Network Computing for Archaeology: a Case Study from the 'Replacement of Neanderthals by Modern Humans' Database Project

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Abstract:
The archaeology team of the 'Replacement of Neanderthals by Modern Humans' project is collecting geospatial and archaeological information on the palaeoanthropological sites dated between 200 and 20 kya in order to visualise the spatio-temporal process of the 'replacement' event in a higher resolution than before. To cover the wide and diverse geographical ranges from Africa to Eurasia, seven archaeologists from six institutions are collaboratively editing a client-server relational database (Neander DB) through the high-speed Internet. From the technical point of view, the features of the Neander DB are: 1) network computing, 2) large-scale data mining, and 3) systematic integration of bibliographical database, knowledge base (wiki), and geographical information systems. Such an integrated knowledge system has the potential to discover unknown environmental and archaeological factors that differentiate the ecological niches and behavioural strategies of the two human species.

Key Words: *Network Computing, Relational Database Management System (RDBMS), Large-Scale Data Mining, Lithic Industry Wiki, System Integration*

Introduction

Computer-based databases for archaeology have continuously been developed since the earliest applications in the 1980s (Ozawa 1985; Richards and Ryan 1985). It is noteworthy that the CAA 1991 were characterised by the papers associated with SQL-compliant relational database management systems (RDBMS) (Cheetham 1992; Ryan 1992) and the bibliographical database for archaeology (Heyworth 1992). Since the mid-1990s, geographical information systems (GIS) have increasingly been incorporated into archaeological database projects (Lock 2000; Yokoyama and Chiba 1997). Using these systems, database technologies further developed and diversified during the first decade of the twenty-first century. The implementation includes: 1) clearing houses to aggregate different online data sources and database systems (Usui et al. 2000), 2) autonomous decentralised Internet GIS (Mori 2011), 3) archaeology-specific search engine (Miura and Ozawa 2000), and 4) object-oriented database schema (Conolly and Lake 1996,55; Lock 2003,89–90) using XML (eXtensible Markup Language) (Jordal et al. 2010), UML (Unified Modelling Language) (Usui et al. 2006), and standardised geospatial information (ISO 191xx series) (Fujimoto 2008).

Today, databases are widely employed in the field of archaeology right from local fieldwork and laboratory work to supra-regional cultural resource management. With regard to Palaeolithic archaeology, which is taken as a case study of this paper, the large-scale site databases of Africa (Märker et al. 2009), Europe (van Andel and Davies 2003; D'Errico et al. 2011), the Far East (Gillam et al. 2005), South Korea (Choi et al. 2006), and Japan (Japan Palaeolithic Research Association 2010) have already been published. Such an archaeological database has usually been edited in the closed, offline environment. However, this practice is less effective for the recent 'inter-institutional' projects where researchers from different institutions collaborate to achieve new scientific outcomes within a finite period of time. For instance, the method wherein researchers edit their own versions of a database in the local environment and merge them afterwards may cause a discrepancy in the data field, classification, description, and input rule. It is also too risky to modify the structure of a database once a template is distributed and employed individually. In light of these problems associated with the use of a closed database, a networked system, in which a number of users can simultaneously access, edit, and share a common master database is in high demand.

Fortunately, recent rapid progress in the computing environment, exemplified by multi-core processors, terabytes of storage, gigabytes of network communication, and sophisticated API (Application Program Interface) technologies, has enabled such network computing. This paper presents the authors' *Neander DB* project as a practical case study of a network-based and scalable archaeological database and then discusses the significance of network computing for archaeology.

***Neander DB* and Network-Based Database Editing**

Research organisation

In 2010, a five-year multidisciplinary research project, the 'Replacement of Neanderthals by Modern Humans', was launched in Japan. The objective of this project is to explain the distinction of Neanderthals (*Homo neanderthalensis*) and the diffusion of anatomically modern humans (*Homo sapiens*, hereafter called AMHs) in terms of their differential learning abilities (Akazawa 2010). It comprises six research groups specialising in archaeology, cultural anthropology, evolutionary modelling, palaeoenvironment, comparative anatomy, and neuroscience (Akazawa 2010; Nishiaki 2011; Terashima 2011). The authors, as part of the archaeology group, are working on creating a database of the palaeoanthropological sites where either human fossils or lithic artefacts of Neanderthals (Mousterian lithic traditions) and/or AMHs (such as Aurignacian, Gravettian, and Solutrean traditions) have been unearthed.

