ARTICLES

THE FIFTH INTERNATIONAL FLINT SYMPOSIUM, BORDEAUX.
29 September - 2 October 1987

by Alan Saville

Some 190 participants from twenty countries, comprising about two-thirds archaeologists and one-third geologists, made the trip to Bordeaux for the opportunity to "think flint" for three and a half days. After a brief opening session and a review of the history of these flint symposia by M.-X. Seronie-Vivien, President of the French Organizing Committee, the first morning was devoted to both archaeological and geological papers. In theory the morning's presentations reflected the sections into which the conference programme was divided, but in practice nothing was included under TRACES D'USAGE and since the advertised paper by Tixier (TECHNOLOGIE) was scratched (owing to the non-attendance of the archaeologists present), only GEOLOGIE, ECONOMIE DU SILEX and MINES PREHISTORIQUES were represented.

Thereafter, the programme was split into separate sessions under the above five headings, and equally throughout the conference began to degenerate (academically) as a result of poor preparation and organization. For reasons unknown, the first afternoon was given over exclusively to geology (and most archaeologists fled to the sights and bars of Bordeaux), whereas on the second and third days there were three competing sessions. As is almost always the case with such arrangements, the timekeeping in each session was inadequate to allow successful movement between sessions to catch particular papers, which was especially frustrating in the case of the TECHNOLOGIE and ECONOMIE sessions, since papers had been somewhat unnecessarily assigned to these headings.

In total this reviewer attended only twenty-seven of the total of about seventy-seven presentations, so is somewhat loath to generalize, but discussions with colleagues attending other sessions confirmed the validity of some general criticisms. These can be grouped as follows:

1. Too many of the papers were of an inadequate standard or of too narrow a focus for presentation at an international conference. It would appear that the selection of papers was undertaken and that every paper offered was accepted. Since the programme was not advertised in advance, but only made known on arrival, the feeling of having been sold a pig in a poke was inevitable.

2. Some overall control of the way in which papers are presented is essential at an international conference, particularly when there are two official languages (in this case French and English). Yet numerous speakers in Bordeaux committed basic errors of presentation, for example by speaking in English, reading very rapidly from notes of sites or finds for which there showed no location map, or, as in the case of three of the papers I attended, showed no slides at all. To address an international audience by reading rapidly from a text in a language with which the audience is at least partially unfamiliar is simply incompetent and almost insulting.

3. In the sessions I attended, chairing was virtually invisible and completely failed to keep the programme to the advertised timetables. Admittedly the chairpersons had problems, since they were not notified in advance of the conference that they would be chairing, since the papers in each session tended to be rearranged each morning (and sometimes during the course of the day!); since not all the papers had an entry in the circulated schedules, and since no provision was made to ensure that a translator (at least from French to English) was available for question times. Needless to say, no chairperson could be expected to cope with the problem created by speakers who announced, for example, that they were not going to speak on the topic listed in the programme but on something completely different.

Having made all these criticisms, were there any saving graces? Thankfully there were, because some of the papers were exactly what one hopes for at this kind of conference, that is to say they were revelatory of new sites and horizons (and/or new approaches to the analysis of them) from outside one's own study area. Thus I found two of the sites discussed by the Spanish contingent at the Symposium to be particularly exciting: the Arbeda cave site in north-east Catalonia, which has over 2000 of deposits with Middle and Upper Palaeolithic occupation (M. Boler et al.), and the Neolithic complex at Can Tintoré, near Barcelona, where various minerals were extracted including that used for the production of 'callais' beads (M.J. Villa et al.). From the opposite end of Europe came two impressive reports of papers, one concerned with the lower Palaeolithic, one with the refitting of numerous stone age sites in advance of a new dam, involving the use of refitting during excavation as a control on site organisation and potential, which then directly influenced the project strategy (S. Coulson and O. Olstad): the other concerned with refitting but in the context of of a museum collection from a previously published Maglemosian camp-site, where the refitting has completely altered the site interpretation (B. Skar). From central western Europe came papers on the excellent post-excavation analyses of the lithic material from the Upper Palaeolithic site of Hauert and Champerreys in Switzerland (J. Auffolter et al.), and on similar work on a site of the same period at Andernach in Germany, including the refitting of flake segments from the recent excavation to those found in the same site in the last century (F. Pless), which was intriguing to learn of the red flint of Heiligen, now way out in the North Sea but previously more accessible and exploited in prehistory (J. Beuker).

