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978-0-521-89844-7 - The Cave of Fontéchevade: Recent Excavations and their Paleoanthropological Implications

Philip G. Chase, André Debénath, Harold L. Dibble and Shannon P. McPherron

Excerpt

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PART I

INTRODUCTION, BACKGROUND, AND METHODOLOGY

Philip G. Chase

André Debénath

Harold L. Dibble

Shannon P. McPherron

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Introduction and Background

INTRODUCTION

This monograph reports on excavations carried out in the Cave of Fontéchevade (Charente, France) in the Universities of Pennsylvania and Perpignan from 1994 through 1998. The site had been excavated sporadically since the late nineteenth century, but is best known from the work of Germaine Henri-Martin (1957) conducted from 1937 to 1954. In total, these earlier excavations uncovered a very small Châtelperronian assemblage, along with an Aurignacian and Mousterian, all of which overlay a deep set of beds with a Tayacian industry. Bronze Age burials and occupation beds were also uncovered near the back of the cave.

The site of Fontéchevade has figured prominently in the paleoanthropological literature for many years because of two principal discoveries made by Henri-Martin. The first was a portion of hominin frontal bone designated Fontéchevade I, which, because it lacked a supraorbital torus, appeared quite out of place for a specimen that was originally thought to date to the last interglacial. Taken together with Fontéchevade II, a partial calotte that displays a more archaic appearance, this specimen was used to argue for the existence of an independent presapiens line of more modern humans in Europe during the early Upper Pleistocene (Heberer 1951, 1955; Vallois 1958), an interpretation that conflicts with what is now known about the fossil record in France and the rest of Europe.

The second puzzle is the Tayacian, a rather enigmatic stone tool industry named after the village of Les-Eyzies-de-Tayac, which is near the site where the industry was first described (Bordes 1984).

However, the industry is best documented at Fontéchevade, which has become, though not the eponymous site, the *de facto*-type site of the industry. Like the hominin fragments, the Tayacian fits poorly with the rest of what is known about the lithic industries of the Lower and Middle Paleolithic of southwestern France. Given the nature of the industry, and the fact that it is often found in geological contexts that indicate considerable frost fracturing or sediment movement, the suspicion has gradually arisen that it is, in fact, less an industry than a product of taphonomic processes. As we report, that is the primary interpretation that results from the present research.

THE SITE AND ITS HISTORY

The site of Fontéchevade is located in the extreme eastern part of the Department of the Charente (Fig. 1.1) in the Commune of Montbron, immediately adjacent to the hamlet of Fontéchevade. Although the hamlet is located in the Commune of Orgedeuil, the cave itself is just beyond the commune boundary.

The north-facing cave (Fig. 1.2) opens onto the valley of a small unnamed tributary of the Tardoire. This stream is intermittent until it joins a spring about 100 m upstream from the cave. The Tardoire is a small river that eventually joins with the Bonnieure and flows into the Charente near the town of Mansle. Its valley contains several important Paleolithic sites. The small stream in whose valley Fontéchevade is located flows into the Tardoire opposite the site of Montgaudier (Bouvier, Cremades and Duport 1987; Debénath 1974; Debénath and Duport 1986; Duport 1969, 1976) less than 1.5 km from Fontéchevade. The caves of La Chaise (Debénath 1969, 1974, 1976; Schwarcz, Blackwell and Debénath 1983) are located only some 2 km down the valley from Montgaudier, about 2.7 km from Fontéchevade.

The external morphology of the cave is somewhat peculiar (Fig. 1.3). The overlying plateau forms a point jutting north into the valley, and it is at this point that the cave's mouth is located. The effect is that the sides of the cave are actually exposed to some extent. Since the initial formation of the cave, there has also been a gradual retreat of the dripline, which has left part of the lateral sides still standing outside of the mouth. Today, following Henri-Martin's excavation, which removed virtually all of the material outside of the dripline, one enters the cave initially within a kind of canyon and then proceeds ultimately to the cave itself.

