THE ABBÉ HENRI BREUIL (1877–1961)

William Davies

Centre for the Archaeology of Human Origins, School of Humanities (Archaeology), Avenue Campus, University of Southampton, SO17 1BF, UK. Contact email: s.w.g.davies@soton.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

This paper considers the considerable contributions made to the development of Palaeolithic archaeology by the Abbé Henri Breuil. It is argued here that Breuil developed pre-existing currents of thought in Francophone archaeology and made them globally-applicable for the first time. His concerns with Palaeolithic art and the chronological and technological development of artefacts set the research agenda for much of twentieth-century Palaeolithic archaeology. Evolutionary processes were discussed more as Lamarckian than Darwinian in Breuil’s work, and this was a direct result of his intellectual heritage.


Keywords: Palaeolithic art, Upper Palaeolithic sequence, Darwin, Lamarck, evolution, global Palaeolithic

INTRODUCTION

“I think it is true to say that [Breuil] was the first prehistorian to develop a genuine world-outlook, and his investigation and correlation of a mass of evidence from widely-separated areas has led directly to that change of axis which to-day we are beginning to take for granted”

(Garrod 1938: 2; author's comments in []

Linking the Abbé Breuil to the discoveries of Boucher de Perthes, and their validation by Prestwich and Evans in 1859, might seem a far-fetched proposition given that Breuil was born almost two decades after that event. However, connections can be made: his great uncle was a President of the Antiquarian Society of Picardy, and a friend of Boucher de Perthes; in the 1890s, Breuil became acquainted with a relative by marriage, Geoffroy d’Ault de Mesnil, who was an early geologist and archaeologist, and who introduced Breuil to prehistory and showed him the Somme terrace deposits (Brodrick 1963; Straus 1994). This paper will look both ways, exploring how Breuil developed ideas forged in the uniformitarian and evolutionary “white heat” of the mid-nineteenth century, and developed them, thus making his contribution to the development of twentieth-century archaeological thought. I shall also consider his legacy for today’s archaeology.

Breuil’s interests were various and eclectic, covering lithic artefacts, geological sequences, natural history, anthropogenic (versus carnivore) modification of bone (Breuil 1938), and Palaeolithic/hunter-gatherer art. He was primarily a field-worker, but many of his major contributions to the archaeology of the first half of the twentieth century were in theoretical systematisations and syntheses. He was a founding professor of the Institut de
Paléontologie Humaine (henceforth, IPH), the first holder of a chair in prehistory at the Collège de France, and an early board member of the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique. He was “one of the first modern professional prehistorians” (Straus 1994: 190); not only did he take a “global” perspective on the Palaeolithic, he was the first to obtain a direct, first-hand experience of the Palaeolithic around the world (Garrod 1938). To some extent this experience derived from his fame, gained early on in the twentieth century: success bred success, and it led to many invitations from prehistorians around the world for him to examine their local records, and fit them into the global syntheses for which he was renowned. This can explain his visits to the UK from 1899, Central Europe (the 1920s), Africa (from 1929) and China (1931), for example. He had gained a reputation as a great and indefatigable field-worker; ironically, as a child, he was somewhat sickly.

ORDER OUT OF CHAOS

Nineteenth century views of the Palaeolithic, primarily focused on France, were inculcated in Breuil, and shaped his approaches. To some extent, while he reworked and corrected them as appropriate, he never completely abandoned them; he saw himself as working in a great living tradition of French research, applied at the global scale. For a prehistorian whose career had been largely built on the identification of chronologies, he made little use of radiometric dating techniques and results when they exploded into archaeological use in the last decade of his life, and it would seem he did not quite know what to do with them (Breuil 1954a). Perhaps by then his views were too entrenched for such techniques to have an impact. Much of this last decade was spent in writing synthetic and consolidating works that would articulate a lifetime of accumulated experience and views.

The works of nineteenth-century French Palaeolithic archaeologists stand as a somewhat confusing corpus of work, with differing methods, classifications and lines of evidence being preferred by different specialists. The roots of French Palaeolithic archaeology lay in Geology and the Natural Sciences, and it comes as no surprise to find that they treated niveaux (levels) and couches (layers) as de facto proxies for phases of occupation (and thus representing successions of different “cultural entities”), and that archaeological artefacts themselves could “evolve” in a Lamarckian way, ever striving for improvement. Darwinian evolution, with its emphasis on lines of descent and so much a feature of 1859, was not clearly applied to archaeology by nineteenth-century French early prehistorians, or by many twentieth-century ones, for that matter (Breuil included; Straus 1994). The idea that artefacts (and their authors) could show diachronic and synchronic change, through selective pressures operating on typo-technological variation generated within cultural traditions, was a somewhat later (and emphatically Anglophone) approach.

