

# Is There Such a Thing as Hunter-Gatherer Archaeology?

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**Abstract:** This paper examines two related questions: firstly, whether there is a distinctive field of practice that might be called “hunter-gatherer archaeology” and which is different than other kinds of archaeology, and secondly, how such a claim might be justified. This question is considered through four prisms: (1) whether hunter-gatherers provide a unitary object of research; (2) whether hunter-gatherer archaeology is the same in different parts of the world; (3) whether hunter-gatherer archaeology is characterised by distinctive forms of archaeological record; and (4) whether there are distinctive themes within the field. None of these approaches provide a single unifying core, with any definition at best a constellation of “partially shared features” and with considerable difficulties surrounding the uncritical continued use of the concept of hunter-gatherers, which is linked to colonial ideologies and practices. Rather than provide a single unitary answer, it is proposed that the value and legitimacy of the concept of “hunter-gatherer archaeology” requires consideration in the local contexts within which it might be used. In the European context within which I work, the broader social significance of the idea of the hunter-gatherer provides a significant opportunity for the development of a self-reflexive and publicly engaged hunter-gatherer archaeology committed to decoloniality. In this context, the potentials that the idea of a “hunter-gatherer archaeology” provides can, with caution, justify the continued use of the term. This answer will not characterise other locations, especially in colonised nations.



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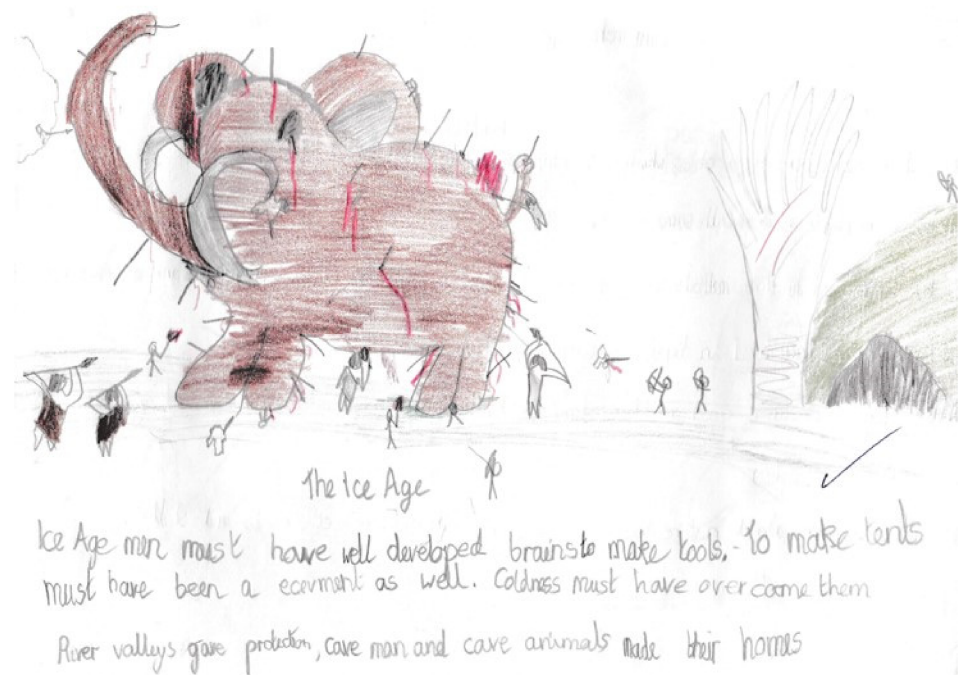
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## 1. Introduction

I produced the drawing and accompanying text shown in Figure 1 when I was seven or eight years old, at a primary school in a small town in the south of England (I am very grateful to my parents for keeping this image. It was not always obvious that my path would lead me to hunter-gatherer archaeology). Although the words hunter-gatherer do not appear, it is clear that they were the focus of the classroom exercise. This image, and others from the same period, show that our very young class was learning about human evolution and the transition from hunting and gathering to farming. Our class was (re-) producing an idea of hunter-gatherers that was created by a combination of archaeological evidence and long-standing cultural assumptions, such as what it means to be human rather than animal (“tools” and “well-developed brains”) and deeply social-evolutionary ideas about a “hunter-gatherer” way of life. The concept of hunter-gatherer was “co-produced” by these actions: “(s)cientific objects may not be invented, but they grow more richly real as they become entangled in webs of cultural significance, material practices, and theoretical derivations.” [1]. Co-production highlights the reiteration of concepts through practice: the ways in which ideas are embedded into discourse [2]—in this instance, enculturated through the pedagogy of education. This is one of the ways that the powerful idea of a hunter-gatherer way of life is created in Western Europe.

For the last twenty or so years, I have made a career out of teaching, researching and writing the lives of long-dead hunter-gatherers: my primary research focus is the Mesolithic (i.e., Early-Mid Holocene) of Europe, with most of that work in the British and Irish Isles. My professional actions continually reiterate the idea that distinctive forms of human social organisation exist that can be labelled as “hunter-gatherers”. In fact, in

recent years, the term “hunter-gatherer archaeology” has been an increasing part of my professional practice. In part, this arose from my roles within the *International Society for Hunter-Gatherer Research (ISHGR)*, where I was an archaeological voice on editorial boards, and often advocate for more archaeological engagement with ISHGR. I increasingly defined my professional self not as a Mesolithic archaeologist, but as a researcher in hunter-gatherer archaeology who specialised in Early-Mid Holocene Europe. At the most recent international Mesolithic in Europe conference (Toulouse 2020), Elliott and I organised a session encouraging Mesolithic archaeologists to engage more with the broader field of hunter-gatherer archaeology and research [3]. Finally, in 2020 I initiated and designed a new MSc programme in Hunter-Gatherer Archaeology to be taught at UCD School of Archaeology.