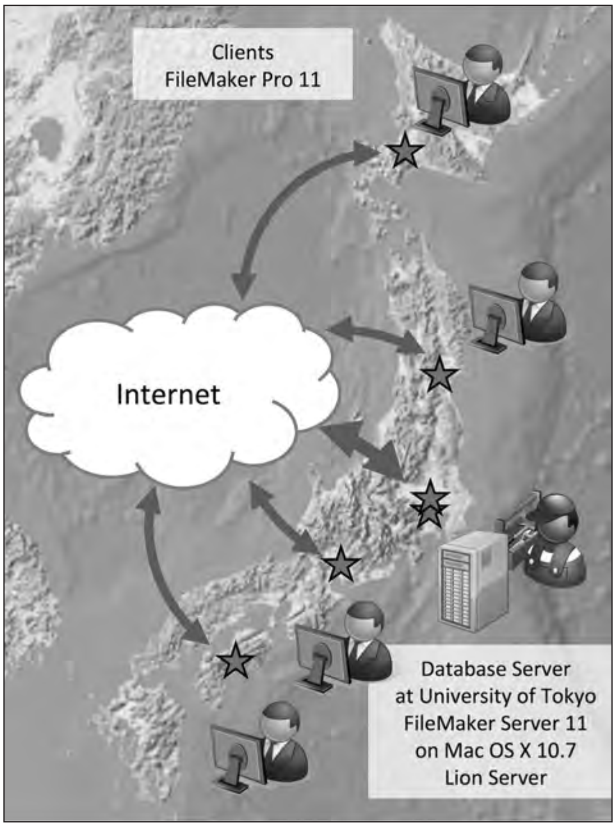

Figure 1. Client-server network for the Neander DB.

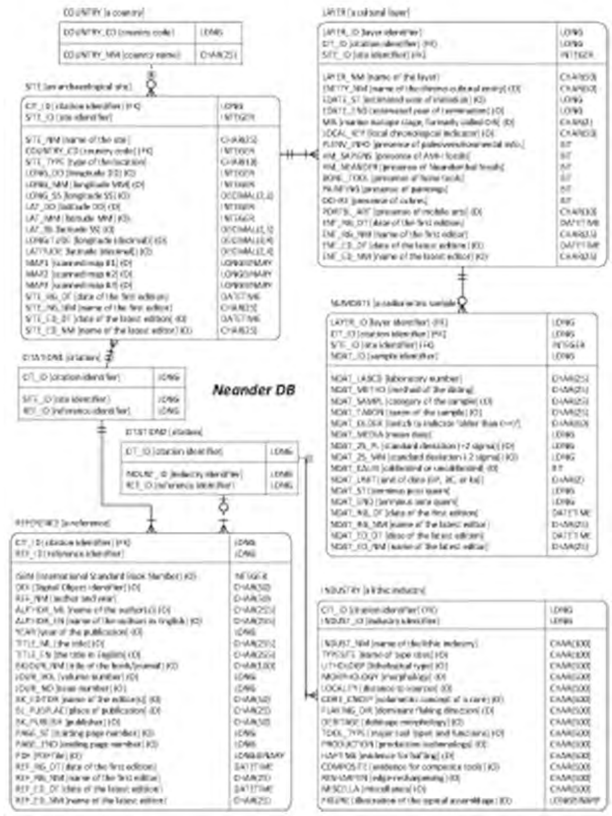

Figure 2. ER (entity-relationship) diagram of the Neander DB.

The goal of this sub-project is to visualise the spatio-temporal process of the replacement of Neanderthals by AMHs in a higher resolution than in previous projects (for example: van Andel and Davies 2003; Banks et al. 2008).

The database project covers a long temporal range from 200 to 20kya and a wide geographical zone from Africa to Eurasia where either the replacement event itself or the evolution of AMHs took place. The principal data source is excavation reports written not only in English but also in French, German, Spanish, Russian, and other languages. In order to extract the necessary information from these diverse data sources, the target area is divided into: 1) Africa and the Middle East, 2) Western Europe, and 3) Eastern Europe and Northern Eurasia, and a pair of archaeologists with professional knowledge and language skills are in charge of each region. The primary author is acting as the database manager. In total, seven researchers based at six different institutions are working in collaboration.

