Obituary of Sir Paul Mellars, 1939–2022

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OBITUARY

Paul Mellars, pictured in 2014 enjoying his customary cigar and coffee outside the Copper Kettle in Cambridge (Thanks to Martin Bond for the use of this wonderful photograph of Paul).

Paul Mellars died in a Cambridge hospital after a brief illness, on 7 May 2022, at the age of eighty-two. He really was a larger-than-life character, someone with strong and often strongly expressed views, but backed up by an immense knowledge of the field of Paleolithic archaeology. However, for his colleagues and students in Cambridge and Sheffield (at every level including forty at Ph.D.), he was a much-loved as well as respected human being.

He was born in the village of Swallownest, near Sheffield, to parents following the strict Christian faith of the Plymouth Brethren. As a conscientious objector to conscription as World War II approached his father was sent down the coalmines, and although Paul abandoned any religious beliefs, something resolute and sometimes absolute undoubtedly characterized his own personality throughout his life. Although he was fascinated by prehistory as a child and founded an archaeology group at his local Grammar School, he decided to pursue civil engineering at University, thinking he could still do archaeology in his spare time. But after starting a course at UCL in 1958 he rapidly realised his mistake and determinedly wrote to various colleges at Cambridge until Fitzwilliam House offered him a place to study 'Arch and Anth' the following year. He proceeded as an undergraduate and then postgraduate, with a doctoral thesis on 'The Mousterian Succession in South-West France,' which led on to his life-long love of that region, and to his cherished wife Anny, who survives him.

From 1965, Paul had stints at Sheffield and Newcastle before returning to Sheffield as a Lecturer in Prehistory and Archaeology. After much soul-searching because he and Anny were so settled in the Sheffield region, he returned to Cambridge in 1981 as a University Lecturer, becoming a Reader in 1991, and Professor in Prehistory and Human Evolution in 1997. During these years, he excavated and published on the important Mesolithic sites of Oronsay in the Inner Hebrides and Star Carr in North Yorkshire, but his primary work on the Mousterian and Upper Paleolithic sequences of France, and the debates around those sequences, were to dominate his academic career and his published output. Paul's early work came to prominence

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at a time when two giants of archaeology, Frenchman François Bordes and American Lew Binford, were locked in a fierce argument about what lay behind the variations in Mousterian stone tools that Bordes had classified in great detail. Put simply, for Bordes these different variants were the products of distinct co-existing Neanderthal tribes, while for Binford they were the products of the same groups conducting varied activities in changing environments, for which they needed different toolkits. Using stratigraphy and the developing techniques of radiocarbon dating, Paul put forward a contrasting view, that at least some of the variants were ordered chronologically, and represented the output of successive Neanderthal populations through many millennia of the French Middle Paleolithic. He developed these views in a series of papers, including in *Nature* (1965, 1986) and his seminal book, *The Neanderthal Legacy* (1996), and time has proved Paul largely right in his arguments—something that the main protagonists were not prepared to accept graciously at the time!

Paul also examined the transition from the Middle to Upper Paleolithic, and its inevitable connection with the appearance of *Homo sapiens* in Europe, which led him into a new series of debates, ones that also became heated at times. My baptism of fire in this area came with disputes about an association of a Neanderthal skeleton and a Châtelperronian industry, excavated at St-Césaire (S.W. France) in 1979. The Châtelperronian was supposedly transitional between the Middle and Upper Paleolithic, so did this mean that the Neanderthals were also transitioning to *H. sapiens*? I thought not, and Paul and I began a series of fruitful exchanges around this topic, which would lead us on to a much wider joint engagement on the evolution of *H. sapiens* in 1987.

That year was a crucial one in the development of ideas about the physical, behavioral, and genetic origins of *H. sapiens*, with new chronologies suggesting that *H. sapiens* fossils preceded Neanderthal ones in the Levant, and emerging genetic data pointing to a recent African origin for our species. Paul and I were privileged to be catalysts in this 'revolution' when he invited me to co-organize a conference in Cambridge that witnessed many of the biggest names in paleoanthropology coming to grips with rapidly developing data from paleontology, archaeology, and genetics. This was set against the growing contest between Multiregional and Recent African Origin models for the evolution of *H. sapiens* that were to dominate debate in this area for the next 20 years or so. The hugely influential "Human Revolution" conference and its two ensuing volumes of papers set numerous research agendas for the following decades, including for Paul and for me. For Paul, this took him into new areas of research beyond Europe, as he developed ideas about Middle Stone Age archaeological signatures that he thought could identify dispersals of *H. sapiens* both within and beyond Africa. The themes of the 1987 meeting were developed in further conferences organized with colleagues in 1992 (Royal Society, London) and 2006 (Cambridge), as well as at a conference in 2009 to celebrate Paul's 70th birthday.

These words cannot really capture the huge personality, the warmth, and the humor of the man. His direct language could sometimes rebound on him, occasionally with hilarious results. At an international conference, he was being interviewed by a journalist and colorfully described the views presented by an eminent Iberian archaeologist as 'bollocks.' Two mornings later Paul was shocked to find his words quoted verbatim in *The Observer*, and wondered how he could explain the bad language to his parents (who were apparently readers of *The Observer*), to the Common Room at his college, Corpus Christi (where the newspaper would be read the next day), and to the archaeologist concerned (who was standing across the room at breakfast). I offered to try and help with the last of these crises, and we were both mightily relieved when the archaeologist accepted the word as a compliment, taking it to mean that he had 'cojones' (slang for bold courage)!

Paul rightly received many accolades and honors, including Life Fellow and former President of Corpus Christi, Fellow of the British Academy (1990), President of the Prehistoric Society (1998–2000), Officier dans l'Ordre des Palmes academiques from the French Government (2004), the British Academy's Grahame Clarke medal (2008), and last but certainly not least, a knighthood from Her Majesty the Queen for 'services to scholarship' (2010).

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