**Figure 1.** “The Ice Age” by Graeme Warren c. 1980–1981.

All these actions reiterated the idea that “hunter-gatherer archaeology” was something real and distinctive. More than this, they actively served to co-produce this—to make it more “richly real”. Coordinating a Masters’ degree in Hunter-Gatherer Archaeology would clearly embed this idea into a new generation of students through new forms of pedagogy. However, these actions begged several questions about hunter-gatherer archaeology—and indeed hunter-gatherers more generally. These doubts are expressed most simply in the title of this paper and the questions this leads to: *is there such a thing as hunter-gatherer archaeology? Is this distinctive and different than other forms of archaeology?* Anticipating that there is not a straightforward answer to this question, not least because of the problematic history of the term itself, this also means asking *can we justify continuing to use the idea of hunter-gatherer archaeology?* Given many of my professional actions over recent years, it is ironic that I was less and less certain I could answer these questions easily. Those doubts provide the point of departure for this discussion.

Previous attempts to define hunter-gatherer archaeology have strongly emphasised its distinctive character, often with reference to the different and/or limited range of surviving material culture available to us. Prentiss, for example, argues that the challenges of hunter-gatherer archaeology are greater than those facing other archaeologists:

*“(a)chieving a comprehensive understanding of past hunter-gatherers will require knowledge beyond the standard training received by many archaeologists” [4]*

Scheinsohn also highlights its distinctive character, whilst being less positive about the kinds of material we deal with:

*“(t)he archaeology of hunter-gatherers is often very different from the kind of archaeology seen in the media. Far away from castles, marble monuments, and splendorous graves, included in the field of classical or urban archaeology, it can frequently be very basic and straightforward” [5].*

However, if there is a distinctive kind of archaeology which is to do with hunter-gatherers, then what is it that provides that identity? Is it really the materials that we deal with, or the ideas that we use? Or is it something else? The two short quotes are from very short papers that did not have the scope to examine this question in the detail I needed. I struggled to find a definition that convinced me. The remainder of this paper is my response to this problem.

Firstly, I will explore four overlapping “prisms” which provide different perspectives on possible sources of this unity. I will ask whether hunter-gatherer archaeology is distinctive because:

- Hunter-gatherers are a distinctive object for our discipline;
- Hunter-Gatherer Archaeology has global similarities in how it is practiced;
- Hunter-gatherer archaeology is interested in a distinctive type of archaeological material remains;
- Hunter-gatherer archaeology focuses on distinctive questions that do not characterise other types of archaeology.

Finally, I will consider how the specific European context within which I work influences my answer to the overall question and develop a potential justification for continuing to use this term.

Some definitions and limits are necessary. By hunter-gatherer archaeology, I mean the archaeology of hunting and gathering groups, not archaeology as practiced by hunter-gatherers. My discussion is mainly limited to the archaeology of *Homo sapiens* populations. This is an Anglophone review which does not attempt to be globally comprehensive, and I acknowledge a significant geographical bias to Europe, the Americas and Australia. I look forward to responses to this argument from other locations—my answer to this question does not pretend to be definitive.

Underpinning much of this argument is reflection on the distinction between hunter-gatherer archaeology as practiced in colonised nations and colonising nations. This very crude simplification refers primarily to the role of nations in European settler colonialism, especially where this has displaced indigenous hunter-gatherer communities. Whilst this binary does not do justice to the complex histories of colonialism, it is hopefully sufficient for this initial argument. Put simply, there appears to be a fundamental difference in our practice in colonised contexts where archaeologists work with and for descendant communities, and areas where this does not take place, such as north-west Europe. Issues of decolonisation have not been to the fore in archaeology in this region (for a discussion of this in the field of human evolution, see [6,7]), which implies a significant consequent impoverishment of that research [8]. The discussion that follows is therefore informed by developing decolonising perspectives on our archaeological craft regardless of geographical location. Or more precisely, by developing a position of *decoloniality* [9] regarding the object of our research: hunter-gatherers in the deep-time past.

The decolonisation of research practices is often considered to require the creation of an “ethical space” [10] enabling the bringing together of different perspectives and encouraging self-reflexive humility in recognising the situated and partial understandings that arise from different positions [11]. In a European context, including many regions where descendant hunter-gatherer communities are not present, the creation of this ethical space means untangling the role of colonial thought in constructing our “foundational

knowledge” [12]; aligning our practice with the first of the three theoretical dimensions of Indigenous archaeology identified by McNiven, namely “identifying and expunging its colonialist underpinnings” [13] (p. 28). In many ways, this paper can be understood as an attempt to open an ethical space to reflect on aspects of our routine practices and concepts.

## 2. A View through Four Prisms

### 2.1. The Unity of Hunter-Gatherer Archaeology Is Created by Its Object

One of the simplest ways of confirming that there is a consistent form of hunter-gatherer archaeology would be if the object of that archaeology can be demonstrated to be consistent in character—that there is something distinctive and different about hunter-gatherers compared to all other forms of human social organisation. Unfortunately, this is not the case. I first consider the problematic origins of the term before examining the diversity which the concept seeks to categorise.

The idea of the hunter-gatherer was, and remains, a powerful “Other” for western thought. As Ingold notes,

*“(h)unter-gatherers occupy a special place in the structure of modern thought so special, that had they not existed they would certainly have had to have been invented (which to a large extent, they have been . . . )” [14].*

The idea of hunter-gatherers is in part based on observations of how people organised their lives, but as with all co-produced concepts, it is also a construct from a particular context. The notion of hunter-gatherers as distinctive came into sharp focus during the Eighteenth Century Scottish Enlightenment [15], not least as a remodelling of Classical myths and beliefs [16]. As is widely recognised, the idea of hunter-gatherers as being people without property and hierarchies was an origin myth that enabled the creation of stories about how such institutions had developed [17]. This social-evolutionary typology allowed societies to be ordered into a sequence from primitive and unfamiliar to the supposed pinnacle of this development—metropolitan, settler colonialist European societies. People encountered during European colonial expansion were mapped to this social-evolutionary scheme: geographical distance from Europe and difference in forms of social organisation were conflated with distance in time and advancement.