Structure of the main database

The database team intends to minimise the time spent for data collection so that they can start with the spatio-temporal visualisation and analyses of the ‘replacement’ events as early as possible. To this end, the team employs a client-server network database system – *Neander DB* – that allows inter-institutional collaborators to access, edit, and share one master database through the Internet in order to save time and avoid redundant errors.

The database system is simple and classical.

Figure 3. Portal interface of the Neander DB.

A database server is placed at the University Museum, University of Tokyo (Fig. 1). It is a Mac mini, operated by Mac OS X Server 10.7, with a 2.66 GHz Intel Core 2 Duo processor, 8 GB RAM, and a 1 TB disk drive. The database is controlled by FileMaker Server 11 and is password and firewall protected. It is open to access by authorised clients using FileMaker Pro 11 for Windows and Mac OS computers and FileMaker Go for iPhone and iPad. The users can access the master database at any places where the Internet is available (office, home, library, and conference hall for example). The *Neander DB* is not a so-called 'cloud database' because the data is stored in the team's own server.

The database scheme was designed to fit the typical workflow of archaeologists to extract from an excavation report: 1) bibliographical information (title, authors, year of publication), 2) fundamental information of the site (such as toponym, latitude, and longitude), 3) detailed information on each cultural horizon, and if any 4) information on radiometric dating (Figs 2 and 3). The graphical user interface (GUI) was also designed to follow this flow and to assist non-expert users in operating intuitively with text autocomplete, pull-down menu options, and on-click scripts (Figs 3–9). These devices also help reduce errors and redundancies.

From the viewpoint of RDBMS, the database contains two different entities of information – attributes of the archaeological site and bibliographical reference. In terms of a database entity, an archaeological site can be divided into 1) one record of the fundamental information (Fig. 4), (2) one or more [1...n] record(s) of descriptive information on each cultural horizon or layer (Fig. 5), and 3) (if any) one or more [0...n] record(s) of descriptive information on radiometric dating (Fig. 6), associated with a layer. Therefore, by means of a unique identifier, records of a layer are related to the record of the site in a many-to-one cardinality, and then, records of radiometric dating are related to the record of the layer in a many-to-one cardinality. The relationship between site and bibliographical reference (Fig. 7) is not always in a one-to-one cardinality: in some cases, the excavations at a site may be reported in multiple books or articles; in others one report may contain information on more than one site. In other words, a table of site is connected to that of bibliography in a many-to-many cardinality, which could not be managed by RDBMS. Therefore, a table of citation (Fig. 8) is inserted to explicitly define the one-to-one relationship between the record of a site and that of a reference.

Fundamental information of a site

Fundamental information of a site consists of toponym, geocoordinate, location (cave, rock shelter, or open site), and a unique identifier (Fig. 4). Of these attributes, geocoordinate, that is, longitude and latitude, is most important

Figure 4. Registration of fundamental information of a site.

Figure 5. Registration of detailed information of a site (a cultural layer).

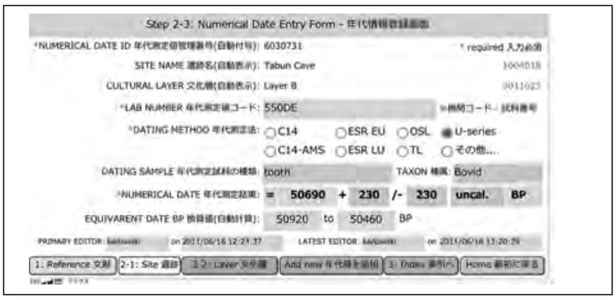

Figure 6. Registration of a radiometric date.

for GIS-aided research: without the relevant coordinate it is impossible to plot point features of a site onto a GIS-based map, which is the only way to visualise the spatio-temporal process of an archaeological event. A highly accurate location allows a spatial analysis in higher resolution. Thus, it is desirable to record geocoordinates as accurately as possible – ideally as one arc second (approximately corresponding to tens of meters in the middle latitude zone). If such a precise value is unavailable, we have to identify the longitude and latitude of the site by reading maps in the excavation report with reference to georectified maps and satellite imageries provided by Google Earth or other GIS applications. This procedure requires a certain amount of time, remote sensing skill, and experience and thus it would be rather difficult for archaeologists to do themselves. Therefore, the team takes advantage of a network database in which multiple editors can simultaneously input data. If the editors find it difficult to identify the geolocation, they are asked to upload scanned maps. A GIS and remote sensing specialist identifies it for them.

