she may have been tailoring clothing from chewed leather, using awls (Zilhao 2007). We also know that she had the genes and the physical equipment to speak, so she may have had language. She was, in fact, very human. She was very modern, but strangely archaeologists can find no sign of her creating art, except for her preference for ochre and occasional use of beaded personal ornamentation (Zilhao 2007). Her Mousterian tools were unique and distinctive, and very finely edged. Also they were more efficient than those of the Modern women she was to meet. But her graves were bare. No grave goods have been found, though there have been suggestions of possible ones, but we can see tender and expert care of disabled and injured Neanderthals in these graves (Spikins et al. 2010).

By around 20,000 yrs ago, she had vanished though, in spite of her strength and stoicism in a tough terrain. Could the artistic mind of modern woman really have been such a successful trait that we outcompeted this formidable ancient woman? Now we must reach today. Only modern woman has survived. Womankind has conquered the Earth, the Arctic Circle, penetrated the Pacific and Australia and there is even a small colony of scientists living in Antarctica. All our competitors are now extinct: the earth, finally, belonged to woman, and after a brief and prosperous hunter-gatherer phase at the start of the Holocene (the warm period we are in now), woman turned to farming, and then to building the great civilisations and vast cities of our own modern world. It truly is the Age of Womankind now, with our foremothers fighting and working and adventuring hard to get here. But we should perhaps not feel too much pride. Our world, as we know it, is a temporary affair and so are we. Our lush climate will not last forever; another Ice Age will inevitably arrive, crushing our great cities and vast monuments under huge moving icesheets. Will womankind be extinct on that day like all her cousins from the past, or will we even reach that point? As woman's populations explode, and Holocene resources get ever more depleted, we may precipitate our own demise long before an Ice Age falls upon us. Woman beware, we may have arisen, but the mighty will fall.

Was that ok? Was it a reasonable and fair appraisal of the past? Was it ever so slightly absurd? The archaeology is all there, and I have followed current understanding and evidence. But on top of that I painted another narrative

and I am hoping in doing so that I have highlighted that avoiding a male-centric terminology of the past is not 'political correctness gone mad'. The male-centric narratives of the past are not only absurd and completely speculative, but also, they could be harmful. Would you be happy for six year old boys to be read my essay and hear them be told by their teachers that this was a true picture of the past? How about boys growing up for 200 years being told the same biased view? How would this affect their self-esteem? And how might it affect girls? Would they start to feel quite masterful? Also, we have other biases above. The article speaks of the 'ascent' of our species, culminating in the high achievement of the establishment of civilisations and cities. Does this mean hunter-gatherers are not ascended? Also, where are the children in this account? They are simply not there, except to say they were highly dependent. Babies are highly dependent but children come in many ages. Disabled people also get little mention except to say that they were cared for. What about the elderly? A human community is actually a complex organism of all ages and sexes and a multitude of different abilities. Communities were not hand-held and guided into the future by healthy young men. They evolved together, they worked together. It was a group effort.

As archaeologists we give people their heritage and they take that heritage very seriously. Early prehistory defines people and tells them about the deepest parts of themselves, we tell them what their very essential nature is. We give them their origins. If a child reads such material it may define who they one day grow up to be. It may define who they think they are now as children and as boys and girls. So maybe care with terminology and gender is not 'political correctness gone mad'. For example, why not mention the role of children? In the past, they almost certainly would have performed a great deal of physical work within a group, and been trained in cultural and technological traditions. Injuries from hunting would probably have been part of life, so people we would class as disabled, with missing limbs for example, may well have been fully contributing members of their group and been a common sight. By accepting that the human story of the past was not a world worked and driven exclusively by healthy young men, we do more honour to the past and those who lived within it, and we do more honour to our society today.

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