This was not a neutral process: framing hunter-gatherers as primitive, as unchanging over time, and as only harvesting the resources that nature provided for them, contributed significantly to the land grabs, displacement and genocide characteristic of settler colonialism. The idea of “hunter-gatherers” was one of a suite of concepts that enabled this. Some early usages, even within academic contexts, are brutal to modern senses: thus Tasmania was chosen as the basis for Sollas’ account of Pleistocene Man in *Ancient Hunters and their Modern Representatives*: “We will therefore direct our attention to the habits and mode of life of this isolated people, the most unprogressive in the world, which in the middle of the Nineteenth Century was still living in the dawn of the Palaeolithic epoch.” p. 87 [18] (for extensive examples, see [16]).

The role that this concept of hunter-gatherers played in colonial atrocities has been debated much more sharply in colonised countries than in Europe, and this has in turn led to sharp questioning of why it continues to play any role in academic research. Writing from an Australian perspective, for example, McNiven and Russell argue that:

*“(t)he question needs to be asked why a central concept of archaeology and anthropology remains based upon a hypothetical tenet of ancient Greek mythology . . . why a category that is part of a progressivist typology developed to allow hierarchical ranking of cultures into some form of teleological evolutionary sequence continues to be used.” [16].*

In presenting this paper to international audiences, it has been notable that American and Australian colleagues are much more strongly critical of *any* continued use of the term hunter-gatherer to classify human societies. That this question has not been explored in detail in Europe relates to the broader failure of deep-time archaeology in this region to decolonise noted above. The difficult history of a key concept should make

us profoundly uncomfortable about how we use it today and should mean that there is explicit consideration of whether a concept so entwined with coloniality has any serious role in research.

Setting aside, for the moment, the problematic history of the term, I now consider whether its use allows us to better understand similarity and difference between different human groups. Unfortunately, this is not the case. The label hunter-gatherer contains significant diversity and also masks similarities between hunter-gatherers and those with other subsistence strategies. For example, the so-called “intensification debate” of the 1980s in Australian archaeology highlighted both that the historical dynamics of economic intensification in the Holocene in Papua New Guinea and Australia were very similar, and that the classification of the inhabitants of the former as “horticultural” and the latter as “hunter-gatherers” had limited recognition of this and generated very different approaches to the societies in question [19,20]. The distinction of hunter-gatherer and farmer is also problematic when considering the adoption of agriculture. A variety of sub-classifications have been introduced to help police our conceptual boundaries across this transition: complex hunter-gatherers, low-level food or resource producers are recruited to allow us to keep on talking about hunter-gatherers even when they are behaving very differently than many models suggest [21].

One of the key developments of hunter-gatherer studies through the later twentieth century was increasing recognition of the diversity encompassed by the label and changes in the kinds of definitions of hunter-gatherers that were used, in anthropology at least. In general, this has seen a move from a focus on subsistence to other factors such as social organisation or ways of relating to the other occupants of the world. Most anthropological definitions emphasise this in different ways. Bird-David, for example, discusses “partially shared features”: hunting and gathering (subsistence), band society, sharing, giving environment, relations with others, ontologies [22]. Recognising “partially shared features” is a very useful way of capturing some of the potential diversity of hunter-gatherer archaeology and will be returned to below.

Whilst archaeologists often emphasise that the deep-time record should provide more variety than the ethnographic sample [23,24], archaeological definitions of hunter-gatherers tend to be less well-developed than anthropological ones: the emphasis is usually on the identification of a hunting and gathering subsistence strategy, with the more-or-less explicit assumption that other aspects will follow. As Lemke notes, this is often a highly “normative” understanding of hunter-gatherer behaviour derived from anthropological models [23]. Stated more bluntly, these are varying degrees of stereotype from the post Man the Hunter generalised foraging model.

Many aspects of the definitions of contemporary foragers that Bird-David offers are difficult (but not impossible) to operationalise in archaeological analyses—some would certainly sit outside of what many archaeologists would be happy to engage with. This raises a significant question about whether anthropological and archaeological definitions of hunter-gatherers are consistent—and whether it matters if they are not.

The degree of diversity included in most definitions of hunter-gatherers should raise questions about any unity of our object. As part of his hugely influential review of ethnographically observed hunter-gatherers for an archaeological audience, Kelly is explicit about the limitations of the concept: arguing that

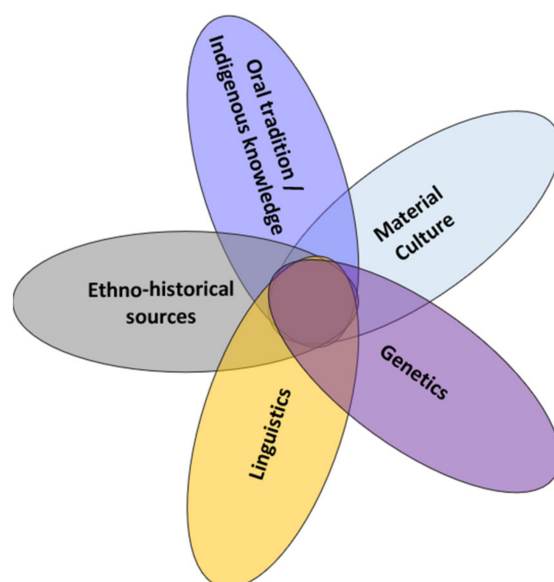
*“there is nothing wrong with the term “hunter-gatherer”—as long as we recognise that it carries no explanatory weight, that it is only a heuristic and pedagogical device ...”* [25].