Descriptive information of cultural layers

Descriptive information of cultural layers provides a main component for the subsequent data analyses. The record of a cultural layer contains five chronological indicators: 1) name of the layer (Layer 1, Level II, and Phase 3, for instance), 2) name of the chrono-cultural entity, or lithic industry (Mousterian, Aurignacian, and Gravettian, for example), 3) the marine isotope stage (MIS, formerly called the oxygen isotope stage or OIS), 4) name of the local chronological indicator (such as specific palaeosol and tephra), and 5) absolute date [ybp] assessed by radiometric dating results (Fig. 5). These different indicators are employed to relate the archaeological chronology with the palaeoenvironmental one using different terminology. A record of a layer also contains a summary of the unearthed materials such as palaeoenvironmental samples, human fossils (*Homo neanderthalensis* and *Homo sapiens*), and symbolic artefacts (carved bone objects, rock arts, beads, pendants, and ochre, for instance).

Radiometric dating

Radiometric dating is a critical technique to observe the diachronic distribution of

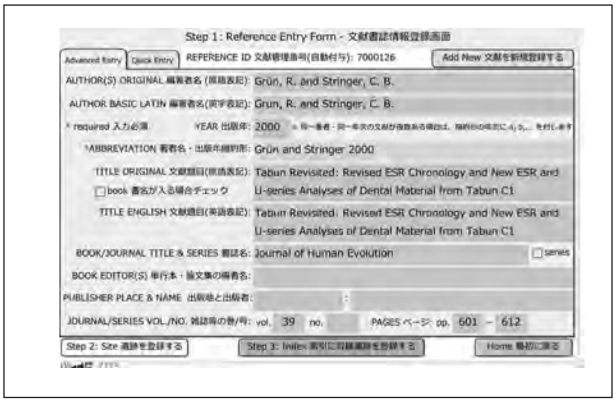

Figure 7. Registration of bibliographical information.

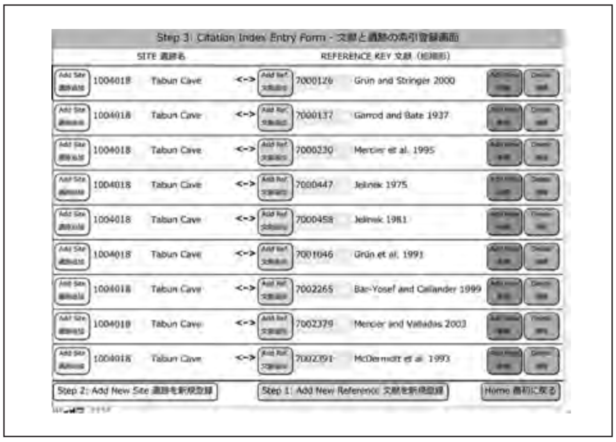

Figure 8. Registration of citation relationship.

Figure 9. Wiki-like encyclopedia of lithic industry.

archaeological sites. The information on dating comprises: 1) laboratory number as an unique identifier, 2) mean age and its standard deviation [ybp], 3) dating method such as AMS radiocarbon, thermoluminescence (TL), optically stimulated luminescence (OSL), electron spin resonance (ESR), and uranium series (U-Series), 4) type of the sample (such as burnt lithics, bone collagen, and shells), and 5) taxon of the sample, if identified (Fig. 6). These data will serve for future reassessments of chronology.

Bibliographical reference

A typical bibliographical reference includes name of the author(s), publication year, title, place of publication, publisher, journal or series title, volume and issue number, pages, and a unique identifier (Fig. 7). The style of bibliography follows the international standard ISO 690-1. Unique identifiers such as ISBN (International Standard Book Number) and DOI (Digital Object Identifier) allow editors to skip inputting the detail because it is easy to specify a unique source by using an online search engine for academic literature, such as Google Scholars and ISI Web of Science. For non-English literature, the name of the author(s) and the title are translated into English for convenient retrieval. The editors are asked to upload PDF files if available, in order to share them with other members. In the near future, the PDFs will be integrated into a digital repository of the project, which will be managed by the National Institute of Informatics (Mori et al. 2011).

Wiki-like encyclopaedia of the lithic industry

In addition to recording the information on sites and radiometric dates, the database team is compiling an encyclopaedia of lithic industries. This sub-project is intended to facilitate an inter-regional and/or diachronic comparison of lithic traditions. Such a comparison has been demanded for a long time but is difficult to carry out because the definitions, in terms of typological (Bordes 1961), technological (Inizan et al. 1992), and behavioural (Torrence 1989) aspects, are too diverse. Therefore, we plan to first collect the original descriptions and then analyse them by means of ontological approaches such as morphological analysis and network graphing, in order to quantify and visualise the similarity, difference, and ambiguity in lithic industries.