While the roots of French Palaeolithic research lie deep, they are surprisingly dependent on a very restricted number of sites, from which large extrapolations were made. Let us briefly consider the Palaeolithic archaeologists that preceded Breuil in France, and assess their impact on his thought. The work of Jacques Boucher de Perthes (1788–1868), which started at Abbeville in 1837 (Breuil 1951), was preceded by the work (Table 1) of François Vatar de Jouannet (1765–1845), Joseph-Jean-Théophile de Mourcin (1784–1856) and Paul Tournal (1805–1872), and was penecontemporary with that (Table 2) of the Abbé Audierne (1798–1891), Alexis Joseph Dominique de Gourgue (1801–1885), Édouard Lartet (1801–1871) and Henry Christy (1810–1865) (Aufrère 1935; Cleyet-Merle et al. 1990). As can be seen in Table 1, perhaps four major sites (Pech de l’Azé,
Combe-Grenal, Badegoule and the Grotte de Bize) had been explored in southern France before about 1830, and little would change, despite re-exploration of those sites, until the late 1850s. Pech de l’Azé and Combe-Grenal, for example, were both excavated from c. 1816 by de Jouannet (Bordes & Bourgon 1950, Bordes 1955). While serious research in the pre-1859 period was scanty and irregular (dominated by antiquarians and collectors, such as de Mourcin and the Abbé Audierne), some methodological and theoretical advances were made in this period. For example, relative diachronic distinctions between knapped and polished stone were made by de Jouannet; he also recognised the importance of stratigraphic succession (Cleyet-Merle et al. 1990). Tournal devised a term (anté-historique) to describe the period before history, but it is debatable whether it really encompassed what we know now as “prehistory” (Rowley-Conwy 2006). The Abbé Audierne, while happy to retain the chronologies derived from the Bible, was among the first people to emphasise the importance of open-air sites, the transport patterns of flint raw materials, and the demonstration of in situ knapping from scatters of debris (Cleyet-Merle et al. 1990).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Archaeologist</th>
<th>Years of (field) work</th>
<th>Publication dates</th>
<th>Sites</th>
<th>Significance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>François de Jouannet</td>
<td>c. 1810–1845</td>
<td>c. 1811–1837</td>
<td></td>
<td>Interested in typological classification; proposed in 1834 that knapped stone preceded polished stone; emphasised the importance of stratigraphic succession.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abbé Audierne</td>
<td>Mid-1820s onwards</td>
<td>1863</td>
<td></td>
<td>Essentially an “armchair” archaeologist; revisited Jouannet’s sites, without exploring any for new ones. Keen to maintain Biblical/catastrophist view of the past. Was among the first to emphasise: the importance of open-air sites, the transport patterns of lithic (flint) raw materials, and the importance of knapping debris in demonstrating in situ knapping.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul Tournal</td>
<td>1827</td>
<td>1828</td>
<td>Grotte du Bize</td>
<td>Human bones associated with those of extinct animals. Divided the record into historic and anté-historique in 1833.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Principal French antiquarians and archaeologists working prior to 1859 (Cleyet-Merle et al. 1990)

However, the pattern and intensity of research seems to change from the late 1850s, doubtless linked to the interest seen in Abbeville, further north. The publication of the tenets of Darwinian evolution, together with the validation of Boucher de Perthes’ finds by Evans and Prestwich, seemed to galvanise a new phase of exploration in France. One French researcher that straddled this “1859 divide” was the Vicomte de Gourgue (Table 2), who concentrated on exploring sites in the Vézère valley of SW France, in and around Les Eyzies. He was primarily interested in how the work of
Boucher de Perthes, and that of Lyell, related to the antiquity of human development, and how geological events, such as glaciations, affected the timing of human developmental ones. He also began to develop the conclusions of Evans’ and Prestwich’s validation of Boucher de Perthes’ findings; no longer was it adequate simply to prove stratigraphic connection between extinct animal bones and human artefacts, but human impact on those bones (modifications, cutmarks, etc.) needed to be demonstrated. De Gourgue also tried to describe horizontal distributions of artefacts within sites, including concentrations, at the sites he studied. To this end, he made preliminary explorations of now-classic Périgordian sites, such as La Madeleine, the two main Laugerie locations, sites in the Gorge d’Enfer, and Le Moustier (Cleyet-Merle et al. 1990). Essentially though, de Gourgue initiated, rather than exhaustively developed, promising lines of research. His collections of artefacts were to prove of crucial importance to his friend, Édouard Lartet.