It seems clear, therefore, that there is little or no unity in our object matter of hunter-gatherers. However, if used appropriately, this term might help us think and teach—a key observation which we will return to below.



## 2.2. Hunter-Gatherer Archaeology Has Global Similarities in How It Is Practiced

The second prism considers whether the distinctive character of hunter-gatherer archaeology is because it is practiced in the same way across the world. Unfortunately, this also does not appear to be the case, not least because of the different relationships of archaeology to other disciplines and fields of knowledge that provide evidence on past forms of human organisation and behaviour. This discussion deliberately takes a broader contextual definition of the field of archaeology, with the section following focusing on the nature of the material remains hunter-gatherer archaeology engages with. In the discussion that follows, I present a very simple model of the kinds of direct evidence for past hunter-gatherer lives to help explore this (Figure 2), with brief examples to highlight key relationships. This model does not consider the use of general or comparative models and focuses on direct material evidence available from specific regions. This also does not attempt to address the socio-economic or political context of archaeological practice, although this is referred to in discussion and would be a subject of considerable interest for more detailed research.



**Figure 2.** A simplified view of the relationship of archaeology and other fields which provide evidence about the human past.

*Material Culture.* The primary subject matter of archaeology and its disciplinary specialty is material culture, or the physical remains of the past, ranging from artefacts, through molecular remains in soil deposits to palaeoenvironmental proxies. The character of this material is discussed in more detail in Section 2.3.

*Genetics.* Recent years have seen a revolution in the use of a range of molecular analyses in the study of the human past, but perhaps the most powerful has been genetics, not least with the development of both protocols and sequencing techniques that allow for the reliable extraction of ancient DNA. This work has been transformative and disruptive, resulting in many critical considerations of the relationship between genetic and archaeological research [26,27]. Genetic data are highly specialist and presented through dense statistical modelling which is impenetrable to many archaeological readers. At times, significant concerns exist about the archaeological interpretations embedded within the narratives provided by genetic research, especially their reduction to culture-historical labelling and problematic associations with ethnicity [28]. This is exacerbated by the headline grabbing character of a new scientific technique which, at times, seems to enjoy showing what it perceives as the limitations of archaeology. It is also important to foreground the

reservations that have been raised about the ethics and implications of sampling protocols in genetic research, especially where descendant communities are involved [29,30].

One good example of the ways in which archaeological data can still provide refinements to the DNA story is provided by research on the early Holocene colonisation of Northern Scandinavia. It had long been recognised archaeologically that this area saw the meeting of two distinctive technological traditions: argued to represent communities with a maritime focus moving along the Atlantic coast, and terrestrial hunters from the east [31,32]. Recent aDNA research confirmed this, identifying the mixing of “Western Hunter-Gatherer” and “Eastern Hunter-Gatherer” genetic types in this area and proposing two primary migration routes to explain this [33,34]. Most recently, however, an archaeological review with refined chronologies has criticised the two migrations proposed genetically for being too simplistic, demonstrating six different episodes of contact and/or movement of ideas in northern Scandinavia in the c. 1500 year period between first settlement and the first DNA evidence [35].

Archaeology and genetics work best when in debate and discussion, allowing each discipline to contribute to a story that neither could tell in isolation. Considered more broadly, MacEachern, for example, has shown that the relationship of genetic, linguistic and archaeological evidence is very different in Europe than Africa: with the strong European archaeological record enabling sanity checks of the genetic claims that are not possible in areas with less well-developed archaeological sequences—meaning that genetic claims may go unchallenged [36].

*Linguistics.* In some regions, past hunter-gatherers’ lives can be reconstructed from linguistic evidence, understood not to mean specific stories or narratives, but the structure of languages, their relationships, the borrowing of words, etc. [36]. Unfortunately, stereotypes about hunter-gatherers and farmers persist in the interpretation of linguistic data. Reconstructions of Holocene language families are often treated more sceptically when they are associated with foragers rather than farmers [37].

As with the relationship between genetics and archaeology, historical linguistics evidence must be read alongside other sources of data. For example, linguistic evidence shows transformation in seed grinding processes in mid-Holocene arid-zone Australia, but does not indicate whether this is associated with population movement [37]. The importance of combining linguistic and other evidence is also shown in Burenhult’s long-term perspective on the relationships of languages and foraging practices in the Malay peninsula [38]. This shows the persistence of a foraging niche which is inhabited by different groups over time but has linguistic continuity. “The language and subsistence mode coincide not because they are inherently connected, but because the niche has been good at preventing external forces from taking them apart” (p. 185).

*Oral traditions.* In many parts of the world, Indigenous oral traditions provide another perspective on the past. The integration of oral traditions and perspectives into archaeological practice forms part of a broader movement towards decolonising archaeology and developing Indigenous archaeology [13]. The accuracy and longevity of oral tradition have often been questioned, but recent examples show accurate accounts recording sea-level change extending over at least 7000 years in Australia [39]. On the Pacific Northwest coast of America, a combination of archaeological and oral perspectives on the history of the Tsimshian, on the coasts of what is now called British Columbia and southern Alaska, suggests that profound social change in the “Middle Period” (3500–1500 BP) was a consequence of ethno-migrations in the region [40]. These were recorded in oral histories but would *not* have been considered a likely archaeological explanation for the material evidence observed. Martindale and Marsden observe that the two sources of evidence are improved by being brought together:

*“Archaeological reconstructions are improved from the rich social and political history preserved in oral records. Oral traditions, in turn, can benefit from the structured chronological, technological, and economic data that archaeological culture histories provide.”* p. 34.

*Ethnohistorical Evidence.* Ethnohistorical evidence is understood here to refer primarily to the written and visual records of the contact and post-contact period, and ranging from the observations of explorers, traders, missionaries, and settlers through to more formal ethnographies. Indeed, the power of informal and unqualified colonial “traveller’s tales” in constructing many of our expectations about the hunter-gatherer “Other” should be stressed [8].