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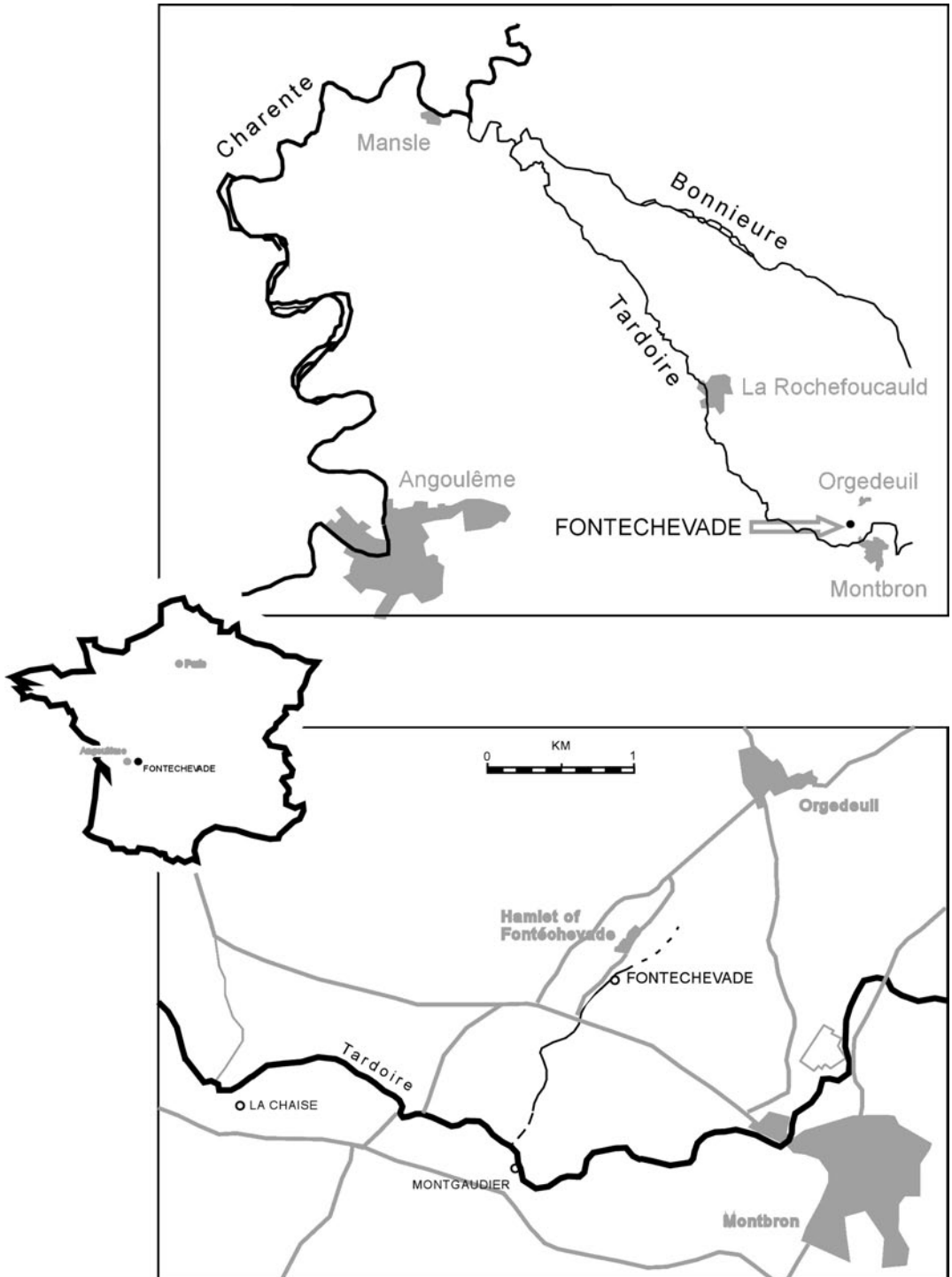
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Figure 1.1
Map showing the location of Fontéchevade.