In late 1860, Lartet (1861) had stopped at the Pyrenean town of Aurignac, where he located bones, stone tools and a split-based antler point in a black layer of charcoal and ashes within the Grotte d’Aurignac. Lartet had been in epistolary contact with de Gourgue since at least March 1862, on the direct advice of Boucher de Perthes himself, which alerted him to the potential of the Dordogne as a productive area of study. The sites he studied with the Englishman Henry Christy, in the winter of 1863–4, provided a suite of sites (together with the already-known Pech de l’Azé and Grotte Richard) that would still be talismanic in Breuil’s day: Laugerie-Haute and Laugerie-Basse, Le Moustier, La Madeleine, the Gorge d’Enfer sites and La Liveyre. Art, such as the ivory plaquette bearing an engraving of a mammoth from La Madeleine, became the earliest-known to the age, and also helped to demonstrate the coexistence of humans with now-extinct species. Much of the wealth of mobiliary art uncovered by this intense season of excavations came to reside in the British Museum, on the death of Christy in 1865. These collections in the British Museum were to be of crucial importance to Breuil, some 35 years later.

In a sense, while the Lartet and Christy excavations were to mark a crucial turning point in the exploration of the French Palaeolithic, providing an increased database for constructions of chronology (Lartet’s Ages of: Large Cave Bear; Mammoth and Rhinoceros; Reindeer; Bison and Aurochs) and typology, theoretical developments would move slowly, until Breuil set to work in the beginning of the twentieth century. Intriguingly, Lartet himself believed that the diagnostic material from Aurignac preceded that from Solutré, and came after Le Moustier (de Mortillet 1870: 50–1): a foreshadowing of the arguments that were to make Breuil’s name. The typological constructs of Gabriel de Mortillet (e.g. de Mortillet & de Mortillet 1881), developed between 1869 and 1872, were to prove a straightjacket to such developments, and a tectonic shift of emphasis and analysis was needed to advance the discipline. Despite the events of 1859, Darwinian evolution was slow to permeate the world of the French Palaeolithic. Although Christy was part of Darwin’s circle (Hooker 1862), and presumably well-versed in his theory of evolutionary descent through Natural Selection, Darwin’s theory did not seem to have had much impact on French approaches to the Palaeolithic, perhaps because Lartet and de Mortillet outlived Christy. Lartet, of course, although he had studied Law in Paris in the 1820s, had also studied with Cuvier and Lamarck. That might explain the strongly Lamarckian approach to change in the Palaeolithic by French researchers particularly, to which Breuil was no real exception. Evolution, for him as for others, moved in discrete, ever more improved/advanced stages (except for isolated cases of “degeneracy”, such as the Mesolithic Asturian of Northern Spain).
**Table 2: French archaeologists and antiquarians working at or in the aftermath of the events of 1859 (Cleyet-Merle et al. 1990)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Archaeologist</th>
<th>Years of (field) work</th>
<th>Publication dates</th>
<th>Sites</th>
<th>Significance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vicomte Alexis de Gourgue (1801–1885)</td>
<td>c. 1824 onwards</td>
<td>1843–1873</td>
<td>La Madeleine, Laugerie-Basse &amp; Laugerie-Haute, Gorge d’Enfer, Le Moustier</td>
<td>One of the first to connect Boucher de Perthes’ &amp; Lyell’s works to the antiquity of humanity; interested in the relative chronological position between human events and geological ones (glaciations, “diluvia”, etc.). Not content with stratigraphic associations between lithics and bones, but wanted direct proofs of whether (and how) humans modified such bones. Tried to describe horizontal distributions and concentrations of artefacts within sites, and the identifiable levels of (taphonomic) disturbance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edouard Lartet (1801–1871)</td>
<td>1837–c. 1868</td>
<td>c. 1860–1870</td>
<td>Grotte de Massat, Grotte d’Aurignac, Abri Crô-Magnon (see below for excavations with Christy)</td>
<td>Trained as a lawyer in Paris in 1820s, though also studied under Cuvier and Lamarck. Excavated vertebrate fossils at Sanson between 1837 and 1856. Became interested in the flints and bones recovered from Gr. de Massat by A. Fontan in 1856; in epistolary contact with Boucher de Perthes from early 1859. Publishes a paper in 1860 (Lartet 1859–60), part-dealing with anthropogenic markings on fossil bones. Sept. 1860: on return from examining Gr. de Massat, stops at Aurignac, where he finds a black layer of organic materials containing bones and artefacts (published in May 1861: Lartet 1861). Proposes first chronological succession based on types of fauna. Informed by Boucher de Perthes of de Gourgue and his collections, and makes contact with the latter.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Following the daughter of Marcelino de Sautuola’s discovery of the Bison Ceiling at Altamira in 1879, the Madrid professor Vilanova came to be convinced that the images were genuinely Palaeolithic. Vilanova spoke on the subject of these paintings at an international congress in Lisbon in 1880. Among the audience were Émile Cartailhac, who was sceptical of their authenticity, and John Evans, whose response to a request for authenticating them is not recorded (Brodrick 1963). We may suppose, however, that he did not feel impelled to travel to Spain to validate them; a general indifference among the delegates pertained, and only later did a French civil engineer, Édouard Harlé, visit the site and pronounce the paintings modern forgeries (Cleyet-Merle et al. 1990: 34; Ripoll Perelló 1995). It might seem that the nineteenth century, while amenable to the concept of Palaeolithic mobiliary art, was incapable of acknowledging the existence of parietal art.

