

JOHN J. SHEA, *The Unstoppable Human Species: The Emergence of Homo Sapiens in Prehistory*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2023. 350 pages, 38 figures, 22 tables, and 11 boxes, paperback, ISBN 978-1108429084.

Any new book by John Shea is sure to catch the attention of Palaeolithic archaeologists and students alike. Suffice it to say, *The Unstoppable Human Species* is no exception to this rule. In a break away from his previous three books,¹ Shea considers more than the stone tool repertoire of prehistoric hominins. This book confronts the broader evidence of behaviours responsible for our species' global expansion and evolutionary success. In doing so, it presents a new 'survival archaeology' approach centred on 'how' questions rather than 'who' questions, providing a welcome counterpoint to marketable narratives on prehistoric identity generated by aDNA research. In essence, the big question asked is: how did prehistoric humans overcome essential survival problems as they spread across the globe? Shea tackles this question methodically in a twofold manner; firstly, by reviewing the evidence of hominin survival skills across space and time and secondly, by evaluating the role of migrations versus dispersals in the human diaspora. In this review I give focus to some of the material and arguments pertinent to these two themes.

As per its subtitle, the book's core focus is on *H. sapiens* and covers the unfolding expansion of the last ~300,000 years. In general, the author's thesis is straightforward: that our species' 'unstoppability' is not owed to a unique quality or cognitive capacity but to how it used its ancestral survival skills differently to prior and contemporary hominins who also possessed them, namely *H. heidelbergensis* and *H. neanderthalensis*. These survival skills include powerful precision grasping, endurance bipedalism, predictive hallucination, spoken language and hyper-sociality.² Shea develops this line of argument within an 'Integrative Ancestral Survival Skills Hypothesis' which proposes that *H. sapiens* used these skills in complex combinations to overcome major survival challenges common to all human primates, turning them into 'force multipliers vastly more than the sum of their parts'.³ Such survival challenges are theorised to be first aid and medication, thermoregulation, hydration, nutrition, transportation, and communication.⁴

This follows the author's 'lifelong interest'⁵ in bushcraft and ancestral technology, and he is forthcoming about drawing upon non-peer-reviewed literature on bushcraft and wilderness survival to this end. Although an unconventional approach – like the near total omission of stone tool industry names or 'NASTIES'⁶ – these skills and survival challenges are conceivably universal and therefore confer value on the comparative framework of analysis. Chapters 1–4 firmly situate this approach in the context of other sources of evidence and likewise introduce important concepts and themes in a way that is accessible to non-professional readers. The author's accompanying illustrations and tables, as throughout the book, supplement the text well and are a testament to his handiwork.

The bulk of the book⁷ makes use of a survival archaeology approach to review the regional and chronological evidence of these skills among prehistoric humans. In doing so, it crystallises an approach previously published as a short communication⁸ (readers will also learn from that entry that the term 'survival archaeology' was coined by Marilyn Johnson, although her name is absent in *The Unstoppable Human Species*). Each chapter deals with a specific major region (bar Chapter 8, devoted to Neanderthals at large and chapters 13–14, which are discussion oriented) and evaluates the hard evidence of survival strategies among dispersing groups. Given the rather pop-science style of some chapter titles (e.g. Chapter 6 – 'First Asians' or Chapter 9 – 'Early Eurasians'), these regional chapters can alternatively be summarised as follows: Chapter 5 – Africa, Chapter 6 – Southwest Asia, Chapter 7 – Southeast Asia, Chapter 9 – Northern Eurasia, Chapter 10 – The Americas, and Chapter 12 – The Pacific Islands. With each chapter, Shea reviews whether the evidence from each region and time period demonstrates an absence of any of the six ancestral survival skills among the three hominins of focus, to which it can mostly be said that observed material differences are 'matters of degree rather than of kind'.⁹ This comparative approach makes for enjoyable reading and its accompanying

1 SHEA 2013. – SHEA 2017. – SHEA 2020a.

2 pp. 74–80.

3 p. 82.

4 pp. 71–74.

5 p. xvi.

6 SHEA 2014.

7 Chapters 5–10 and 12.

8 SHEA 2020b.

9 p. 106.

arguments are largely convincing. Indeed, the synthesis of a global body of evidence in an instructive and fair way is no easy feat and the author should be complimented for this effort.

One slight pitfall in the above argument, however, is that direct evidence for some of these survival strategies across space and time is scant or entirely missing. To patch these empirical holes, the past existence of certain strategies is invoked as reasonable assumptions e.g. the use of containers for nutrition purposes or the use of watercraft as a method of transportation. True, if prehistoric humans were hafting tools using cordage it is therefore highly likely, if not certain, that they also made storage containers with organic materials. And as Shea correctly emphasises throughout the book, this absence of evidence is likely a function of preservation biases.¹⁰ That said, it is a slight leap of faith to assert, for example, that *H. sapiens* ‘almost certainly used watercraft’ to disperse across northern Eurasia.¹¹ While future research has the potential to corroborate this statement, the current data precludes any certainty about the use of watercraft by dispersing groups (and less so about its ubiquity over such a large continental area). In Europe, for example, although it remains a valid hypothesis that is occasionally implied, there is currently no direct evidence that early *H. sapiens* dispersed across the continent using watercraft. Furthermore, it seems that once established, initial hunter-gatherer groups did not undertake short open-water crossings in the Mediterranean (e.g. the Strait of Gibraltar); given that, at present, the earliest example of an open-sea crossing is attributed to Sardinia circa 15,000 calBP.¹²

