
Reviewed by

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Dibble and Lenoir's book is the result (or rather, some of the results) of their 1987-90 excavations at Combe-Capelle Bas, one of a cluster of Middle Palaeolithic sites at Combe-Capelle in the valley of the Conze, a tributary of the Douzous. It is also a not entirely successful attempt to reconcile the conflicting demands of a site report and a problem-oriented case study. The editors explicitly recognise this contradiction, but recognition is not reconciliation, and the consequence is a general unevenness in the book's structure and depth.

As a site report, the book offers extended and useful chapters dealing with the description and primary analysis of the lithic assemblages and with the implications for site formation of artefact orientation and density. There are also important chapters relating to electrical resistivity and magnetic susceptibility measurements and site sedimentology, as well as copious, if occasionally uninformative, illustrations. These contributions, however, sit mostly alongside general summaries of the history of approaches to Middle Palaeolithic assemblage variability and raw material procurement. The purpose of these summaries is to support the raw material availability-reduction intensity model of Middle Palaeolithic assemblage variability with which Dibble is famously associated and which is the foundation of the book's research concerns. Their tone and scope, however, are more in keeping with an undergraduate text book than with either a site report or an in-depth case study. Also, one can understand the editors' desire to avoid delays in publication, but the book cannot be a comprehensive account of their excavations when Guadéli's faunal analysis, Maninbat's palynology, and Vailladas' absolute dating are omitted on these grounds.

Chapter two makes clear Dibble and Lenoir's research aims. These are: the clarification of the industrial sequence at Combe-Capelle Bas, through the re-excavation of the trench sunk by Ami in 1926 and his death in 1931; a re-examination of the geological context of the archaeological material; and the testing of predictions deduced from the raw material availability-reduction intensity model at a site that sits directly on top of a flint outcrop. The editors' success in addressing these questions is, again, uneven. With regard to the first, their results are impressive. According to Peiron, who published from Ami's notes after the latter's death, and Bourgon, whose work was published posthumously by Bordes, the uppermost level at Combe-Capelle Bas contained a Mousterian of Achellean Tradition (MTA) with typical cordiform bifaces. Beneath this were scraper-rich (Charentian) industries characterised by an abundance of flint (Clastokian) platforms. Bourgon went further, subdividing the Charentian into two Quina facies with a Levallois Index (LI) of 18.9% and an Upper Ferrassie with an LI of 33.3%. Dibble and Lenoir confirm in chapter five that the collections held in the museum in Les Eyziez confirm to this sequence, but the assemblages they recovered in their re-excavation of Ami's trench are very different. There is no trace of MTA bifaces, and the LI averages only 2.6%
across all levels of their excavation and nowhere exceeds 4.8%. In fact, they recovered only typologically Typical Mousterian industries with relatively abundant notched pieces and a high incidence of Clactonian platforms, and no MTA or Charentian at all.

This apparent mystery is convincingly explained. Dibble and Lenoir also excavated the backfill from Ami's enormous trench, and found it to contain fewer scrapers and more notched pieces than the supposedly representative museum collections. In fact, the Rador Indices (IR) of the museum collections and of the assemblage from Ami's backfill bracketed those of the assemblages from the re-exavation of the original trench. The conclusion is inescapable, Ami was keeping the scrapers and throwing away the notches and falseflakes. As for the alleged MTA, Dibble and Lenoir point out that industries of this character do exist on the hillside to the east of Ami's trench, and conclude that Peyrony, Bourguignon, and probably Ami included finds from all over the slope in the collection from the uppermost level of the trench on stratigraphic grounds.

This convincing demonstration that the previously published industrial sequence at Combe Capelle Bas was in error has implications that extend beyond this particular site. It indicates yet again how little faith Paleolithic archaeologists should place in culture-stratigraphic schemes constructed from excavations of doubtful quality in the earlier part of this century. In addition, Combe Capelle Bas is no longer an argument against Mellars' chronology for the Mousterian in southwest France, which places the Ferrassie Charentian earlier, rather than later, than the Quina variant.

