

## **SAS Lecture 15<sup>th</sup> January 2019: Palaeolithic Cannibalism: calories or culture.**

The first talk of 2019 was given by Dr James Cole, now a lecturer at Brighton University. Members may recall him speaking to us a couple of years ago about his work in Isimila, Tanzania, East Africa, where he collected some huge Palaeolithic hand axes, evidently made as showpieces or for rituals. This is his area of expertise, so this time he spoke on Palaeolithic cannibalism in the period from about 1.5 million years ago. This period includes a number of ancestor 'species' of ours, which, it is now thought, may not be separate species at all, since considerable interbreeding is being discovered in DNA studies.

He considered a number of possibilities for this (to us) rather revolting behaviour: survival (famine), psychosis (mental aberration), warfare (complete conquest), ritual, memorial (acquiring the wisdom of the deceased), and dietary advantage. He also addressed how we knew actual cannibalism was taking place, and suggested that at least two diagnostic signs in the bones were needed to be sure. These were: cuts for de-fleshing bones; base of skull and/or vertebrae missing (to access edible parts); broken long bones (marrow); and tooth marks.

Does the human body have a high food value, such that there is evolutionary advantage to those groups who practise cannibalism? James' team have compared other contemporary animals which our ancestors were eating, but found nothing special about humans in general. Indeed, one individual would hardly provide a feast for an average family or tribe (believed to be about 25 in number). Much better to catch a larger animal to feed everyone efficiently in one go. Furthermore, the evidence so far recovered suggests that "cannibalism" events were few and far between. There is also the question of disease transfer. If a tribe were to regularly eat those dying of natural causes including disease, they would likely all become infected, and die out quite quickly.

The conclusion at present is that the practice is connected with warfare, ritual or memorial. James mentioned such cannibalism among chimpanzees and other mammals, and spoke of the Neanderthals' complex social culture, evidenced in several ways including by the recent work of Alistair Pike on cave painting. Such complexity probably dates back at least 300,000 years, and has the potential to give rise to some extreme behaviour.

This fascinating topic is of course work in progress, given the present level of our knowledge about these distant times, and no doubt we shall learn more in years to come.

Martyn Dowell