Nevertheless, from Lartet and Christy onwards, the twin elements of art and typology became the prisms through which to view the (French) Palaeolithic record. Breuil was to combine and realign those prisms, creating a “global Palaeolithic” for the first time. The nineteenth century had made huge advances in the study of the Palaeolithic, but these advances were essentially isolated and moderately incremental. The analytical frameworks erected by Gabriel de Mortillet and others were imperfect in their construction, and restricted any advances that could be made. It was difficult to make reliable comparisons between different sites, often dug with different research agendas, and using different techniques.

**BREUIL’S BUILDING BLOCKS**

The underlying rationale behind de Mortillet’s scheme was that “simple” preceded “complex.” Stone-working was held to be more “primitive” than bone-working. Thus, de Mortillet believed — for the Upper Palaeolithic — that the acme of stone-working was the Solutrean, and that this must therefore come immediately after the Mousterian. The Solutrean was succeeded by the Magdalenian, of which a small facies was the niveau d’Aurignac of Lartet. This Aurignacian was held to be intermediate between the Solutrean and the Magdalenian, as it contained both finely-worked lithic implements (cf. Solutrean) and worked bone, antler and ivory ones (cf. the Magdalenian).

By the 1890s, problems had arisen with this chronological scheme, largely due to the excavations of Dubalen, and then Piette, at Brassempouy. Breuil (1906) lists another seven sites, such as Trou Magrite, Goyet and Spy (Belgium), and Pair-non-Pair and La Ferrassie (France), whose stratigraphies placed the Aurignacian in the “pre-Solutrean” period. The Solutrean, in contrast, immediately underlies Magdalenian occupations, with no trace of an intervening Aurignacian. It is worth noting that “Aurignacian”, as defined by Breuil in a series of key papers (1906, 1907, 1909a, 1909b, 1912), encompassed three types (see Table 3), defined by key tool types. These papers comprise a significant contribution to the Bataille Aurignaciennne (Battle of the Aurignacian), fought against Adrien de Mortillet (son of Gabriel), Paul Girod, and others, who changed their accounts of sites in a desperate attempt to support their increasingly fragile position. Breuil (1907, 1909a) responded by adducing more stratigraphic data from an increased number of sites, and by explicitly describing the extensive bone industries from Solutrean sites. By 1912, when Breuil’s paper to the Congrès International d’Anthropologie et d’Archéologie Préhistoriques (Geneva) on his refinements to his Upper Palaeolithic chronology was published, he had won the battle, and de Mortillet’s defenders were routed. Having established the early Upper Palaeolithic on a firmer footing, Breuil only intermittently engaged with typological-
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Early Upper Palaeolithic Sub-Divisions</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lower Aurignacian (Châtelperron type)</td>
<td>Curved, backed knives, generally thick, with abrupt, backing retouch; sometimes short and squat, sometimes thin and tapering. Numerous Mousterian types persisted, and bone tools (if present) were rare and poorly-defined.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle Aurignacian (Aurignacian type)</td>
<td>The culmination of “Aurignacian retouch”, used to make Aurignacian blades, which were generally large and sometimes strangulated, frequently carrying an endscraper on one/both extremities. Lamellar retouch was mostly identified on thick flakes or cores, removing thin, narrow parallel bladelets from the lithic blank, and creating thick, carinated and nosed endscrapers, and rapots (large, heavy-duty tools, presumed to have been used for scraping or shaving wood), as well as burins busqués. Bone tools are both varied and abundant, e.g. several types of bone/antler point, with the split-based forms being held to be particularly characteristic (pointes d’Aurignac).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper Aurignacian (Gravette type)</td>
<td>General disappearance of the above tool-types, and development instead of assemblages comprising very large quantities of angled burins made on retouched truncations. Characterised by well-made flint points of variable size, made on blades and sometimes bladelets, which have been created by abrupt backing retouch on one side of a knife-like blank. These Gravettian points were accompanied by Font-Robert ones (with distinctive tanged ends), Noaillian burins and fléchettes (thin, often laminar, marginally-biconvex pieces with semi-abrupt marginal retouch); endscrapers on both retouched and unretouched blades, truncated pieces, marginally-retouched blades and bladelets.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Breuil’s (1912) subdivisions of the early Upper Palaeolithic (modified after Davies 2001); all three stages were believed to have had independent origins

cultural debates thereafter, though he did participate in the British “elolith question” (see below and McNabb, this volume) and helped to define the “Solutrean” of Central Europe (now better known as the Szeletian; Breuil 1923). Much of the rest of his research would instead concentrate on the description and discussion of parietal art.