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INTRODUCTION
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Early excavations

The history of early excavations at the site is known primarily through the writings of Henri-Martin (1957:21–23, 36–39), who collected information about those who had worked at the site before her. The first of these was apparently a teacher at the Collège de La Rochefoucauld named Plaire. His excavations were described by a later excavator, Vallade, in an unedited manuscript given to Henri-Martin (1957:21–22). According to this manuscript and the sketch

Figure 1.2

Photograph of the mouth of Fontéchevade Cave.

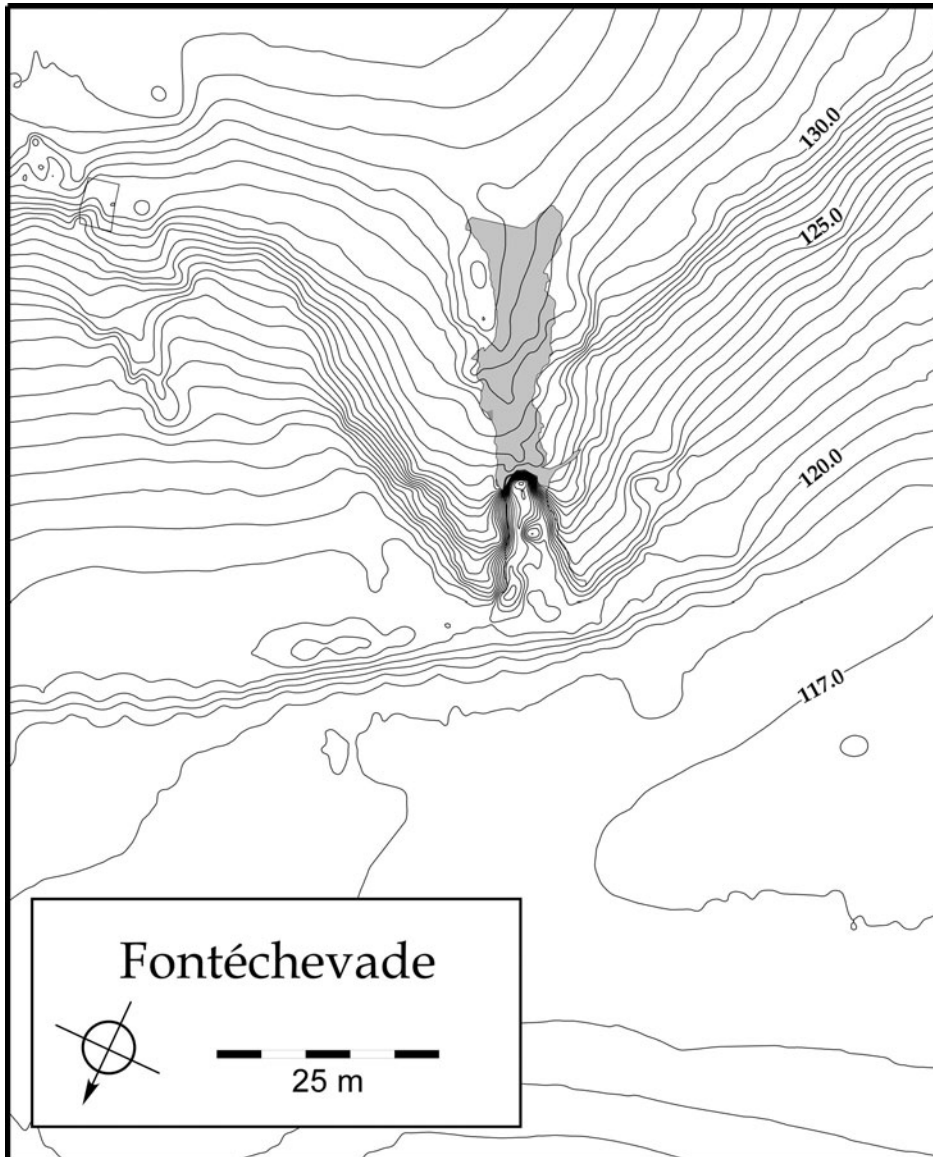


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map of his excavations, Plaire excavated an area about 2 m in diameter directly in front of the dripline. The dates of his excavations are unclear, but may have been as early as the 1870s.

