The University of Southampton’s Centre for the Archaeology of Human Origins (CAHO) is currently celebrating its 10 year anniversary. An international symposium on the 28th and 29th of January 2011 highlighted its past achievements, current strengths and aims for the future. Below is a brief review of the symposium and the research presented.

It was Professor Clive Gamble who founded CAHO ten years ago, bringing under one roof several researchers interested in different aspects of human origins research. A decade later the Centre, now led by Dr John McNabb, has become a thriving institution, well-respected both in the UK and abroad. This was reflected by the mammoth success of the symposium; attended by over 150 people coming from different corners of the UK and the continent.

Throughout the symposium over fifty people presented papers and posters on their research, from established academics to up-and-coming postgraduate students. The research topics ranged widely from environmental studies, to social and bio-anthropological approaches and in-depth analyses of prehistoric stone tools and hominin behaviour. The celebratory aspect of the symposium was also prominent and included an evening dinner and closing wine reception.

The two-day event was opened with a keynote talk by Professor Clive Gamble who explored the early history of Palaeolithic studies and argued that the future of the discipline lies in modelling the demography and population numbers of our extant ancestors. CAHO was also pleased to announce that Professor Gamble will be re-joining the Centre from next academic year onwards.

The first main session of the symposium focused on bio-anthropological approaches to the Palaeolithic and included, besides a summarising overview of the most recent discoveries and advances in our understanding of human evolution in Europe, talks about the potential of the Sahara in revealing more clues about our origins, Palaeolithic burial practices, the biology of cognition theory and Late Pleistocene demography.

The subsequent Lithic Analyses session included ten presenters, making this the largest session, which is in line with the main research interest of CAHO. The session covered a wide range of topics and started off with four papers focusing on various aspects of handaxes, including their symmetry and refinement, the concept of describing their morphology through virtual shape-space, the presence of regional variability within Late Middle Palaeolithic bifaces and the potential of use-wear analyses. Next up, the papers focused on brand-new research of stone tool assemblages in Kenya, South Africa, Syria, Qatar and Arabia giving an international aspect to the symposium.

One of the highlights of the symposium was a session dedicated to a new fieldwork project on the island of Jersey that was launched last summer. The Quaternary Archaeology and Environments of Jersey (QAEJ) is a joint project between CAHO, University College London, The British Museum (AHOB 3), the University of Wales Trinity Saint David and the University of Manchester. It is the first major archaeological work to take place on Jersey in 30 years and aims to research the deepest history of the island, including the prominent Neanderthal site of La Cotte de Saint Brélade. Throughout the session promising preliminary results of the first fieldwork campaign and of the re-analyses of the existing collections were presented, as well as future plans for fieldwork. More information about the research of the QAEJ team can be found on the project’s webpage (http://quaternaryjersey.wordpress.com).

Day one of the CAHO10 symposium ended with a poster session where various postgraduate students briefly introduced their work. Posters ranged from Simple Prepared Cores and the Origins of Levallois, to Hominin Absence during the Last Interglacial and the Role of the Climate in Neanderthal Settlement Choice in MIS-3 Italy. The poster session
created a forum for researchers to present their preliminary results and gain feedback throughout the conference.

Day two opened with a session about palaeoclimate and human ecology, emphasising the strong links between CAHO and Southampton’s School of Ocean and Earth Science. One of the strong points of the conference was the discussion sessions where ideas were exchanged and challenged, as illustrated at the end of this session. Following was a series of presentations that focused on Palaeolithic Landscapes and Land-use. Several presenters demonstrated the potential of reconstructing prehistoric land-use based on evidence from raw material transport, new methodological approaches, on-going fieldwork and new interpretative frameworks.

The final session focused on social approaches to the study of the Palaeolithic, covering research issues of hominin cognition, cultural transmission and social traditions. The session also touched upon topics such as aesthetics, social networking and how to interpret Palaeolithic portable and figural art.

The CAHO10 symposium was closed by a joint keynote talk given by current CAHO lectures Dr. William Davies and Dr. John McNabb. They stressed the importance of creating a close-knit Palaeolithic research community; the significant input CAHO alumni still bring to the research centre highlights the value of maintaining such links. Finally, on a more political note, our responsibility to bring the story of human evolution to the wider audience was emphasised, leading the symposium to an enthusiastic and forward-thinking end.

The concept of this event, providing an informal atmosphere for both postgraduates and academics to present, touching on wide-ranging topics and the inherent opportunity for a research centre to showcase its work, has proved inspiring. It has now been proposed to turn this event into an annual symposium travelling around amongst different human origins institutions in the UK.

To re-live the CAHO10 symposium ‘Unravelling the Palaeolithic: 10 years of research at the Centre for the Archaeology of Human Origins’ please visit http://caho10.wordpress.com, where footage from the event (including photos and videos) is available. You will also find more information there about the conference monograph which will be published through Archaeopress.

The organising committee would like to thank all participants for their attendance and input, helping to make the 10 year anniversary of CAHO a memorable event. Overall we feel that the CAHO10 symposium was a great success and highlighted the pivotal position of the Centre within British Palaeolithic Archaeology and illustrated that CAHO is ready for another 10 years of research excellence!

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For more information about the University of Southampton’s Centre for the Archaeology of Human Origins, visit: http://www.soton.ac.uk/archaeology/cah