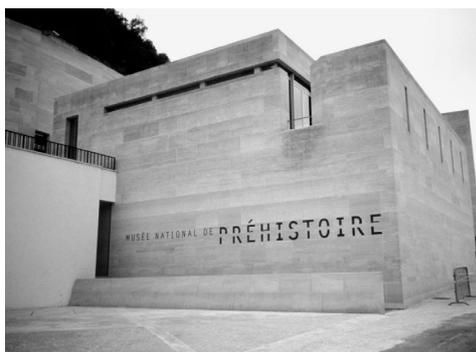

EDITORIAL

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It is not every day that a major museum devoted exclusively to prehistory is constructed, nor everywhere that this would even be conceivable, but the World Heritage site of the Vézère valley in south-west France, with its internationally renowned Palaeolithic caves and rock-shelters is an obvious such location. This summer I had the opportunity to visit the stunning new National Museum of Prehistory (*Le musée national de Préhistoire*) at Les Eyzies-de-Tayac (Dordogne). The architectural practice of Jean-Pierre Buffi has magnificently achieved the near impossible of sympathetically fitting a dramatically modernist, bright, and very angular building into the space available against the iconic limestone cliff behind Les Eyzies and next to the reconstructed 16th-century château which formerly housed the museum, first opened in 1923. The ambitious 24.4 million € project to construct the new museum – and given the many delays after the initial architectural competition in the 1980s and the laying of the foundation stone in 1994 many doubted it would ever reach fruition – succeeded in July 2004 when the building was inaugurated by Renaud Donnedieu de Vabres, the Minister for Culture and Communication.

Inevitably, given its history, location and the nature of its collections, the focus of the displays in this new museum is predominantly on the Palaeolithic period – the material culture and the changing climate, flora and fauna (including human evolution) – with short shrift given to the Mesolithic period, let alone the Neolithic and Bronze Ages. But what an incredible wealth of Palaeolithic material the museum has with which to tell its story, especially the detail of the classic French Upper Palaeolithic sequence. The main public area of the museum comprises two elongated rectangular galleries, the



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lower with displays basically organized chronologically, and the upper gallery arranged thematically, plus a further gallery space for temporary exhibitions. There is innovative integration of architecture, art, geology and archaeology, as in the connecting staircases displaying stratigraphic sequences and flint nodules. Throughout the main galleries there are excellent audio-visuales explaining chronological and climatic reconstruction, archaeological methodology, knapping techniques, bone and antler working, refitting, butchery practice and so on, as well as interactives, dioramas, casts, and animals, both skeletal and modelled. But all these add-ons do not overshadow the actual artefacts and ecofacts, of which some 18,000 examples from the museum's collection of over five million objects are displayed by an attractive technique which permits close inspection of most of the pieces in plan-view.



Not everything is perfect of course. The entrance arrangements are slightly confusing – it is easy to miss the cast of the skeleton of 'Lucy'; the 'wall of human evolution' (*frise anthropologique*) was spoilt when I visited by an unsightly temporary barrier; and the very atmospheric passageway, along which one literally walks in (casts of) the footsteps of Laetoli, leads to a reconstructed figure of the fossil Lake Turkana boy wearing an inappropriately politically correct 'fig-leaf' of animal skin (which is surely both surprisingly un-French and archaeologically improbable)! The striking display case with the reconstructed bison skeleton cleverly

positioned in front of a cave-painting image of a bison seems wilfully perverse in having the two facing in opposite directions. There are other minor issues, some of them no doubt simply teething and snagging problems which will be rectified, but overall I believe this new museum is a triumph for all those concerned with its creation and I have no hesitation in wholeheartedly encouraging others to visit – neither the museum building nor its contents will disappoint.

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This latest issue of the *EJA* is again in no way intentionally thematic, but one could argue for linkage between papers in terms of the concept of 'reading' aspects of the past, either



directly as in the case of Louise Revell's article using the epitaphs found on Roman tombstones, or more metaphorically in the case of Andrew Powell's Irish tomb designs or Helène Whittaker's inscrutable Phaistos disc with its possible 'pseudo-writing'. All three papers evince an admirable concern on the part of the respective authors to push the available data as hard as possible in pursuit of the goal of greater understanding of the past. This is also Vincent Megaw's aim in his review essay of recent work on, and conceptions of, the 'Celts'. In a typically wide-ranging manner Megaw raises issues of relevance to all archaeologists and historians, going way beyond the specific (and factional!) concerns of Iron Age specialists.

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Regular readers of the *EJA* will note the absence of a Book-marks section in this issue, and the appearance of new names as Reviews Editor and Assistant Reviews Editor on the inside front cover. In fact the present review essay and both the book reviews were commissioned under the old regime of Peter Biehl and Alexander Gramsch, whose fingerprints will remain visible on some of the reviews in several forthcoming issues as well. In welcoming the new team of Cornelius Holtorf and Troels Kristensen it is appropriate to thank Peter and Alexander for their valuable contribution to the *EJA* since 1998. Their Book-marks and the accompanying reviews have been authoritative, illuminating, entertaining and very much appreciated.

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Finally I am pleased to announce another new development, the establishment of an *EJA* Advisory Board of distinguished senior scholars whose names are now inscribed inside the front cover. The EAA is indebted to these scholars for accepting the invitation to form the inaugural Advisory Board and I look forward to their assistance in further enhancing the academic status and international profile of the *EJA*.