Ethnohistorical evidence has played a significant role in structuring archaeological practices in some regions. Put simply, the ethnohistorical “present” can be understood as an end-point for a historical trajectory of change and provide a first step in helping to reconstruct that change. For example, Fitzhugh’s account of the development of socio-political complexity amongst hunter-gatherers of the Kodiak Islands in the North Pacific uses accounts of fur traders, Russian colonial officials, missionaries and later ethnography to understand social structure at contact [41], and then critically reviews how this developed over time. As well as providing points of departure for analysis, oral and ethno-historical traditions can provide valuable correctives to archaeological assertions: as, for example, in Tasmania where historical records eventually refuted damaging archaeological narratives of claimed technological loss, not least because the value archaeologists placed on contact-era ethnohistorical evidence changed [42].

The use of ethnohistorical data to assist in reconstructing the past carries significant dangers, not least in terms of teleology and the imposition of the ethnographic present into the past [43]. As Grier has argued [44], it is critical to understand the degree to which colonial contact might have transformed the practices recorded in ethnohistorical sources. For the Coast Salish, he stresses that this was a

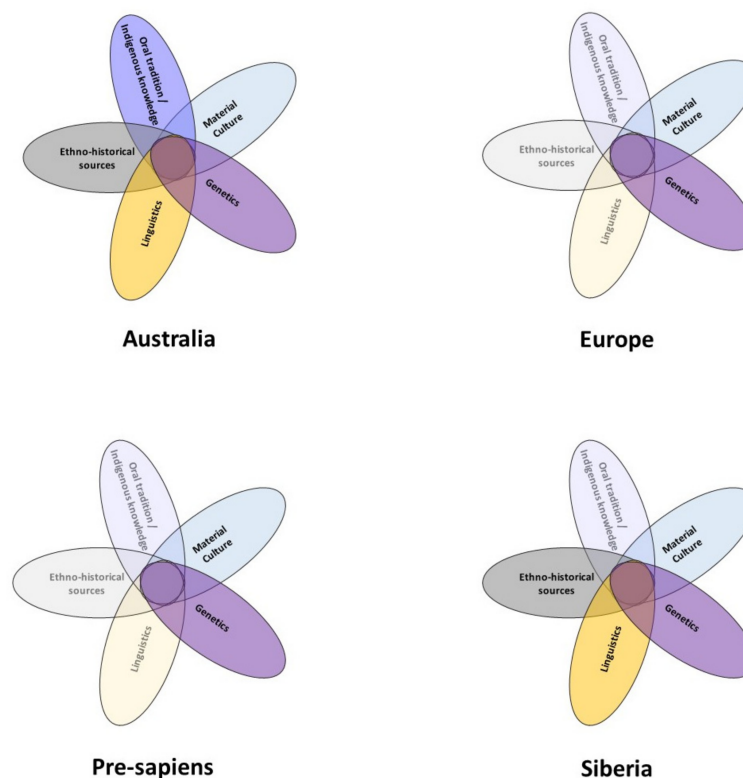
*“form of disruption of preceding Indigenous systems that had a particularly marked effect on the parameters of those systems in some of the specific ways that archaeologists typically set out to measure—mobility, exchange, seasonal rounds, and settlement distributions”* (pp. 294–295)

Grier shows how archaeological interpretations emplace this transformed system into the pre-contact past. The power of the ethnographic present therefore poses a risk of flattening difference—of creating deep time as simple continuity with a supposed present which in most cases is an outcome of colonial violence. In this sense, ethnohistorical records are best understood as a starting point for the development of historical narratives of social practices which seek to identify episodes of change [13].

The availability of ethnohistorical sources therefore creates problems and opportunities for understanding the deep-time archaeological past. However, it is also clear that navigating these challenges is a different kind of intellectual problem than faces those who work with no ethnohistorical sources. This was brought home forcibly to me during a conversation at CHAGS11 (Vienna 2015) when Colin Grier asked me “where do you get your analogies from?” for working with Mesolithic Europe. It is a question that helps us understand how different hunter-gatherer archaeology can be in different places.

*Discussion: regional practices?* The value of the simplified model of hunter-gatherer archaeology presented here is in highlighting the significant diversity in how the archaeology of hunter-gatherers is practiced worldwide, as highlighted in Figure 3.





**Figure 3.** Comparing hunter-gatherer archaeology in different areas.

For example, in the case of Australia, arguably the contributions of all five fields are integrated (if not equal). McNiven and Russell argue that a combination of social, political and legal changes, especially in the context of Native Rights and Social Justice movements “set the scene for the development of a new, unique (Australian) archaeology tailored to accommodate the desires of the country’s Indigenous and scientific communities” [16] (p. 7), noting that there is still room for significant development.

In contrast, in Western Europe there is little to no use of direct linguistic evidence, ethnohistorical evidence or oral tradition in the reconstruction of the hunter-gatherer past. Genetics and archaeology make the most substantial contributions. Some use of a generalised “Northern” hunter-gatherer as an analogical frame for Europe’s hunter-gatherer prehistory has been made, sometimes (but not always) citing the possibility of historical connections [45,46]. In Siberia, ethnohistorical and linguistic evidence are used by researchers, but, despite the increasing prominence of ethnoarchaeological approaches, the field of Indigenous archaeology remains under-developed [47,48].

Finally, the archaeology of pre-Sapiens populations is only characterised by direct evidence in the form of material culture and genetics, supplemented by the use of generalised models drawing on comparative linguistics, primatology and anthropology.

