THE CAVE OF FONTÉCHEVADE

This book provides a summary of the discoveries made during the course of excavations at the Paleolithic cave site of Fontéchevade, France, between 1994 and 1998. The excavation team used modern field and analytic methods to address major problems raised by earlier excavations at the site from 1937 to 1954. These earlier excavations produced two sets of data that have been problematic in light of data from other European Paleolithic sites: first, the Lower Paleolithic stone tool industry, the Tayacian, that differs in fundamental ways from other contemporary industries and, second, the human skull fragment that has been interpreted as modern in nature but that apparently dates from the last interglacial, long before there is any evidence for modern humans from any other site in Europe. By applying modern stratigraphic, lithic, faunal, geological, geophysical, and radiometric analyses, the interdisciplinary team demonstrates that the Tayacian “industry” is a product of site-formation processes and that the actual age of the Fontéchevade I fossil is compatible with other evidence for the arrival of modern humans in Europe.

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RECENT EXCAVATIONS AND THEIR PALEOANTHROPOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

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To the memory of Antoine Debénath
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Foreword

Anta Montet-White

In 1994, the authors of this book undertook new excavations at the Cave of Fontéchevade, a site best known for its human remains and the uncommon artifact assemblages recovered by Germaine Henri-Martin in the 1950s. Henri Vallois attributed the skull fragments to an early form of *Homo sapiens*, which he designated as *presapiens*, and the artifact assemblages associated with them were labeled “Tayacian” by Henri Breuil, who had also confirmed the relatively early (interglacial) date based on faunal association. Henri-Martin’s interpretation of the cave as a campsite marked by the presence of large hearths was supported by observations and arguments in line with accepted views of her time. However, progress in recovery and analytical techniques and changes in perspectives and theories lead present-day researchers to challenge earlier findings and sometimes overturn the interpretations proposed by previous generations of archaeologists. The latest work at Fontéchevade is a vivid illustration of this process.

Discovered at the end of the nineteenth century, the cave was first excavated in the years before World War I, and although visited occasionally by professional archaeologists, it was abandoned to looters for some 20 years before becoming Germaine Henri-Martin’s research focus in 1937. She worked at the site off and on until 1955. The site was then considered closed until the new team, whose results are described in this monograph, decided to undertake a new series of investigations. In short, there have been three distinct episodes of active fieldwork at Fontéchevade, each one reflecting the resources, technical capabilities, and concerns of its time.
Before World War I, the field of Paleolithic archaeology in France was dominated by a small number of professionals, but it also welcomed a large number of amateurs, as the many discoveries of the late 1800s and the archaeological exhibits presented at world’s fairs had excited considerable public interest. Centers of systematic research began to develop in several regions. Peyrony, Breuil, and Capitan focused on the Périgord and the Pyrenees. The Charente received recognition thanks to the work at La Quina of Germaine’s father, Léon Henri-Martin (who was born Henri Martin but changed his name to Henri-Martin). Regional and national sociétés savantes published the latest findings, which were presented at regular meetings. The pioneer work of Breuil and Peyrony focused primarily on the temporal ordering of cultural stages defined by specific assemblages of bone or stone artifacts. Their writings remain the best testimony of research at the time.

At the same time, geologists, other natural scientists, and educated amateurs, among whom were medical doctors, teachers, and priests, surveyed and collected artifacts and often engaged in the excavation of cave sites. There was little control or restriction, other than securing the permission of the landowners. The collected artifacts were considered the property of the excavators and/or the landowners, and private collections multiplied. The sites were often excavated rapidly and completely, the objective being to procure collectible items, while other bone and stone artifacts were discarded. For example, the Saint-Périers, amateur archaeologists with a great deal of field experience, dug a trench through the Fontéchevade Cave in one day; they then abandoned the site, which they judged to be without interest. Artifact assemblages were sometimes sold but often ended up in small museums with little or no provenance or context information. Some researchers presented summaries to local or regional sociétés savantes, but there again the proportion of published results was small indeed. Few followed the example of a Denis Peyrony.

Durousseau-Dugouthier did extensive work in the Fontéchevade Cave between 1902 and 1910, collecting series of artifacts and bone, but he kept no notes. Vallade, who followed in 1913 and 1914, did keep some records, but his concern seems to have been to identify cultural layers on the basis of index fossils. He was content to bring some support to the classification and ordering of Paleolithic manifestation proposed by Breuil. Between them, Durousseau and Vallade
emptied the cave of all visible layers that contained Mousterian and Early Upper Paleolithic assemblages.

