Through the generous award of a Wymer Bursary, this summer I was able to begin research on the late Neanderthal archaeology of the celebrated Middle Palaeolithic site, La Cotte de St Brelade, Jersey. I began recording collections at the British Museum, and as part of the interdisciplinary and multi-institutional project currently reinvestigating this site (Quaternary Archaeology and Environments of Jersey project, or QAEJ), I joined the team for the second season of fieldwork in July 2011.

Although La Cotte is rightly famous for its deeply stratified Early Middle Palaeolithic archaeology, and impressive ‘bone heaps’ of mammoth and woolly rhinoceros that were excavated by Charles McBurney in the 1960s and 70s, above these were extremely rich layers of Late Middle Palaeolithic archaeology. Uncovered during the first exploration at the site in the early 20th century by the Société Jersiaise and R. Marrett (funded by the British Association for Advancement of Science), these deposits were several meters thick and filled the ‘cave’ in the northern wall of the ravine almost to the roof. While the artefacts from these deposits were briefly described by Paul Callow in an appendix to the 1986 monograph on McBurney’s excavations at La Cotte, they have never been analysed in detail, and represent a substantial neglected resource on this period, which would benefit from the application of modern technologically-focused lithic analysis.

Even though these excavations were conducted during the formative years of archaeology as a science, and artefacts were not recorded in three dimensions, several relatively detailed publications were produced describing the deposits. Sadly however, as with many early sites, the collections have substantially reduced in size from what was originally recovered: an estimated total of c. 20,000. In spite of this, as I found during July, the artefacts from the early 20th century fieldwork can be distinguished from material collected during later excavations because those accessioned by the Société Jersiaise (and now in the Jersey Museum) were assigned individual numbers, and many have matching stickers with handwritten dates (e.g. “La Cotte 1910). In total around 4-6000 lithics have survived, in addition to another collection of just over 100 lithics in the British Museum. Although the collection sent to the UK was clearly cherry-picked to include very fine specimens of retouched tools, a large proportion of the material in Jersey is formed of debitage (including small sizes) and cores, which are technologically the most informative elements. So despite the limitations of the extant collection, it is possible to analyse a substantial sample of the original material. Clearly in the absence of stratigraphic information, the artefacts will have to be treated as a large palimpsest, but my doctoral research on the British Late Middle Palaeolithic demonstrated that it is still possible to extract detailed information about raw material exploitation, reduction strategies and wider technological organisation from such assemblages. Based on the data recorded from the collections in Jersey and the UK thus far, it is clear that there are some interesting patterns in the later Neanderthal archaeology from La Cotte. As with the lower Early Middle Palaeolithic layers, technological strategies for core reduction include discoidal and Levallois techniques. Some very small cores indeed were worked in an especially economical manner.

Generally, reduction is controlled, with a high degree of faceting, and working of individual cores pursued until they cannot be further knapped.

However, a major difference to the lower layers is the overwhelming proportion of flint

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artefacts, including what appear to be beach cobbles of varied sizes, despite the lack of Cretaceous deposits on Jersey suggesting that currently sub-marine beach deposits may have been exploited. Despite this apparently greater availability of flint than during earlier Neanderthal occupations, there is a high frequency of recycling of ‘old’ artefacts, identifiable through secondary patination. This is often in the form of a flake being removed down the dorsal or a retouched tool, using the top of the original striking platform. This practice suggests, similar to the intensive core reduction, quite economical management of the lithic resource at La Cotte during the Late Middle Palaeolithic, which could be due to changes in wider systems of mobility and technological organisation, rather than purely geological constraints.

Further investigation of this intriguing assemblage will be continued by returning to Jersey and the British Museum to record the remainder of the collections when further funding is found. Especially exciting for future directions of the project are the presence of many pieces of banded beige flint which provide potential for refitting, along with other distinctive coloured flints. Furthermore, possible organic residues on some artefacts were identified with Rob Dinnis at the British Museum, which will be investigated later this year.

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