**BREUIL’S DEVELOPMENT**

It is astonishing to note Breuil’s progress, making major changes to views on the Upper Palaeolithic succession and Palaeolithic art while still a student. Even before he obtained his degree in Natural Sciences from the University of Paris in October 1903, at the age of 26, Breuil had already made major contributions to Palaeolithic archaeology. He was instrumental in authenticating Upper Palaeolithic parietal art, at La Mouthe, Les Combarelles and Font-de-Gaume in 1901 (Brodrick 1963; Bahn & Vertut 1997). The results of the 1902 expedition to Altamira (which included Breuil) finally vindicated the Palaeolithic attribution of the art at Altamira, and spurred Édouard Piette (who had always believed its authenticity) to encourage Cartailhac to repent his scepticism (Bahn & Vertut 1997: 20–2). Breuil had also begun to think of the Upper Palaeolithic succession in France, re-evaluating de Mortillet’s idiosyncratic classification and chronology in the light of Piette’s and Rutot’s discoveries.

Breuil had come into contact with Piette in 1897, when he was 20, and already embarked on training for the priesthood at the seminary at Issy-les-Moulineaux, a dependency of St.-Sulpice, in Paris. At Issy, the Abbé Guibert encouraged Breuil’s interest in natural history and evolution, and also encouraged him to consider prehistory, lending him the works of de Mortillet (Brodrick 1963: 29). While at Issy, Breuil also befriended Jean Bouyssonie, who —
together with his brother, also a priest, and the Abbé Bardon — was to uncover the Chapelle-aux-Saints Neanderthal skeleton in 1908. In 1895, d’Ault de Mesnil had co-written a paper arguing that “Chellean” (which Breuil (1932) later tried to rename “Abbevillian”) preceded the Acheulean, which itself predated the Mousterian (Breuil 1945: 25). Thus, in broad outline, the relative chronology of the Lower and Middle Palaeolithic was settled before the end of the nineteenth century; the same could not be said for the disarray that was the Upper Palaeolithic.

Breuil became reacquainted with d’Ault de Mesnil in 1896, and was introduced to the Somme river gravels, a topic and region to which he was to return frequently throughout his career.

1897 was a momentous year for Breuil, as not only did he enrol as a student at the Faculty of Sciences, University of Paris (while still at the seminary of St.-Sulpice), but he moved beyond his native northern France, and took up Bouyssonie’s invitation to come to Brive, and thence to Les Eyzies (Brodrick 1963). In the latter place, he met Denis Peyrony (1869–1954), his elder and a local school-teacher (Breuil 1954b). In July that year, he joined Piette at the Pyrenean site of Brassempouy, where stratigraphic evidence had been recovered that made a nonsense of de Mortillet’s Upper Palaeolithic chronology. Viewing Piette’s incomparable collection of Magdalenian mobiliary art and artefacts, at his home in Rumigny, inspired Breuil to study the Magdalenian. He thus returned to the Vézère the following year to dig at Crô-Magnon and La Madeleine (Brodrick 1963).

In 1899, Breuil made his first visit abroad, to the UK, where he looked over the Christy collection of Magdalenian mobiliary art, while staying with Sir John Evans at his house at Nash Mills, Hertfordshire (Breuil 1945; Brodrick 1963). Breuil was evidently not to forget his contact with Evans, as he would later refer to him regularly. In addition, Evans was present at the 1906 Monaco conference, where Breuil for the first time addressed his ideas on the Aurignacian question and the succession of the Upper Palaeolithic to a wide audience (A.C.B. 1906), and was to die only a few months after Breuil was elected an Ordinary Fellow of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland on 24th March 1908.

Breuil was ordained a priest in late 1900, but managed to persuade the Bishop of Soissons to excuse him from parochial work for four years. During this time he would be formally attached to the Diocese of Soissons, and his title would be ‘Abbé’, a priest unconnected with a specific parish (Brodrick 1963). He still continued to read for his degree, and also developed his researches in Upper Palaeolithic art, chronology and typology. By the time of his graduation in 1903, Breuil was well-placed to become the pre-eminent Palaeolithic specialist of his generation. The next few years were to see him consolidate that position, operating on the twin fronts of art and typology/chronology. Nevertheless, while the Roman Catholic Church had provided the education, it did not provide the money to indulge his secular interests, and thus a patron was needed. Initially, the fate of having to become a parish priest was prevented by obtaining a private teaching position at the University of Fribourg, thanks to the intercession of his peer at the Issy seminary, the Abbé Brunhes. However, the Monaco conference brought a rather larger, and more influential, patron into the picture: Prince Albert of Monaco, who had sponsored the 1906 conference, and much other archaeological work besides, and who was planning to establish his own archaeological institute in Paris (the IPH). Given his rapid and deserved success in just a few years, Breuil was considered by the Prince to be the pre-eminent candidate for the chair of Prehistoric Ethnology (Brodrick 1963). The Institute was formally constituted in 1910, but its building would not be completed until 1920, delayed from the end of 1914 by the distractions of World War I
Breuil now had his base from which to conquer the global Palaeolithic.