This encyclopaedia is incorporated into the *Neander DB* as a wiki-like knowledge base. The definition and characteristics of each lithic industry are quoted from the original texts or summarised by the specialists referring to the typical specimens from representative sites (Fig. 9). The quotations and summaries are explicitly distinguished. Description follows the processes of production and includes information regarding: 1) raw materials, 2) core-reduction technology, 3) retouch technology, 4) hafting methods, 5) tool-maintenance, among others. Similar to the relationship between site and bibliography, a table of citation is inserted as a hub between a record of lithic industry and a bibliographical reference.

Discussion and Conclusions

This paper has reviewed the scheme and practical application of our *Neander DB*, a network-based RDBMS for Neanderthal and AMH sites in Africa and Eurasia. For a year since November 2010, approximately 3,400 layers of 1,255 sites, with more than 4,700 radiometric dates including European data published by the Stage 3 Project (van Andel and Davies 2003) and PACEA (D'Errico et al. 2011), have been recorded in the *Neander DB*. There is no doubt that the RDBMS with advanced network computing technologies has successfully facilitated inter-institutional collaborators to assemble and share one master database. It has contributed towards not only reducing errors and redundancies in database editing but also facilitating database maintenance. In fact, minor revisions of the database scheme, GUI, and hardware have frequently been carried out as per users' requests without any troubles in data backup and versioning. Continuous updates of the system and contents are provided. The database will be open to public access after the scientific achievements are published.

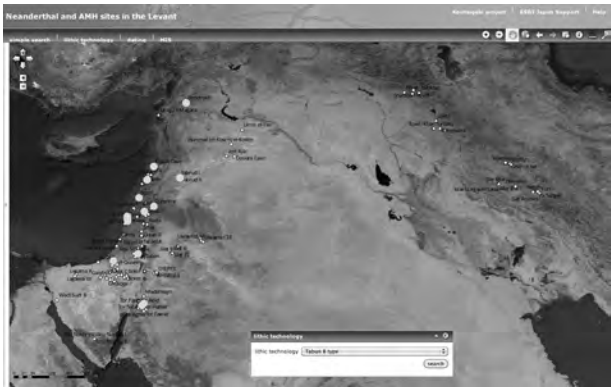

Figure 10. An example of mapping the 'replacement' sites by using ArcGIS Server.

The *Neander DB* is characterised by an explicit relationship between bibliography, archaeological records, and wiki-like encyclopaedia of archaeological objects. Such an integrated system is useful to reorganise data in a flexible manner, and it may broaden opportunities to discover overlooked relationships in archaeological concepts. In the case of the lithic industry encyclopaedia, we will be able to clarify the similarity, difference, and ambiguity between lithic industries using ontological approaches.

The collected data are exported to geographical information systems (GIS) for on-demand mapping (Fig. 10). The maps are ready to be published online through the ArcGIS Server hosted by the Center for Spatial Information Science (CSIS), University of Tokyo. In the near future, the spatio-temporal distributions of sites will be analysed with agent-based evolutionary models and a palaeoenvironmental dataset including elevation, slope, distance to water sources, temperature, precipitation, and vegetation, provided by other groups of this multidisciplinary project. It is expected that large-scale data mining in combination with different data sources would enable us to explore unknown archaeological patterns so as to reconstruct a detailed spatio-temporal process of the replacement of the Neanderthals by AMHs and to discover possible explanatory factors that differentiate the ecological niches and behavioural strategies of these two human species.

Through this database project, the authors have gradually noticed that network computing can potentially change the way of archaeological thinking itself. First, as pointed out above, it enables inter-institutional collaborations to expeditiously develop new models which explain an archaeological phenomenon. Second, the database-oriented data processing lets us canonicalise and quantify the attributes of archaeological objects such as sites, built structures, and artefacts; moreover, it also provides us with an opportunity to rethink the definitions of the objects themselves. Third, an integration of library-oriented systems such as bibliographical databases and museum-oriented ones like a relic catalogue and site database allows archaeologists to retrieve and reorganise data more quickly and effectively. These advancements may contribute to the discovery of new research issues and ideas for archaeologists in the next generation.

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