The book's contribution on this matter is of considerable importance. The editors' success in achieving their remaining research aims is less obvious. Dibble clearly shows in Chapter twelve that the industries at Combe Capelle Bas are more lightly utilised than the Quina industries from levels 22 and 25 at Combe Grenal, which is somewhat more distant from a flint outcrop. The analyses in chapters eleven and twelve relating to blanks/ core ratios, platform preparation and surface area, flake surface area, core and flake length and other elements certainly indicate a trend towards increasing intensity of utilisation on the site's industries as one ascends the stratigraphy, at least in those two sectors of the re-excavation that yielded assemblages sufficiently large for meaningful statistical analysis. But many of the "Availability-reduction" model's more specific predictions fail to find statistically significant support in the data. Furthermore, the tendency (again, not always statistically significant) for the transverse and convergent scrapers at Combe Capelle Bas to be both shorter and wider than the single and double scrapers rather undermines the editors' claim that blank size was the major determining factor in the selection of blanks for edge retouching. It appears instead that blank size may also have been an important consideration in the selection of blanks for reworking into either transverse-convergent or single-double scrapers. If so, then the "availability-reduction" model would have to recognise the existence of two distinct continua of scraper reduction rather than the single reduction continua that are described in the book. In any case, the omission mentioned earlier of the faunal analysis, palynology and absolute dating necessarily means that a number of competitive explanations for the differences in assemblage variability at the site - subsistence strategies, butchery and meat transport practices, vegetational environment and climate for example - are "factored out" of the interpretation. Dibble also concedes in chapter twelve that the choice of primary flaking technique is a major contributor to assemblage variability and that it does not correlate with indices of raw material reduction intensity. Considering all of this, together with the typological and technological uniformity of the assemblages recovered in the re-excavation and the virtual absence of erratic artefacts such as cordiform bifaces and Charentian blisters, it is hardly surprising that reduction intensity emerges as the major source of assemblage variability at Combe Capelle Bas.

The two aspects of the book - site report and case study - are held together by chapters six to ten, which deal with the geological history of Combe Capelle Bas. Work of this nature is essential to any site report, but it is also fundamental in establishing whether the depositional context of the archaeological materials can sustain the analyses and interpretations that the book contains. These chapters, however, do not speak with one voice. Bartram and Texier's sedimentological analysis (Chapter seven) argues that all the archaeological deposits at Combe Capelle Bas, which are situated on a slope running down from a limestone cliff to the valley floor, have been slumped down hill and may be hopelessly mixed. Their treatment is, however, brief and superficial. They assert that the limestone benchtop terraces beneath the site are the products of erosional downcutting by the Combe river and assign remarkably early dates to their formation based on the basis of passing unillustrated references to what is known of stream deposition in northern Aquitaine and of the Bordogne terraces. Chapters eight to ten are devoted to debunking this scheme. The re-excavation's three sectors each sample a separate terrace fill, and Ellwood, Khleas and Dibble (using electrical resistivity and magnetic susceptibility measurements, artefact orientation and density data and lithic assemblage characteristics respectively) each argue that the terrace fills are sufficiently different one from another to render the post-depositional mixing of archaeological remains across separate terraces unlikely. Khleas and Dibble also present stratigraphic trends within each sector which, they contend, mitigate against the vertical mixing of archaeological horizons within each terrace fill. All of which is lost, they feel, is the fine dolomite fraction and the possibility of horizontal spatial analysis. On balance, the evidence presented in the book favours Dibble. But doubts remain, although further studies could address them. Refitting, for example, could prove useful, and a more thorough sedimentological analysis could resolve the problem of whether the Combe Capelle terraces are fluvial in origin as Bartram and Texier suggest, or the products of cryoplanation as Khleas maintains.

Dibble's re-excavation of Combe Capelle Bas was a valuable exercise and this book is an important addition to the literature. It is not its best in rewriting the site's industrial sequence, but the emphasis on intensity of utilisation, which is useful at this site, is of limited utility when applied to wider questions of Middle Palaeolithic assemblage variability. The eventual publication of the faunal analysis, palynology and absolute dating may encourage more multi-dimensional interpretations of the archaeological. More crucial to this, however, is an appreciation of the Middle Palaeolithic record as traces of past action in the landscape, rather than primarily as a succession of economic production systems. The differences between which are to be explained, or explained away - a mode of thought to which Dibble and Lenoir, to judge by this book, remain committed.