THE GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

“I have often regretted, for England, that no work has tried to group, by critiquing them, the results obtained since Buckland and MacEnery. It even seemed that the interest for these studies had greatly weakened among your compatriots since the heroic age of Prestwich, Lyell, and Evans. It is with great pleasure that I have seen it re-emerging, first with the re-excavation at Paviland by Professors Sollas and Marett, to which I am happy to have contributed.”

(Breuil, in Garrod 1926: 5–6; ‘Originally in French, author’s translation]

Although the UK seems to have been the first foreign country to be visited by Breuil, his academic involvement with its Palaeolithic record does not really seem to have started until about 1912. That year saw him invited by Lankester and Moir to Britain to offer expert advice on the vexed question of the sub-Crag flints. Breuil’s initial view of the eoliths was one of extreme scepticism, but a return to the subject in 1921 found him readier to believe their authenticity as anthropogenically-used artefacts (Moir 1921: 418, 1929: 63; Garrod 1961: 206). With hindsight, it is difficult to know why Breuil allowed himself to be convinced by Reid Moir’s examples, but perhaps they came to fit his changing conception of pre-Acheulean technocomplexes.

While on a trip to the UK with Boule in summer 1912, he visited Oxford, and both men examined the material uncovered by Buckland from Paviland. A little later, Breuil visited Paviland with Sollas (Sollas 1913: 329); having pronounced on the Upper Palaeolithic succession of western Europe, Breuil was happy to classify the materials from that site as his “Aurignacian”, from the Middle and Upper phases (i.e. Aurignacian and Gravettian: Table 3). The red stripes on the walls of neighbouring Bacon Hole that they described (Sollas 1913: 372) were subsequently revealed to be nineteenth-century daubs (Daniel 1961: 259). Despite contributing to these questionable lines of evidence, Breuil also made significant contributions to the study of the British Palaeolithic, particularly the Lower (Clactonian, “Chellean” and Acheulean: Breuil 1930, 1932; Kelley & Breuil 1956). Breuil (1930) was instrumental in helping to define the Clactonian, distinguishing it from the “Mesvinian” (Breuil 1926), and fitting it into his pre-Acheulean phase. He was also responsible for encouraging Garrod (1926) to study the British Upper Palaeolithic material, so that it could be fitted into a continental synthesis. Breuil’s election as president of The Prehistoric Society of East Anglia in the mid-1930s helped to steer it towards a more international perspective, ultimately to be renamed, simply, The Prehistoric Society.

Breuil had a long-standing research interest in Iberia, which started in 1902 with Altamira (Figure 1). Revisiting Spain in 1906, he worked mainly in the north (along the Cantabrian coastal strip) with Alcalde del Rio, but later (1908) visited the Spanish Levante region with Cabré Aguilo to view the rock art. In 1909, Breuil worked with Hugo Obermaier (Züchner, this volume) at sites such as El Castillo, Altamira and Covalianas (Pales 1962), and impressed the visiting Prince Albert of Monaco enough for him to offer Breuil the chance to be a part of his proposed IPH. Breuil had a natural affinity with Spain, learning to speak fluent Spanish, and this would later lead to him becoming attached to the French Embassy and Naval Bureau in Madrid during World War I. Running occasional diplomatic errands between Madrid and Gibraltar, he found himself with just enough leisure time to discover the Mousterian site of Devil’s Tower in April 1917 (Breuil 1922). Almost a decade later, Breuil would recommend that his ex-pupil Garrod excavate this site further (Garrod 1961). Breuil would continue to be
involved with work in Iberia for the rest of his career, even working as Visiting Professor at the University of Lisbon in 1941–2, just after he had been in France, inspecting the newly-discovered art at Lascaux.