On a broader level, therefore, the absence of evidence for waterborne dispersals in places where we strongly expect them generates unresolved questions that form major lacunae in our understanding of Pleistocene watercraft use. As such, that prehistoric hunter-gatherers used watercraft to settle Sahul (Chapter 7) or quite possibly to disperse along a coastal route to the Americas (Chapter 10) – the timings of both of which are heavily debated – does not necessarily mean it happened elsewhere or later in time. The use of riverine and maritime watercraft may not have been common to all Late Pleistocene humans,¹³ and thus it is difficult to agree with the argument that ‘just as Early Eurasians almost certainly settled Northern Eurasia using watercraft, the peopling of the Americas required watercraft use too’.¹⁴

The asymmetry of historical trajectories is an unassailable fact repeatedly upheld by the archaeological record and, incidentally, something that the author alludes to when he writes that ‘behavioural variability is the common heritage of humanity’.¹⁵

Notwithstanding this technicality, the main arguments of this survival archaeology perspective will be of interest to researchers, to whom the book is partly (but not primarily) addressed. The overarching conclusion reached is that the archaeological record of *H. sapiens* beyond Africa does not demonstrate additions to the six survival skills in place among prior and contemporary hominins. Granted, evidence of some skills among these hominins and indeed early humans is sometimes elusive, and especially those rooted in organic materials. However, these instances are inconsequential for making two important points. First, that humans used these skills in intricate combinations in a way that other hominins did not, giving rise to, among other things, complex projectile weapons, textile baskets and containers, fishing implements, watercraft, medicinal recipes and art.¹⁶ Second, compared to their Neanderthal contemporaries, humans devised improvements to thermoregulation, nutrition and communication that likely became consequential for their evolutionary success. Both points provide insight into why the archaeological record of humans in Eurasia is so distinct, which Shea supplements with a valid suggestion: competency tests. That is to say, an increase in group encounters required tests to demonstrate competence in technological practices (stone tools, ornaments, etc.), thereby resulting in strong selective pressures. In advancing this survival archaeology perspective, the book establishes a worthy counterargument to earlier texts that emphasised the role of socially mediated cognition or technology and information transmission in the evolutionary success of our species.¹⁷

Another strongpoint of the book lies in its second major theme of migrations versus dispersals in the global expansion of our species. In the introduction, Shea writes that the book ‘challenges archaeology’s use of migration as an explanation for past human population movements’.¹⁸ Although his continuous evaluation of the evidence reads more as a critique of narratives generated by the media, popular science writers and geneticists,¹⁹ and therefore less so of archaeologists, it is effective in providing a much-needed rebuttal

¹⁰ C.f. KELLY, MACKIE, KANDEL 2023.

¹¹ p. 202.

¹² SONDAAR et al. 1986.

¹³ See GAFFNEY 2021.

¹⁴ p. 220.

¹⁵ p. 237.

¹⁶ p. 298.

¹⁷ E.g. GAMBLE 2013. – HOFFECKER 2017.

¹⁸ p. 2.

¹⁹ E.g. REICH 2018.

of undying migrationist perspectives. Surprisingly or not, Palaeolithic archaeologists still use migration as an explanatory term for the spread of humans across the globe and at times opt to describe (in a rather outdated culture-historical fashion) said migrations as ‘waves’.²⁰ Shea provides an excellent service to the discipline by methodically demonstrating that the population movements of the Late Pleistocene consisted of dispersals rather than migrations. In large part, this is because ‘migrations require food production or its functional equivalent’²¹ to sustain the large numbers of people that traverse great distances (i.e. ≥ 100 km). In making this important point, the book plugs a publication void that expanded after Clark’s²² essay on the topic.

At the same time, however, the argument on migration could have been strengthened by a greater qualification of the key terms. Definitions of migration, dispersal and transhumance are provided in Chapter 1 but without much explanation for the basis of these definitions or their material differences. For example, no justification is given for why dispersals only involve ‘individuals or small groups’ or result in social relations being ‘reconfigured in destinations’.²³ Equally, the definition of migration provided does not consider whether migrations could operate as repeated small-scale movements (akin to dispersals) by large groups, rather than just long-distance journeys (≥ 100 km) involving hundreds of people. Unfortunately, it is not until much later in the book that the author touches upon this nuance with reference to the Bantu expansions of sub-Saharan Africa.²⁴ The complex character and variability of mobility is an aspect that is often highlighted by archaeologists of later prehistory when challenging simplistic statements about past population movements. As it happens, terms like migration and dispersal – which carry assumptions of self-reflexive journeys rarely unpacked – are terms that archaeologists project on the past and must therefore be qualified with theory and evidence.

In sum, this book takes hold of the question ‘why us?’ – a question at the bedrock of palaeoanthropological inquiry – and proposes a novel survival archaeology approach to understand *how* we came to be the ‘unstoppable’ species. To date there has been no attempt to examine our global expansion through the lens of human survival skills and John Shea succeeds in providing a thought-provoking and creative take on the subject. At a time when press-release

science endangers due process and erroneous narratives of prehistory become engraved into the public imagination, we must also appreciate the arrival of this compact, hypothesis-driven piece of work. Its unconventionality and minor technical mishaps should not detract from its scholarship. *The Unstoppable Human Species* is a vibrant but no less scientific invitation to the discipline that is sure to catch the attention of a broad audience. In the words of the author himself, which may foreshadow the nature of archaeological interest: ‘How many different kinds of “Mousterian” industries occurred in southern France? Nobody cares. How to not freeze or starve to death? Everybody cares.’²⁵

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²⁰ E.g. SLIMAK 2023.

²¹ p. 256.

²² CLARK 1994.

²³ p. 8.

²⁴ p. 252.

²⁵ p. xvi.

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