

RECENT WORK AT HAUA FTEAH, LIBYA

Tim Reynolds, Senior Lecturer, Archaeology, Birkbeck College

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Report by Phil Beeton

Tim Reynolds came to address the meeting on work being carried out at the Haua Fteah cave excavations in Libya, which turned out to be an interesting if somewhat challenging lecture. For most members it was definitely unfamiliar territory in terms of place and terminology.

The Haua Fteah cave is located in Cyrenacia, eastern Libya, approximately 8 kilometres east of Apollonia and about 1 kilometre inland from the glittering azure blue of the Mediterranean Sea. It has a huge opening 80 metres wide and 20 metres high. It was American-born Cambridge archaeologist Charles McBurney who first discovered it in 1948 and returned with his colleague C. T. Houlder to begin excavations in 1951. Over four years they dug a huge shaft to the depth of 14 metres, recovering a vast quantity of artefacts of human occupation going back 100,000 years. Much of the research centred on the study of flake tools dating from the Middle Paleolithic period from around 30,000 BC which are known as Aterian (after the site of Bel-el-Ater, south of Annaba in north eastern Algeria) and have a high standard of workmanship and standardisation.

After this period the cave was neglected for many years until a new programme of research was begun in 2007 organised jointly by Queen's University, Belfast, Birkbeck College and Royal Holloway, University of London and led by Professor Graeme Barker. This team cleared the infill from the McBurney trench to a depth of 8 metres and armed with state-of-the-art dating equipment continue to study the stone tools, shells, and carbonised plant remains they believe can take the story back to close on 200,000 years of human activity.

The whole story is complicated and enlivened by the extraordinary climate changes that have affected the Sahara region over millennia and its consequences for human migration. This is apparently due to changes in the tilt of the Earth which occurs every 41,000 years. In the Neolithic period around 8000 BC, the Sahara was then more like a flooded savannah region with swamps and vast lakes the size of European countries. Cave paintings discovered in Algeria indicate the presence of buffalo, elephants, rhinoceros and hippopotamuses, animals that died out after the rapid desertification of the land around 3500 BC.

In conclusion, Tim Reynolds indicated that, the political situation allowing, research would be resumed in 2014.