In the mid-1920s, Breuil (1923, 1924, 1925) travelled greatly round countries in central Europe, gaining first-hand experience of their Upper Palaeolithic records in particular. In 1929, he made his first trip to South Africa, and would return to that country frequently, notably being invited by Field-Marshall Smuts to spend the duration of World War II (from 1942) there (Brodrick 1963). It was on Breuil’s advice that the Archaeological Survey of South Africa had been founded in the 1930s (Garrod 1961), and his effects on South African archaeology were far-reaching and long-lasting. Breuil was struck not only by the wealth of archaeological material from South Africa, but also its wealth of ethnography. By the end of the 1930s, Breuil had made many visits to different parts of Africa, even venturing to pass comment on the archaeology of northern Africa, for instance on the Aterian (Pales 1962).

The 1930s were an especially busy time for Breuil, given that not only was he travelling in Europe and Africa, but had also ventured to China in 1931 and 1935, and become involved with “Peking Man” in conjunction with his frequent colleague Teilhard de Chardin (Pales 1962). He also visited Garrod’s and Neuville’s excavations in the Levant in 1933 (Garrod 1961), but perhaps more as a “tourist” than as a researcher.

It cannot be denied that Breuil was well-connected, right from the start of his career. However, that would also underestimate his own considerable abilities, and the way he applied them; it did not take long for his successes to lead to further invitations of collaboration. These connections were frequently facilitated by his connections within the Catholic faith: the IPH was a Catholic institution, free of the secular tendencies of the French state (Hammond 1982), and the Bouyssonie brothers, Obermaier and Teilhard de Chardin, to take some examples, were all fellow priests with an interest in archaeology. Garrod had converted to Catholicism during World War I. The role of Catholicism should not be overstated, however, as many of Breuil’s colleagues were not Catholics, notably Miles Burkitt and Mary Boyle. Catholicism seems to have provided a network of largely sympathetic researchers that Breuil could exploit, especially at the outset of his career. Breuil was canny in the ways in which he operated within accepted codes of conduct. In contrast, Teilhard de Chardin, a friend and frequent collaborator with Breuil, had displeased the Catholic Church by his writings on evolution, and was thus sent abroad in the 1920s, ostensibly to keep him out of trouble. However, that strategy seems to have backfired: having sought to combine his scientific, theological and philosophical knowledge with evolution while in the UK between 1908 and 1912 (he dug at Piltdown in 1912), Teilhard de Chardin became involved in Zhoukoudian when in China.

Despite a largely peripatetic existence for much of his life, Breuil regularly found time to return to the Somme gravels, his native region. His presidential address on the centenary of Boucher de Perthes’ Antiquités Celtiques et Antédiluviennes (printed in 1847, but only offered for sale in 1849) in 1949 (Breuil 1951) set his own thoughts on the Lower Palaeolithic of northern France into a broader historical context of research, with Boucher de Perthes as the fulcrum point. He clearly saw himself as an heir and upholder of Boucher de Perthes’ legacy. Interestingly, in this publication aimed squarely at the Francophone audience, Breuil carefully mentioned just two precursors to Boucher de Perthes, both English — Conyers and Frere — but noted a contemporary lack of reaction to their publications. It is implied that this presumed lack of co-ordinated British response to their
Figure 1: Breuil in Autumn 1902, during a break from recording the parietal and ceiling art at Altamira, N. Spain; the white dots on his cassock are wax drips from the candles used to illuminate the art [Photograph reproduced from Ripoll Perelló 1995: 70]
compatriot pioneers of the discipline thus left the field open to Francophone dominance.

**BREUIL’S LEGACY: ‘THE ABBÉ EXTRAORDINARY’**

It is impossible to avoid the global perspective when discussing Breuil. He himself ensured that he would be considered as a global prehistorian from the outset of his career. That might explain in part why he took such a variety of approaches to the Palaeolithic, e.g. technology/typology, art and symbolism, and the modification of bone and stone (distinguishing anthropogenic agencies from other, non-human ones). In some ways, he can be seen as a key figure in the development of our concepts of the Palaeolithic, devising new ideas to explain techno-typological development, rationales for parietal and mobiliary art (where, despite his eminence at the time, he encountered mixed success in explaining and/or dating such images), and non-human/taphonomic explanations for modifications on bones and stones. He employed experimental reconstructions to try and explain creation of eoliths and identify anthropogenic modifications on bones. He also was among the first to predict the effects of too many visitors to Palaeolithic decorated caves, and warned of measures that needed to be taken to protect them (Breuil & Bégouën 1933), ironically some years before the discovery and subsequent over-exploitation of Lascaux.

Underlying all those advances, Breuil had a shrewd idea of his own worth, and never knowingly undersold himself. He also had a strong sense of historical perspective in the development of the Palaeolithic, and sought to place himself within it. He had great respect for the nineteenth-century British pioneers of the discipline, such as MacEnery, Lyell, Prestwich and Evans (Walker, Pope & Roberts, McNabb, Lamdin-Whymark, this volume), but felt (along with compatriots such as Boule) that the torch had been passed across the Channel at the start of the twentieth century (Breuil 1945; in Garrod 1926: 5–6). To some extent, he was not wrong, at least in his own case: he had many British disciples, such as Burkitt and, notably, Garrod (Price, this volume). However, the best of those disciples developed and tested Breuil’s ideas, and did not always support his conclusions.