Returning to the second prism, the answer to the question “is hunter-gatherer archaeology the same world-wide” must therefore be no. Hunter-gatherer archaeology is highly varied, not least because of the different relationship to other research traditions and sources of direct evidence in different places. This, in turn, is further amplified by the different social, economic and political contexts within which hunter-gatherer archaeology might operate, especially in terms of the relationship with descendant groups. In most instances where archaeology has engaged with different sources of information, it is recognised (sometimes after a period of difficult adjustment) that bringing together the different disciplines works to the benefit of both and creates a better understanding of the past. In this sense, and in comparative perspective, the traditional archaeological focus in Europe might be seen as an impoverished form of hunter-gatherer archaeology.

### 2.3. The Third Prism: The Evidence Base for Archaeology

Another way of considering the distinctive character of hunter-gatherer archaeology would be through identifying a distinctive suite of characteristic materials. Here, it is appropriate to acknowledge the power of another stereotype—namely that the archaeology of hunter-gatherers deals with very fragmentary remains, is often dominated by stone tools, and that practitioners are obsessed with the recovery and recording of this tiny material, applying an ever-expanding battery of analytical techniques to extract stories from stones. Explanations for this supposedly characteristic material basis of hunter-gatherer archaeology often overlap: they frequently include claims that the material is very old, and therefore taphonomically altered, or that there is a limited range of material culture in hunter-gatherer contexts, sometimes explicitly linking this to the lack of hierarchy or presence of high degrees of routine mobility.

It clearly a truism that, even when restricted to *Homo sapiens*, the archaeology of hunter-gatherers can frequently mean dealing with very old material. This can, for example, mean dealing with time spans in the hundreds of thousands of years for first human dispersals and tens of thousands of years for first settlement in some regions. However, at least some agricultural societies had developed within the early Holocene, probably by about 10,000 years ago in Southwest Asia [49]. Many of the hunter-gatherer communities that are researched archaeologically are much younger than this. Age alone does not define hunter-gatherer archaeology. One important age-related feature, which is not always commented on, is that hunter-gatherer archaeology is often the *oldest* in a region. This has important consequences in terms of taphonomy and discussions of origins.

Hunter-gatherer archaeologists have developed increasingly sophisticated approaches to dealing with the influence of time on their archaeological evidence. In part, this refers to taphonomic processes and the array of palaeo-environmental and geoarchaeological approaches which allow us to reconstruct past landscapes and understand the formation of archaeological deposits more clearly. However, this also encompasses developing understanding of how the duration of our archaeological deposits influences the kinds of questions that we can ask—concerns raised under the label of “time perspectivism” [50,51], but considered more broadly than that. These problems are not limited to the archaeology of hunter-gatherers—they are features of the archaeology of *all* periods—but they are particularly well-developed in hunter-gatherer contexts.

Finally, reviews, and stereotypes, often propose that hunter-gatherer archaeology deals with a limited range and extent of material culture and is therefore heavily interested in reconstructing technology [5]. It is of course important to stress that where preservation conditions are favourable, hunter-gatherer archaeology can be made from a very wide diversity of materials and show considerable complexity and variety. Numerous examples could be provided, including the remarkable excavations in eroding permafrost at the Yu’pik village of Nullaleq [52,53]. Setting such examples aside, the allegedly limited range of hunter-gatherer material culture is sometimes linked to two supposed characteristics of hunter-gatherer societies: that they are mobile, and therefore tend to have little material culture anyway; and that they tend to be egalitarian, and therefore have limited diversity of material culture.

Again, any overall understanding of hunter-gatherer diversity shows that these claims are not true in all instances. We do not need to become too concerned about whether or not the deepest-time hunter-gatherers were egalitarian or not to recognise that many hunter-gatherer groups were far from egalitarian, and that a wide variety of social strategies were enacted through the accumulation and elaboration of material culture [54]. Archaeologists interested in hunter-gatherers are also not the only archaeologists interested in mobility. The archaeology of pastoral communities, or archaeology with and for the homeless [55,56] highlight other examples of the archaeology of mobile communities.

Overall, then, whilst there are shared features that may link some aspects of the material evidence characteristic of hunter-gatherers, there are no exclusive or universal features.

#### 2.4. The Fourth Prism: Distinctive Questions and Approaches?

Another area of potential commonality is the identification of shared themes of interest within hunter-gatherer archaeology. Many of the themes that characterise our practice, or indeed our future direction, are also shared with other archaeological specialisms: for example, when Prentiss identifies gender and landscape archaeology as areas of growth in hunter-gatherer archaeology [4]. If we focus on areas that appear to be more exclusive to hunter-gatherer archaeology, four themes are significant:

- Methodological challenges associated with understanding social aspects of the past;
- The influence of evolutionary perspectives;
- An interest in origins of key behavioural or social traits/institutions;
- An increasing awareness of the importance of decolonising our concepts and practices.

*A social archaeology of hunter-gatherers:* A consistent thread in reviews is that it is difficult for hunter-gatherer archaeology to develop interpretations of the social context of activity, especially in deep-time contexts. This prejudice speaks to long standing models of archaeological reasoning, (in)famously captured in the ladder of inference. In such models, we can reconstruct subsistence technologies, but anything else is too uncertain. In fact, and as noted above, the archaeological emphasis on subsistence-first definitions means that the social is often integrated into these pessimistic accounts by sleight of hand in the form of implicit normative analogies.

To my mind, the “ethical space” for research includes the recognition of the difference and humanity of the objects of our archaeological research, and therefore requires a commitment to crafting rich and socially engaged accounts of hunter-gatherer pasts. This, in turn, requires celebrating innovative approaches to this task. Understanding the social worlds of the past may not be easy, but the over-emphasis on the difficulty of doing so means that we risk downplaying the creativity and excellence of work that seeks to build such interpretations. This includes new approaches to narrative as reflective of relational ontologies [57], or to the use of sound [58] or innovative creative writing to engage audiences (accepting that its focus is not *Homo sapiens*, this is most notable recently in the phenomenal success of Wragg-Sykes’ account of Neanderthal social worlds in *Kindred* [59]).

