

## A Day in the Life

by **Richard Deacon**



Excerpted from his essay in the exhibition catalogue *First Sculpture: Handaxe to Figure Stone*

This is incredible: One day, sometime around 500,000 years ago, a large horse wandered out onto the mudflats beside a shallow and brackish lagoon at Boxgrove, in modern-day West Sussex, England. This was unusual; perhaps the animal was ill, or was injured from a predator's attack or an ongoing hunt (a hole in one of the surviving scapulae is possible evidence of a projectile wound), or maybe it was just old. The group of hominids settled nearby noticed it, though, and some of them rushed over from their encampment. Perhaps they needed to deliver the coup de grâce to the struggling animal or perhaps it was already dead by the time they reached it. Whatever the details, this was an incredible boon for the group, a huge quantity of meat right next to where they were settled. But it came with problems. Such a large and heavy animal could not be carried back to the camp, and out there on the exposed mudflat it would soon attract attention—carrion birds were probably already circling, and who knows what else was sniffing the wind. They needed to butcher the kill quickly and take what they could, but a whole carcass was unmanageable with the tools they carried. A group of individuals was sent running to the exposed flint at the base of the nearby cliff to bring back half a dozen nodules. At least one of this group would have been experienced enough to select the right material. At the carcass, the others kept watch, scaring away the circling birds and keeping a wary eye out for more dangerous animals. Once the nodules were to hand, the hugely experienced knappers could set to work to produce the cleavers and axes they needed, quickly and decisively flaking the stone to extract rough cores, which they then finely flaked and shaped to produce the tools. These artifacts are sharp and need to be held securely in hands that would become increasingly covered in grease and blood.

Once the tools were prepared, the butchery could begin, slicing open the carcass, removing the hide, eviscerating the abdomen, and disarticulating the skeleton so that several of them could work at once. The meat was removed from the bones and set aside. Then the bones themselves

were split to get at the marrow, which was presumably eaten on the spot. The group worked quickly and deliberately. When they had as much meat and offal as they could strip from the carcass, they loaded up and headed off back to the encampment, taking the cleavers with them to finish the job. Night fell. Hyenas appeared and gnawed at the remaining bones, scattering them a bit more. Sand and mud covered the abandoned flint flakes and pieces of bone, burying them and leaving them undisturbed for hundreds of thousands of years. As I say, this is incredible, an astounding amount of information, reconstructing the activity of a single day among a small group of hominids in a particular place some 500,000 years ago!

We know about these hominids and the horse that nourished them because the wonderful excavation of the Middle Pleistocene hominid site at Eartham Quarry, Boxgrove, revealed not only the hominid occupation but also, a short distance away, the horse bones and flakes from the knapped nodules. These scatters have been carefully documented and the flakes painstakingly reconstructed back to their originating nodules, leaving a void in the middle corresponding to the handaxe produced. There is more. The delicate flakes from the final finishing of the stone tools are distributed some one to two meters away from the large flakes produced in the initial two phases of the knapping. This suggests evidence for a division of labor, perhaps that the initial piece was first roughed out, then handed to a more highly skilled individual to finish.

The excavation at Boxgrove, led by Mark Roberts and the late Simon Parfitt, both from the Institute of Archaeology at University College, London, was exceptionally rigorous, and exemplary in its multidisciplinary approach. The very fine grain of the investigation of the site and its evolving geology, context, and paleobiology establishes an accurate, but quite brief timeline for hominid occupation somewhere between 20 and 60 years before an incursion from the sea overwhelmed the site. During this brief period the site was regularly used by a group of hominids as something more like a supply camp (particularly associated with meat butchery) than a base camp. There is an absence of evidence of other food gathering – for mollusks or vegetable material, for example – nor much evidence for the further working of skins or other organic material and no evidence of fire. There is a lack of campsites, sleeping, or other activity areas. This suggests organized occupation during daylight hours. To me, this seems sensible, with the known and active presence of large and dangerous predators in the area, keeping the butchery site a distance from the base camp seems eminently wise! Among the handaxes found at the site are a few that are rather clumsy or not quite fit for purpose. These can be interpreted as “beginner’s attempts,” or the products of learning, so the group was settled and secure enough to contain young individuals and families and not just a roving band of hunters sporadically using the place.

These various strands of evidence provoke an intriguing question. The quality of many of the discovered handaxes is very high, reflecting not only the high quality of the local material available but also the presence of some very skilled individuals among the group—a conclusion reinforced by the apparent division of labor at the horse butchery site. Conversely, the presence of “learning attempts” and the conclusion that the encampment contained family groups suggests a level of security and stability that would infer persistent use of the site by the same group or successive generations of that group for protracted periods. Given the 20- to 60-year time horizon, the question becomes: Can we identify individual makers of the handaxes? Or, more precisely, given the multitude of handaxes found, would it be possible to say that some of them were by the same hand? To go from identifying the characteristics of a site occupied some half a million years ago to potentially identifying individuals is a huge stretch, but this is a question that the investigation permits and for which there is sufficient material to examine. Remember, this is a group of hominids. The bridge of empathy that would be established by answering the question in the affirmative is a strong link in the chain that connects the thesis of this exhibition—*First Sculpture*—with our lives. To this end, six of us—Tony Berlant and Tom Wynn, the driving forces behind *First Sculpture*; Mark Roberts, the lead archaeologist and coauthor of the paper on the excavation at Boxgrove; Dr. Natalie Uomini, Associate Lecturer at the Max Planck Institute for Human History in Jena, Germany; Dr. Freddy Foulds, Researcher and Palaeolithic Archaeologist at the University of Durham; and myself—met with Nick Ashton at the British Museum’s store in London’s East End to look at their entire range of Boxgrove handaxes and associated material. I’m an artist and have no claims to specialism in palaeoanthropology, although I have a deep and long-standing interest both in the subject and in questions about cultural origins. The question we were asking, though, is also one most art historians have encountered, a question of attribution that we would address by close attention to the material evidence.

Incredibly helpful and supportive, members of the staff at the British Museum had carefully laid out the more than 70 archive boxes with their lids open, enabling us to examine, pick up, turn over, and compare, one to another, the museum's 350 or so handaxes from the Boxgrove site. Each of us independently decided on how we would "look." The parameters I eventually worked out for my viewing were:

1. **Stratigraphy** – finds within the same layer are rather more likely to be associated.
2. **Material** – there are varieties of flint on site and an experienced maker would know what they liked to work with.
3. **Shape and symmetry (morphology)** – look and feel – the assumption being that the more control you have, the more likely you are to produce something that is symmetrical and also conforms to an idea that you have about it. But this aspect of my examination also includes something like how the tool feels in the hand.
4. **Fine finish** – this is something like facture and reflects the ability to control the outcome of your activity as well as the subtle preferences that would arise from the ways you went about your task.
5. **I also looked closely at those handaxes** that incorporated or had been modified to accommodate embedded fossil or crystal material, features that might be described as decorative (or, perhaps better, as rewarding).

We spent a day and a half looking at the British Museum's collection of handaxes and then put forward our tentative views regarding why certain objects might reasonably be associated together into one group or another. Of course, we all had outliers, things that we had selected but were not supported by anybody else, but we settled on two groups of three and two pairs of handaxes around which there was common agreement. We believe that each group was made by a particular individual (not all by the same individual). This is a strong conclusion; these objects are not just good enough for the job in hand but made with sufficient refinement and particularity to carry a message across the millennia to us. My thanks to the exhibition's curators, Tony Berlant and Tom Wynn, for giving me the chance to listen.