



GOVERNMENT OF GIBRALTAR
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Gibraltar and the Saharan Connection

We may think of Gibraltar as a refuge of the Neanderthals but we rarely see it in the context of our own ancestors, other than as part of a late arrival from the north. Clive Finlayson is now suggesting something quite different. In a key note lecture delivered in Oxford University last week, Professor Finlayson showed that prehistoric sites in Gibraltar showed clear affinities with African, even Australian, sites. This was in stark contrast with sites in the rest of Europe which, though closer, had been constantly under the influence of the cold-warm cycles of the Pleistocene (the Ice Ages). The link was discovered after a comprehensive study of prehistoric sites across the world. Details of geology, vegetation and fauna for each site were entered into a database and subsequently analysed. "The Victorian naturalist Abel Chapman once described this part of the world as a little piece of Africa in Europe..." said Professor Finlayson, "...and he was right! Certainly, when it comes to comparing the climate and ecology of past millennia and the present too, our area is closer to the wet-dry African climatic and ecological regimes than it is to the rest of Europe."

Clive Finlayson was addressing delegates from 13 countries at a conference on "The Middle Palaeolithic in the Desert". The thrust of his argument was that Gibraltar in the extreme north-west, and south-east Australia in the extreme south-east, were once interconnected by a belt of habitat of similar characteristics. "It is difficult to fully understand this when we have huge deserts – the Sahara, Arabia, Thar in India and Australia itself – severing these links today" added Clive Finlayson. The belt opened and closed in response to climate change but it was within it that modern humans emerged, evolved, spread and retreated. The entry into northern latitudes came much later and wasn't an easy affair.

Shortly after we meet our first ancestors, in Ethiopia, around 200 thousand years ago, we find that they had reached west to the Atlantic coast of Morocco. The perennial question "did they cross the Strait?" remains unresolved. What is certain is that, had they done so, they would have found similar conditions to the other side. In any case, our cousins the Neanderthals had found the northern shore of the Strait and exploited it, uncannily, in a very similar way to our own ancestors. This may represent a case of what biologists call convergent evolution.

Data gathered in Gibraltar and in the region of south-western Iberia are now being used to model this lost world that once reached from Gibraltar to the southern shores of Australia. Once again, Gibraltar's outreach far exceeds its small size.