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MINISTRY FOR CULTURE, HERITAGE, SPORT & LEISURE
310 Main Street
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Gibraltar Museum in lead role at Oxford Seminar

Museum Director, Professor Clive Finlayson, has been invited to give the key note paper at a seminar to be held at the University of Oxford in January. Organised by the School of Archaeology, the seminar will address a question that has remained unanswered in this scientific field: when and how did people occupy desert and semi-arid regions of the Eurasian mid-latitude belt in prehistory?

Professor Finlayson, now regarded as a leading world authority in the field of human origins and also a scientist of the prestigious *Academia Europaea*, was the first to introduce the concept of a Mid-latitude Belt which once stretched from Gibraltar in the west to China in the east. At different times, global climate change turned this belt from a land of lush savannah and wetland to a veritable desert. Many parts – the Sahara, Arabia, Thar Desert in India, the Central Asian deserts – are arid lands today but they were not always so. For long periods these areas were occupied by people as new evidence is beginning to reveal. Professor Finlayson's ideas, which included the prediction that the Mid-latitude Belt was central to our evolution, have formed part of a number of research papers and two of his books: *Neanderthals and Modern Humans, An Ecological and Evolutionary Perspective* (Cambridge University Press) and *The Humans Who Went Extinct* (Oxford University Press).

"Some people may find it hard to believe that Gibraltar was the western extreme of this wide belt of lands which was the stage for our origins" declared Professor Finlayson "but our research confirms that it was so, acting as a refuge for the last Neanderthals and as part of the pump that catapulted us to today". He added "it is yet another cog in the wheel of time that places this small land of ours in the centre stage of world affairs, like it often was later during the course of written history". The fieldwork which Professor Finlayson and his team have been conducting for two decades now is revealing the detail of the environments that were the key to human survival and how these were altered as climate changed, lessons that we can draw from in trying to predict future events.

Gibraltar was central to a small region of south-western Iberia, which included coastal areas such as today's Doñana National Park in Spain, which stretched to the area of Lisbon. "This region was part of the Mid-latitude Belt and its affinities lie more with North Africa to the south than with Europe to the north" said Professor

Finlayson. “Our research shows that people focused their activities very closely to water sources and there were plenty close to the Rock. We have an Underwater Research Unit here in the museum, which is run by some fantastic and dedicated scientists. Dr Geraldine Finlayson and Dr Darren Fa have been performing the gruelling and exhausting task of charting the sea bed off Gorham’s Cave and they have been finding the places – now submerged – where people were living. And these places included sources of raw materials that they used to make stone tools and, importantly, springs of fresh water!”

There were times when things went bad even here in Gibraltar. One such moment, around 25 thousand years ago, saw the worst climate Gibraltar had seen for a quarter-of-a-million years. It was not cold that hit but severe drought. Gibraltar, for a while, was part of the great deserts of the south. “Before this moment we had Neanderthals, during it nobody could live here, and afterwards we see the first signs of our own ancestors” said Professor Finlayson. Now all this evidence from Gibraltar and beyond will be the subject of Professor Finlayson’s key note lecture in Oxford.