Insofar as it was possible to determine any key trend from the sessions I attended, it would have to be described as a concentration on raw materials and refitting. Particularly when there are two official languages (in this case French and English). Yet numerous speakers in Bordeaux committed basic errors of presentation, for example by speaking in English, reading very rapidly from notes of sites or finds for which there showed no location map, or, as in the case of three of the papers I attended, showed no slides at all. To address an international audience by reading rapidly from a text in a language with which the audience is at least partially unfamiliar is simply incompetent and almost insulting.

In addition to the lectures, an evening film session demonstrated the great potential that exists for the use of film/video as a medium for explaining in an interesting and
entertaining way to the general public the intricacies of flint-knapping and prehistoric mining. The highlight of the Symposium was undoubtedly the food: The university cafeteria lunches were splendid but were outshone by the magnificent Conference dinner in the Chateau des Ducs d'Épernon at Cadillac.

So what of the conference as a whole, and what of the prospects for the next Symposium in Spain in 1991? The original vision and concept of the organizers of the first three Maastricht Symposiums has been confirmed in that the study of the origin, composition, occurrence, extraction and use of flint and related rocks has proved to be of continuing and growing interest and provides a viable basis for bringing people together in an international gathering. Clear problems are apparent, however. First of all, to what extent is the split between the geological and archaeological aspects of the conference. One of the *raisons d'etre* of these Symposia, and one of their most endearing qualities in these days of increasing disciplinary specialization, was that they brought geologists and archaeologists together to discuss common interests and to explain related work and problems. At Bordeaux this did not happen.

Nor, as Tixier pointed out in his closing remarks, was there sufficient interaction between the KOMONIX, TECHNOLOGY, and TRACES D'USURE sessions of the Symposium, sessions which there is little logical basis for separating. What is the point of bringing together so many specialists from different countries if they cannot exchange and interact and share the results of their studies? Either the number of contributions given as papers at the Symposium should be drastically reduced, and should be presented in single sessions, or there should be a structure devised for daily feedback from these sessions to the Conference as a whole. Perhaps keynote papers, specially commissioned and vetted, could be presented to the whole Conference at the beginning of each day's proceedings.

The Spanish organizers will need to plan well to bring back cohesion and substance to the Symposium.

Finally, I cannot avoid mention of the associated pre-conference two-day field trip to northern Aquitaine, attended by a large number of those participating in the Symposium. This was also something of a disappointment. Despite the presence on the trip of more archaeologists than geologists, seven of the ten stopping points had geological interest only and this involved devoting the whole of the first day to geology. The geological exposures visited comprised deposits which, for the most part, were not humanly exploited in prehistory, and one was left to speculate on the origin and type of flint used by the prehistoric peoples of the region, a region which is self-proclaimed as the 'birthplace of prehistory'. Since the preliminary publicity did not mention any of the sites to be visited, most of the archaeologists had been attracted to the field trip by the fact that the overnight stop was to be in Les Eyzies, with tantalizing implications for the opportunity to investigate local archaeological treasures. This was not to be! Instead of splitting the party, the first two stops of the second morning were yet more geological exposures, the visits made all the more infuriating by the archaeologically famous placenames frequently glimpsed through the windows of the coaches!

Eventually we got to see the one rock shelter included on the itinerary, La Mouthe, and (thanks to an 'unofficial' site talk in English by Roy Larrick) were able to appreciate some of the complexity involved in the impressive deposits at this famous site, at which the current excavation campaign is but one of many since its discovery in 1895. At the other two archaeological stops we were able to see two excavations of open sites in progress, one at the Lower Palaeolithic site of Barbas, the other at an Upper Palaeolithic location at Pécharmant. The former site has been known of for some time and is now undergoing further excavation, the latter is new and results from the rescue survey of an area about to be taken under cultivation within the Corbiac vineyard. By systematically probing the stone-free sandy soil of the Pécharmant fields with a simple metal rod, two concentrations of knapping debris have been discovered and exposed. The denser of these two concentrations, being excavated by Tixier, was a kind of mini-Pincevent, but without any organics because of the soil conditions.

Fortunately during the field trip the weather was kind, and no one will forget the 'wallpaper-paste' soup served during dinner at Sireuil, which immediately became the symbol for the conference! Despite all the irritations and failings of the field trip and Symposium, the week as a whole proved a very enjoyable one and was socially very successful. By the end one had come to appreciate and admire the (south-west?) Gallic way in which Seronie-Vivien serenely allowed events to largely orchestrate themselves, whilst always being on hand to say the right words at the right time. His greatest challenge is now the production of the Symposium proceedings. Only in this respect did the previous Symposium at Brighton prove a fiasco - two volumes costing £60 each and the archaeological one taking four years to appear, just in time for Bordeaux, though it was not on sale there! Rapid and cheap publication of the Bordeaux Symposium proceedings would go a long way towards removing any lingering regrets about the Conference itself!