Preface

The question of the biological and behavioural origins of fully 'modern' human populations is not only one of the most important issues in palaeoanthropology, but also one of the most difficult and controversial. Throughout almost the whole of the present century opinions on this question have tended to polarise between two sharply opposed schools of thought: on the one hand are those who see the transition from anatomically 'archaic' to fully 'modern' populations as an essentially gradual, continuous process, reflecting a gradual working out of long-term evolutionary processes in all regions of the world; on the other hand are those who see this as a much more dramatic event, involving some form of large-scale population dispersal – and eventually replacement – deriving ultimately from one major geographical centre. Intermediate positions involving varying degrees of local evolution, combined with equally local episodes of population displacement and interaction, can of course be added to this range of options. As a generalisation, however, it is probably fair to say that the tendency in most of the recent literature has been to opt fairly firmly for one of these two sharply opposed schools of thought.

The Cambridge conference on the 'Origins and Dispersal of Modern Humans' was planned to bring together specialists on all aspects of the biological and behavioural origins of modern human populations, at a time when many crucial developments in molecular biology, relative and absolute dating methods, novel approaches to the analysis and interpretation of the archaeological data etc. were bringing an impressive array of new and highly important evidence to bear on these long debated problems. The success of the conference depended partly on the wide range of specialists present at the meeting (fifty-five in all, from areas as far afield as Australasia, southern Africa and North America) and partly on the wide range of complementary disciplines represented – including not only the long-established fields of biological anthropology and archaeology, but also the newly emerging fields of molecular biology, human ethology and palaeo-linguistics. The opportunity to confront the crucial issues of modern human origins and dispersals from such a wide range of geographical and theoretical perspectives was an experience which most of the contributors seemed to find extremely stimulating and which cer-

tainly led to some very lively exchanges and discussions at the meeting itself.

The task of collecting together the wide range of papers presented at the Cambridge conference for publication has itself presented something of a challenge. Since it was clearly impossible to include all of the fifty-five papers given at the conference in a single volume, there was the difficult task of dividing these in some meaningful way into two separate volumes. Eventually – and after careful discussions with the publishers – it was decided to include all of the strictly ‘biological’ papers, together with some of the more general ‘behavioural’ and archaeological papers in the first volume, and to reserve the second volume primarily for the more detailed and specific archaeological case studies. Any division of this kind is inevitably arbitrary to some degree, and there are clearly many papers which could have fitted equally well into either volume. Nevertheless, the emphasis in the present volume is placed very firmly on the archaeological aspects of the transition from archaic to modern humans, as a way of illustrating not only the general patterns of human behaviour and cultural development across this crucial transition, but also some of the interesting and highly significant contrasts in the patterns of behavioural and technological development which can be observed in different regions of the world.

The editorial task of preparing the papers for publication has, once again, been dependent on help from many colleagues and students at Cambridge. Above all, none of this editorial work could have been completed successfully without the computing expertise of Nigel Holman, who successfully arranged for the transcription of all the papers onto computer files and played a major role in the detailed editing of the text and bibliographies, and the distribution of computerised galley-proofs to authors. Similar help in the computerisation of texts was provided by Mrs Doreen Simpson of the University Computing service, while many of the illustrations for the volume were redrawn by Sarah Skinner and John Rodford. The whole of the editorial work was carried out in the Department of Archaeology at Cambridge, for which the cooperation of the Head of Department, Professor Colin Renfrew, and the Departmental Secretary, Mrs José John, is warmly acknowledged. Needless to say, none of the organisation of the Cambridge conference would have been possible without the generous financial support of several organizations, including the L.S.B. Leakey Foundation for Anthropological Research, The British Academy, the Royal Society, the Boise Fund of Oxford University, and the Association for Cultural Exchange. It was of course this support which made it possible to bring together so many colleagues for the original meeting in Cambridge, and which ultimately contributed to the highly diverse and stimulating range of view-points reflected in the published papers.

Lastly, I owe a special debt of thanks to my co-organiser in the Cambridge meeting, Chris Stringer, and to the authors of the various papers included in the two volumes of the conference proceedings. Even

if these papers have not succeeded in resolving more than a fraction of the immensely difficult problems involved in the study of modern human origins, they have at least served to bring these issues into much sharper focus and – I hope – to point the way to some of the exciting lines of research to be explored over the course of the next decade.

PAUL MELLARS
CAMBRIDGE
June 1990