In this anniversary year, it is worth passing final comment on Breuil’s relationship with the Darwinian theory of evolution. Unlike his friend and sometime colleague Teilhard de Chardin, Breuil deliberately avoided confrontation with the Catholic Church over the application and significance of evolution. He wrote remarkably little on the subject, and when he did, was remarkably vague. Detailed, high theory evidently interested him little; instead he was notable for his empiricism, almost preferring to see artefacts as entities independent of their authors. Breuil’s preference often seemed to be for unilinear developmental sequences, as he first described for the Upper Palaeolithic of Western Europe, and which he vigorously defended (with Garrod’s invaluable assistance) for the first half of the twentieth century. However, on occasion he could be persuaded to support multi-linear evolution, especially in the Lower and Middle Palaeolithic, where he saw contemporary, separately evolving “cultural traditions” (Breuil 1926: 178; 1930: 226). Breuil was prepared to countenance morphological evolution between type fossils, e.g. from Abri Audi points into Châtelperronian knives (Breuil 1909b), but was less inclined to believe that technocomplexes evolved into other ones. That belief arose from his conviction that stone tool industries reflected ethnicity, and that the lithic remains of these ethnic groups should not necessarily be expected to evolve into new artefactual forms. The detection of ‘ethnicity’ in material artefacts is still hotly-debated today.

Excepting the verification of Boucher de Perthes’ work in 1859, that year marks less
of a paradigmatic threshold in Francophone than Anglophone archaeology. A steady increase in the number of excavated French sites from the beginning of the 1860s was instead used to consolidate and develop ideas based on existing preconceptions. The French took a long time to come fully to terms with Darwinian evolution, and it can easily be argued that even in the time of Breuil and Boule, the Catholic establishment was trying to neutralise the full implications of Darwin’s ideas (Hammond 1982). Boule’s conception that every fossil hominin he evaluated was an extinct side-branch of human evolution (Gillette 1943; Hammond 1982), found an analogue in Breuil’s treatment of typological and technological developments in the Palaeolithic: individual elements might change, but larger-scale changes could only be explained as sudden (catastrophic) events, such as migrations or population replacements. In this sense, Lamarck rather than Darwin was still the dominant paradigm in French academic discourse — setting Breuil in a long line of Lamarckian French archaeologists extending back to Lamarck’s pupil Lartet.

Nevertheless, it is remarkable that, even today, Breuil’s definitions of technocomplexes and their successions have survived relatively unchanged in their outlines, especially for the Upper Palaeolithic, where he started his career. The 1930s arguments between Peyrony and Breuil, and their followers, were largely resolved by the mid-1950s, and it was the modified Breuil scheme that prevailed. Breuil’s vast, mostly first-hand, experience of the global Palaeolithic, combined with his meticulous and critical evaluation of the evidence to hand, and set within a pragmatic, testable and workable scheme for explaining the Palaeolithic, had helped to give him the edge over most of his contemporaries, and ensure that even today he cannot be ignored. Peyrony was content to restrict most of his exploration to a radius of one hour’s cycle ride from Les Eyzies (Rigaud & Simek 1987: 55); Breuil was not happy to be so constrained.

It is difficult to summarise the achievements of someone who published over 830 papers and books in a paper like this. Breuil’s career starts by acknowledging the contributions made by people such as Piette and Cartailhac to his researches, and people such as John Wymer (Ashton, this volume) are similarly-credited near its end (Kelley & Breuil 1956). Breuil’s research differs most from that of today in its scales of analysis, both temporal and spatial. Breuil struggled to grasp the full implications of radiometric dating, admittedly when the techniques were still in their infancy. He also tended to see patterns in the artefactual and artistic records separately from their broader behavioural contexts, e.g. development of individual images and artefact types in isolation from the rest of the assemblage. Garrod has summarised Breuil’s overall contributions to archaeology well. In her review of Brodrick (1963), she opined (Garrod 1965: 68) that:

“[Breuil’s] original contribution was very great, greater than is now realized by some of his survivors who did not know him in his prime, and who were stung by his somewhat authoritative ways. Time will re-establish his true position, not perhaps on the pinnacle sometimes claimed, but very high.”

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I should like to thank Clive Gamble, Paul Bahn, Pamela Jane Smith and the editors for their comments on drafts of this paper. All remaining errors are my responsibility.

REFERENCES


Lartet, E. 1859–60. Note sur des os fossiles portent des empreintes ou entailles anciennes et attribuées