Gemaine Henri-Martin’s work was of a very different nature. She was a musician by vocation who came to Paleolithic archaeology somewhat reluctantly to maintain the research lab founded by her father at Le Peyrat and to continue the work he had engaged in the region; it was from him that she received most of her training. She maintained contacts with professionals in a determined effort to keep up with progress in the field. She sought the advice and collaboration of other researchers, most noticeably that of Henri Breuil, who was the recognized authority in the field. He was the one to whom she turned to corroborate her interpretation of the lowermost material, recovered under the Mousterian. She was quick to consult Henri Vallois for the analysis of the human remains.

Working in what was decidedly a man’s world, she sought continued support and frequent and regular exchange of ideas with women who were active in the field. Among her closest friends were Suzanne de Saint-Mathurin, an erudite amateur archaeologist who discovered the sculptured friezes at Angles sur l’Anglin, and Dorothy Garrod, a professional noted more especially for her work at Tabun (Israel) and Bacho Kiro (Bulgaria). Garrod spent a considerable amount of time at Le Peyrat making use of the comparative collections stored in Henri-Martin’s laboratory. Henriette Alimen inspired much of the research done on site formation and sediment analysis that became a major section of Henri-Martin’s published report.

In her introduction to that report, Henri-Martin (1957) acknowledges the financial support that she received from state organizations. Compared to modern project budgets, the sums she had at her disposal were minimal, being only enough to compensate one, sometimes two, laborers for a few weeks and to purchase essential equipment or provide protection to the site. She had no crew, working by herself except for the occasional help of neighbors and students. She worked at sites located near her house, as a bicycle was her only mode of transport. Similar situations prevailed at most of the sites I visited in the early and mid-1950s, including Combe Grenal, where Bordes was working, and even more so at Caminade, where Denise de Sonneville-Bordes was excavating. The field school at Arcy-sur-Cure was something of an exception, as it had a relatively large crew of student volunteers. It is perhaps worth mentioning that, in spite
of very limited resources, F. Bordes and A. Leori-Gourhan, each in his own way, managed to reinvent excavation methods, developing and enforcing standards that were to transform the field. By the late 1950s, the situation had evolved, and some projects at least enjoyed financial support that enabled them to accommodate larger teams of students. However, Henri-Martin’s excavations had closed by then.

Her excavation techniques were much improved compared to those of her predecessors at the site. Yet she did not keep up with the dramatic changes introduced by the new generation of professional archaeologists who transformed the field in the late 1940s and early 1950s. She was cognizant of the changes in excavation and recovery techniques but continued to practice methods learned in the 1930s. She discussed grid systems, the use of Cartesian coordinates to locate artifacts in situ, and other related topics with her friends and with students she encountered. She did divide the site into sectors, and eventually, in an effort to follow the new guidelines, she established a grid. Yet, she recorded exact coordinates only in the case of unusually important items. Her concern was to identify and follow natural stratigraphy, but she was most comfortable working on a slant rather than a vertical exposure. She kept careful notes of daily progress, but provenance information was limited to unit and level. She did, however, under Alimen’s influence, engage the collaboration of many specialists who provided sediment analyses that were then up to date. And to her credit, she completed and published a detailed report of her work.

The work of Chase, Debénath, Dibble, and McPherron belongs to a completely different era. The project, conducted in the 1990s, almost 50 years after that of Henri-Martin, was well funded and well staffed, as modern projects tend to be. The excavation methods they introduced or developed are at the cutting edge of recovery techniques. More important perhaps, the problem orientation and the whole theoretical framework within which their archaeological fieldwork operates have been completely transformed. They started out questioning every conclusion proposed by Henri-Martin: What part did natural processes play in the formation of the site of Fontéchevade? Are the chipped stones human-made? Is the Tayacian a real variant of the early Middle Paleolithic? Are the proposed dates and interpretations acceptable?

Henri-Martin’s interpretations may or may not withstand the test imposed by modern archaeology. However, one should remember
that the work she accomplished was a step in the development of our understanding of prehistory, and when viewed in the context of its time, her well-published contribution remains significant. And as the field is alive and well, current views may not, in turn, resist the scrutiny of future generations of archaeologists.
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