*Evolutionary Perspectives:* A distinctive theme in the archaeology of hunter-gatherers is the substantial influence of approaches with a strong evolutionary theoretical stance, often developed with the field of Human Behavioural Ecology [60]. Whilst HBE approaches have also seen significant application to the processes of domestication, they have generally been less influential in non-hunter-gatherer contexts. Becoming a hunter-gatherer archaeologist normally requires some form of familiarisation with these frameworks and approaches.

Despite its strength as a research tradition in some contexts, especially North America, and the valuable insights it can provide HBE remains controversial, with many commentators arguing that the placement of a rational economic actor at the modelled centre of decision making is not appropriate (for an early example of such critiques, see [61]). This is especially important if we are to maintain an “ethical space” for archaeological practice which seeks to understand the influence of colonial attitudes on our understandings of humans in the past. As Porr has argued, imposing the rationality of settler nations onto the past risks recreating the damage that was done to Indigenous ways of understanding the world [57]. Stated more bluntly, imposing western economics onto the past might in itself be considered a colonial act (I am grateful to Colin Grier for discussion of this point and this strong statement.). Seeking to provide contextually based social interpretations is an important provision of balance to HBE.

*Origins:* Much hunter-gatherer archaeology is concerned with origins and transitions: the development of inequality; the origins of gender roles; the origins of agriculture; first colonisations and dispersals; first religion. Again, this emphasis on origins is true of other periods of archaeological research: the archaeology of the medieval period, for example, examines the conditions within which feudalism and capitalism developed. In fact, what distinguishes the origins that we seek in the archaeology of hunter-gatherers is that these origins and transitions are often considered to be fundamental steps in the human story.

The origins of egalitarianism and trajectories of developing inequality, for example, are considered foundational questions about who we are as a species and what our most “basic human nature” might be. These debates are played out in broader intellectual discussions and contributions as well as the specialist literature [62,63]. Here, of course, we are discussing not just the nature of hunter-gatherer archaeology but the mythopoetic role that hunter-gatherers have always played in our social-evolutionary imagination.

*Colonial legacies and decoloniality:* Increased engagement with the legacy of colonial thought and practices is a key theme in much hunter-gatherer archaeology. Unsurprisingly, this has seen the most significant development in colonised nations where archaeologists work with and for descendant communities. The ongoing development of Indigenous archaeology, which of course does not just involve hunter-gatherers, is a complex and diverse process but has involved fundamental challenges to our archaeological modes of thought and praxis [13]. The value of Indigenous archaeology lies not just in attempts to redress historical power imbalances and wrongs, but also in the ways that it improves our practices. As “issues of reflexivity, ethics and self-locating are critical components of the Indigenous research paradigm” (1) it creates better science [64].

For example, the recent re-excavation of Cloggs Cave, Southeast Australia, fifty years after the original phase of archaeological work, was informed by collaboration with the local GunaiKurnai [65]. The original interpretation was developed in an economic and adaptationalist frame and suggested that there was no Late Holocene use of the cave. GunaiKurnai perspectives, however, tell stories such as that reported by Phillip Pepper (1905–1985):

*“There was the story about the Hairy Man... Some called it nargun. It was a bad thing anyway. It was seven feet tall and went out at night to hunt the children and eat them.”*

These powerful beings lived in caves, which were therefore:

*“were not known to have ever been used for everyday living or camping, but were locations where mulla mullung (medicine/magic men/women) undertook their special training, practised magic, and obtained magical objects.”*

With this understanding of the potential use of caves, the excavation was able to identify material evidence of such practices. In another Australian example, this time working on interpretations of rock art, the development of a collaborative project between researchers and Yanyuwa communities required sensitive negotiation of profoundly different epistemological perspectives [66,67]:

*“They are for the spirits those painting, they put them there in the caves on the rocks, I am telling you they are not for my kinspeople, my deceased ones who lived long ago, merely it is the spirits” (Banjo Dindalhi 1968).*

The resulting development of “methodological open-ness” unsettles common-place categories and forces new ways of thinking.

This recognition of the need to engage with the legacies of colonialism is far from universal amongst archaeologists. A significant distinction exists between those archaeologists who routinely work with and for descendant communities who are in a position to strongly foreground these issues and those who do not work with such groups, either because the communities in question have not been provided with the capacity to engage or because there are no descendant communities in the region in question. Even in these latter contexts, we need to create an “ethical space” for our practice. Issues of colonialism, decoloniality and the politics and ethics of our work should not only be considered where we work with or for descendant communities.

For example, how we use Indigenous knowledge to generate and sustain the idea of “hunter-gatherers” should be subject to critical and reflexive consideration. Porr and Bell have argued that continuing to suggest that there is such a thing as a “hunter-gatherer world view” simply reiterates the idea that there is such a thing as a hunter-gatherer [68]: re-producing and co-producing the social-evolutionary category. However, these practices are

widespread: it is common-place to read archaeological accounts of past hunter-gatherers that seek analogues from ethnographically observed hunter-gatherers from a wide variety of geographical contexts. Little justification is usually offered for this selection of analogues, which is seen as being self-evident: but is underpinned by neo-evolutionary logic (In many instances, the authors are explicit that the examples are not direct analogies, but “alternatives” or “possibilities” to help us think differently. This is analogy by subterfuge.). The ongoing selection of analogical comparisons reifies and reinscribes the category of “hunter-gatherer” through the repeated presencing of ethnographically observed hunter-gatherers into the deep-time past, often into distant and alien geographies. Such analogies often foreground Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies as alternatives to Western categories. Whilst intended as critiques of dominant Western epistemologies, this runs the risk of removing local stories of place from their context and creating a fixed “Indigenous” perspective, flattened of difference and dynamism and with their danger and critique downplayed [69,70]. Montgomery argues that any use of Indigenous world views in the development of general theory requires engagement with the political and ethical implications of these perspectives [71]. This includes recognition of the impact of colonialism on Indigenous peoples, but also requires that the researchers are open to “transformative Indigenous philosophy”—and a “radical indigenism” which sees Indigenous perspectives as providing genuine alternative ways of knowing and engaging with the world.

