BEYOND THE CAVES: THE PALAEOLITHIC RIVERS OF SOUTH-WEST BRITAIN

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This paper introduces a new English Heritage (Aggregates Levy Sustainability Fund) project *The Palaeolithic Rivers of South-West Britain* (project no. 3847), and summarises the results of a first phase resource assessment. The goal of this ongoing project is to develop a new synthesis of the Lower and Middle Palaeolithic occupation of the south-west region, focusing upon river terrace-based archaeology and its implications for hominin landscape use. The resource assessment has reached two preliminary conclusions. Firstly that the region's earliest Palaeolithic archaeological record is significantly richer than previously believed, and secondly that although find locations have been added in several areas which previously had very few or no finds (e.g.West Cornwall) the overall bias of finds to the south coast is maintained. The project has also revealed that the river terrace resource of South-West England offers potential for geochronological dating, landscape reconstruction, and improved contextualisation of the archaeological material. Some outreach components of the project are also summarised.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper summarizes the preliminary results of a new programme of research funded by English Heritage through the Aggregates Levy Sustainability Fund. *The Palaeolithic Rivers of South-West Britain* project is focusing upon the Lower and Middle Palaeolithic archaeology (*c.* 500,000–40,000 BP) of the south-west region, with particular attention to the findspots and artefacts associated with the region's river terrace landforms and deposits. The overall academic goals of the project are the development of a new synthesis of the Lower and Middle Palaeolithic occupation of the south-west, with an emphasis upon: (i) the apparent decline in the richness of the archaeological record to the west of the Axe valley and the well known site at Broom (Green, 1988), and to the south of the Bristol Avon (Roe, 1974; Wymer, 1999); (ii) the relationship between the river terrace archaeology and the cave deposit archaeology of the region, and the evidence for hominin landscape preferences; and lastly (iii) the different possible routes by which hominins reached the south-west region. The first phase of the project (for which preliminary results are reported here) undertook a resource assessment, documenting the Lower and Middle Palaeolithic archaeology and the Pleistocene river terraces of the region. These assessments have indicated both a richer archaeological resource than previously indicated in national syntheses (e.g. Roe, 1968; Wessex Archaeology, 1993; Wymer, 1999) and a river terrace resource with potential for geochronological dating, palaeo-environmental reconstruction, and the contextualisation of findspots and artefact assemblages.

BACKGROUND

For the purposes of the project, the south-west region was defined as the area to the west of the western headwaters (the Frome and Piddle rivers, Dorset) of the now-extinct Solent River (Allen and Gibbard, 1993), and to the south of the Bristol Avon (Bates, 2003; Figure 1).

Despite Wymer's (1999) observation that '*…the great majority of the evidence for the Palaeolithic occupation of Britain comes from river deposits*' little attention has been paid to the terrace deposits and sequences of the south-west. This is in marked contrast to the river terrace sequences of south-east Britain such as the Thames, which have been well studied and formed the basis of the development of widely accepted models of climate- and uplift-driven cycles of terrace formation (e.g. Bridgland, 2000; Maddy *et al.*, 2001). The lack of attention to the south-west region at least in part reflects the relatively minor exposure of terrace deposits through aggregates (gravels and sands) extraction during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This has reduced opportunities for Quaternary research, and reinforced the view that the river terrace deposits of the south-west are insignificant, particularly in terms of their Middle Pleistocene archaeological content.

One of the aims of the first phase of this project was therefore to assess the scope and distribution of the terrace landforms and deposits of the south-west. This relates to the larger question of whether the apparent geographical differences in the national distribution of Lower and Middle Palaeolithic finds reflect regional histories of aggregates extraction, or genuine regional differences in the pattern of hominin occupation of Britain during the Middle Pleistocene (or, most likely, a combination of both of these factors).

Regarding the archaeological resource of the south-west region, clear evidence for a Lower and Middle Palaeolithic hominin presence comes from a number of well documented cave sites (e.g. Kent's Cavern, Torquay; Windmill Cave, Brixham; and the Hyena Den and Rhino Hole, Wookey, Somerset) (Campbell and Sampson, 1971; Tratman *et al.*, 1971; Straw, 1995, 1996; Figure 2b). However, preliminary analysis of the evidence for the region (e.g. Wessex Archaeology, 1993; Wymer, 1999) indicates that these sites only represent a fraction of the evidence for earlier Palaeolithic occupations in the region (both in terms of the overall number of sites/findspots and the total quantities of Palaeolithic artefacts). The principal focus of the project is therefore to develop a regional-scale