Plaire was followed by L. Durousseau-Dugontier, who excavated the interior of the cave in his spare time from 1902 to 1910. He found pottery and Aurignacian and Châtelperronian industries. He also found, according to Henri-Martin (1957:22), a human calotte and “some other human debris.” Eventually, the family of Durousseau-Dugontier turned over his collections to Henri-Martin.

Figure 1.3
Topographic map of the cave and its immediate vicinity.

More systematic excavations were carried out by Vallade in 1913 and 1914 and reported in an unpublished manuscript given to Henri-Martin. He excavated from about 1 m inside the dripline outward and apparently located the excavations of both Plaire and Dourousseau-Dugontier. His excavations were important because they produced the only conclusive evidence for the presence of Châtelperronian at the site (Henri-Martin 1957:209 and see Chapter 10). The great majority of the Châtelperronian artifacts recovered belong to his collections, which were given in part to the Museum of Angoulême and in part to a M. Lugol (Henri-Martin 1957:22), who lived near the town of Mansle (Charente). These collections were later studied by Henri-Martin herself. Vallade recognized three beds (Lower, Middle, and Upper) containing Châtelperronian, Aurignacian, and Gravettian, respectively. He also found a bed with unbroken animal bones marked by hyena teeth that Henri-Martin (1957:37) believed must have been a Mousterian bed.

Another pair of amateurs, M. and Mme. De Saint-Périer, spent a single day at the site in 1921, excavating a trench at the entrance to the site (Henri-Martin 1957:22). They recorded a stratigraphy that included a meter-thick Aurignacian “hearth.” Henri-Martin attempted a correlation between their reported stratigraphy and her own (Henri-Martin 1957:37–38). Later, P. David, a prehistorian who had worked many sites in the area during the course of his career, put in another series of test pits (David 1933).

Excavations by Germaine Henri-Martin

Henri-Martin began excavations at Fontéchevade in 1937 and continued until 1954, but with interruptions during World War II. She first excavated a series of test pits, and then, in 1946, she began major systematic excavations, which destroyed all traces of earlier excavations in or at the entrance to the site (Figs. 1.4 and 1.5). Because the finds from most of her test pits were eventually included with those from the later full-scale excavations, she did not report on their contents separately. Briefly, Test Pit 1, which was 3 m² by 3.8 m deep (Henri-Martin 1957:56–57), was located in the field approximately 10 m in front of the cave and was apparently sterile. Test Pit 2 was located directly in front of the cave and consisted of a trench 3.5 m wide by 4 m long by slightly more than 2 m deep that cut into the talus in front of the cave. This trench today is covered