### 2.5. *Four Prisms Revisited*

The four perspectives on what grounds might exist for arguing that there is a distinctive field of practice that can be identified as hunter-gatherer archaeology have been useful in highlighting the diversity of our practices.

There is little or no unity provided by the first prism, the definition of these groups as “hunter-gatherers”—which is a category with a problematic history and one which is increasingly recognised as encompassing very significant diversity. We should significantly question the continued value of using this term as a way of classifying human diversity. Our second prism demonstrated that hunter-gatherer archaeology is practiced very differently in different parts of the world, and the third confirmed that it does not have a single distinctive form of archaeological record. Finally, the fourth prism sought potential unity in theoretical approaches and themes. Again, there is no simple universal response.

Returning to the anthropological definitions developed by Bird-David, however, it may be useful to consider aspects of these varied themes as “partially shared features” of hunter-gatherer archaeology—and to recognise that there will always be exceptions to the rule. Different practitioners will recognise different aspects of their archaeological craft through the perspectives enabled by the analytical prisms. There is hopefully enough common ground to encourage the value of talking to each other and the generation of connections and community.

## 3. Discussion

This partial definition of hunter-gatherer archaeology, alongside the deeply problematic history of the term hunter-gatherer itself, might suggest that the answer to my initial question is negative: that there is no unity of hunter-gatherer archaeology and that we cannot justify using the term. Indeed, in the early stages of this review, this was the position that I began to develop. However, seeking a universalising answer to this kind of question is not helpful, and is not in keeping with the relationality necessarily characteristic of researchers working from different situations. To answer our initial question, we also need to think about why we might be using the term and in what contexts we are situated. Returning to Kelly’s comment that the term hunter-gatherer is only of pedagogic and heuristic value, what am I trying to achieve by using this to describe archaeological practice? What are the benefits of this, and what are the costs? Who are we communicating with? What purpose does the label seek to serve?



A reason for emphasising that there is such a thing as hunter-gatherer archaeology is because it enables the generation of research communities at different scales. Labels generate communities—and the idea of a community of people bound by shared interests is what makes possible organisations such as ISHGR and their CHAGS (Conferences on Hunting and Gathering Societies) meetings. These highly diverse communities create wonderful opportunities for researchers to develop networks, exchange ideas and listen to the unfamiliar. They lift our perspectives from the local and encourage critical reflection on our practice. The opportunities these communities create to encounter and think through difference are of great importance for our discipline. Labels, of course, can also serve to exclude people from communities, but the idea of hunter-gatherer archaeology gains some justification, at least, from the communities it enables.

Working in Anglophone Europe, a more important reason for arguing that there is value in using the term hunter-gatherer archaeology is because of the remarkable social power the concept holds. Although its precise meaning has shifted and changed over time, the influence and reach this idea holds in public discourse remains. Indeed, Lavi, Rudge and I have recently argued that the idea of the hunter-gatherer is presented as both the antithesis and the antidote to modern (urban) life in Britain and Ireland [72]. These visions of our hunter-gatherer selves, which we supposedly stepped away from with the Neolithic revolution, are constructed in a neoliberal and colonialist context and they are stereotypical visions of what a hunter-gatherer might be: at times, crude stereotypes. Caution is therefore needed about the use of the term, but its significant social presence is a significant *opportunity* for researchers interested in these topics. Rather than reject the term because of its problems, an alternative strategy is to use the idea of hunter-gatherers as a hook to bring people in, and then start to deconstruct the concept, to highlight its strengths, weaknesses—and critically, its history.

Thomas Widlok argues that the ethnography of hunter-gatherers is valuable:

*“because it departs in so many ways from the dominant ways of farmers and herders—while not being exceptional to the extent that a comparison would not be possible . . . . it enriches the spectrum of possible lifeways that humans have been able to bring about—and it enriches our attempts to better understand how humans create any particular socio-cultural environment in the first place.” [73].*

This important emphasis reminds us that understanding hunter-gatherers is a key contribution to considering issues around human diversity and human possibilities and is as true for archaeology as it is for ethnography. The emphasis on possibilities and comparative perspectives in this statement also aligns our archaeological practice with definitions of decoloniality which consider it be not simply a critical response to dominant colonial perspectives but as a creative and subversive praxis: “a process, practice and project of sowing seeds . . . ” [9] (p. 100).

In summary, working within an Anglophone European context, the power of the idea of hunter-gatherers is such that the use of the term “hunter-gatherer archaeology” can be justified, if we ensure to read this concept “against the grain”. Hunter-gatherer archaeology is a practice that seeks to understand past hunter-gatherer lives to enrich our understanding of the spectrum of possible human lifeways. Whilst there is no simple unity to the craft of hunter-gatherer archaeology, there are “partially shared” features that can enable communities of researchers to share ideas, methods and reflections—perhaps to share a perspective on the conditions under which we produce knowledge. To be effective—and to be justifiable—hunter-gatherer archaeology must be self-critical in developing decolonial perspectives on the problematic history of its core concepts, and global in its outlook. It must also engage outside the academy, using the potential of the public recognition of its central concept.

If these conditions are fulfilled, then in the local contexts within which I practice there can be such a thing as hunter-gatherer archaeology, and I think I can justify using that rather problematic term. Arguably, I may be able to hold the contradictory position where the idea of hunter-gatherer archaeology is used to introduce people to the argument that

the very use of the term hunter-gatherer should be questioned. This in turn might enable us to use the power of that concept to generate compelling narratives which help sow the seeds of something different.

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