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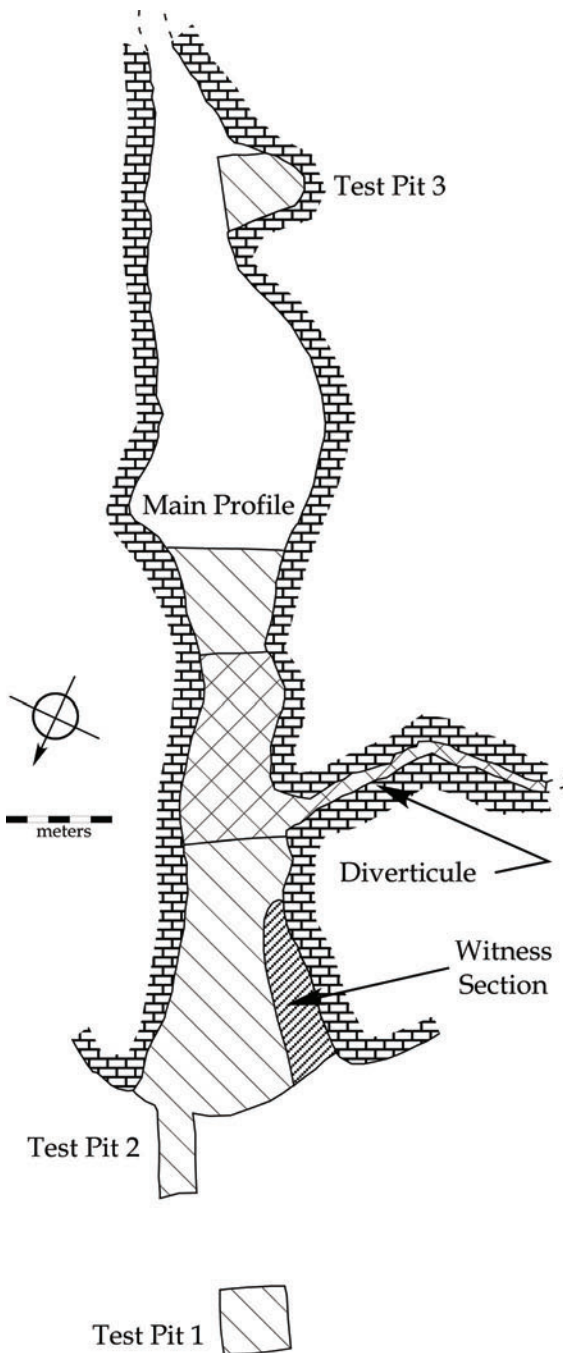
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Figure 1.4
Plan view of the interior
of the cave indicating
areas of the cave exca-
vated. (Redrawn from
Henri-Martin [1957]
fig. 7.)

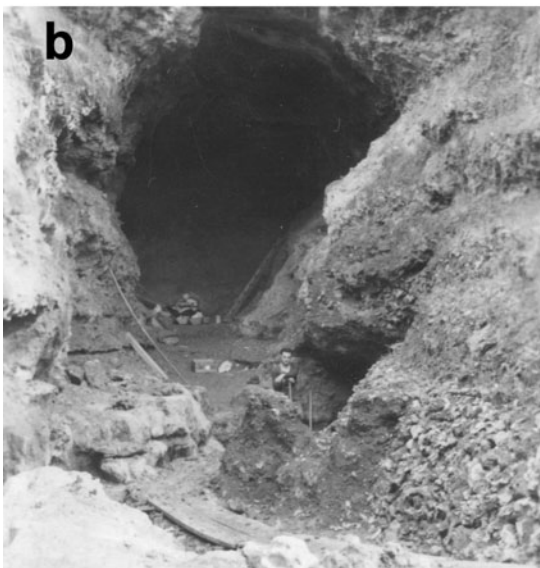
by a tractor road that passes directly in front of the cave. It, too, was apparently sterile (Henri-Martin 1957:57). Test Pit 4 was located 60 m east (upstream) from the cave, on the same slope into which the cave penetrates. It measured 2 by 1.3 m in area and 1.6 m in depth. This test pit does not appear on any of her maps or plans, but

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Photographs of the cave (a) before, (b) during, and (c) after Henri-Martin's excavations. (Left, from Henri-Martin [1957], plate I, reproduced by permission of Elsevier. Photos (b) and (c) are reproduced by permission of the Musée d'Angoulême.)

it produced a tooth of a small horse and an "atypical" worked flint (Henri-Martin 1957:59). Test Pit 5 was located upslope from Test 4, at the base of a small "microcliff" formed by a bedrock outcropping. It was of the same dimensions as Test 4 and was archaeologically sterile (Henri-Martin 1957:59–60).

Test Pit 3 (referred to simply as the "Test Pit" in this report) is the only one that remains, having been placed approximately 25 m behind the dripline, west of the midline of the cave, behind a small pillar. It was approximately 3.5 by 4.0 m in area and 3 m deep, although, in keeping with Henri-Martin's policy of not leaving