

VICTOR COMMONT

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ABSTRACT

The study of Palaeolithic archaeology in Northern France entered the scientific era with Victor Commont's research at the beginning of the 20th century. Commont's research into the Palaeolithic industries was based around detailed stratigraphical observations of the fluvial deposits and their loamy capping. He recognized four fluvial terraces, identified by their height above the lowest river deposits, and studied the profiles of the loamy deposits, especially in the area of Amiens. The Bultel-Tellier pit played an important part in these studies. At this pit Victor Commont demonstrated that the major chronostratigraphical division was the "limon fendillé", a palaeosol now attributed to the Last Interglacial pedogenesis. Commont recognized three lithic industries in the Lower and Middle Palaeolithic: the Chellean, the Acheulean and the Mousterian. He also discovered at Montières one of the oldest Middle Palaeolithic industries of continental north-west Europe, characterised by a volumetric laminar débitage. Successive studies of the Somme terraces have demonstrated the soundness of the majority of Commont's observations, which remain precious today.

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INTRODUCTION

The Somme Valley has played an important role in the history of Palaeolithic prehistory, with the publication of the "Antiquités celtiques et antédiluviennes" by Jacques Boucher de Perthes in 1849 (Gowlett, this volume). The discovery of *in situ* handaxes at Saint-Acheul by Rigollot in 1854 and the confirmation of these discoveries by J. Prestwich in 1859 (Pope & Roberts, this volume) highlighted the eponymous site of the Acheulean. However, the study of Palaeolithic archaeology in Northern France did not enter the scientific era prior to Victor Commont's research at the beginning of the 20th century.

HIS LIFE

Victor Comment (Figure 1) was born on June 28th 1866 at Buire-Courcelles near Péronne in the Somme region (Bordes & Fitte 1953; Ponchon 1923). His father, an artisan, settled in Amiens after the 1870 war between France and Germany. When he was 18, Victor Commont left high school with a school certificate and was appointed as an adjunct teacher, first at Neuville and subsequently at Hem, a suburb of Amiens. In 1894, he was appointed as a teacher of science. After spending one year at Alençon, in Normandy, in 1895 he was nominated director of the elementary school that was joined to the teacher's training school at

Amiens. He remained there until his death, less than 23 years later.



Figure 1: Victor Commont [A. Tuffreau Personal Collection]

Being not very strong, Victor Commont took a very active interest in the botanical and, after 1903, he devoted all of his free time to prehistory and the study of Quaternary deposits. As his house was located on Edinburgh Street in the Saint-Acheul suburb, he oversaw almost daily the exploitation of the quarries and brickyards in this suburb of Amiens. He also had the help of correspondents for the quarries located in the other parts of the Somme basin, and Commont understood the nature and importance of the geological and paleontological backgrounds of the artefacts discovered in the *different* pits. Between 1904 and 1917, he published 72 papers and mémoires in the *Bulletin de la Société Linnéenne du Nord de la France* and in numerous other reviews (*Annales et Mémoires de la Société Géologique du Nord*, *Bulletin trimestriel et Mémoires de la Société des Antiquaires de Picardie*, *Bulletin de la Société Géologique de France*, and *Congrès*

Préhistorique de France, amongst others). François Bordes and Paul Fitte (1953) have drawn up a complete list of his publications, of which the most important are probably “Saint-Acheul et Montières. Notes de Géologie, de Paléontologie et Préhistoire” (Commont 1909) and “Les Hommes contemporains du Renne dans la vallée de la Somme” (Commont 1913a).

In November 1917, during a geological field excursion in a sector of the Somme battlefield left by the German troops, Victor Commont fell sick. He was subsequently obliged to leave his house in March 1918 because of the shelling of Amiens, located just ten kilometres from the frontline, and died at the hospital of Abbeville on 3rd April 1918, aged 51 years old. This untimely death prevented him from writing a synthesis about Saint-Acheul (Agache 1958; Fagnart 1993; Groenen 1994; Tuffreau 1987).

The artefacts collected by Victor Commont were bought by André Vayson de Pradenne, a mining engineer, who published in 1920 a memoir entitled “La plus ancienne industrie de Saint-Acheul”, which provides valuable information on the stratigraphy of the deposits of Saint-Acheul.

THE STUDY OF THE SOMME TERRACE SEQUENCE

Victor Commont’s research into the Palaeolithic industries of the Somme utilised detailed stratigraphical observations of the fluvial deposits and their loamy capping. He recognized the influence of the soliflucted sediments within the fluvial accumulations, and their importance, long before the solifluction deposits’ formal identification.

He recognized four fluvial terraces (Figure 2), identified by their height above the lowest river deposits and not by their height above the bedrock under the modern floodplain: the Low or 10 metre Terrace, 2nd or 30 metre Terrace, 3rd or 40 metre Terrace

(divided into two different deposits), and the 4th or 55 metre Terrace, which had only a small number of visible sections (Commont 1910a, 1911). Very precise levelling of the different deposits permitted Commont to demonstrate that the terrace sequence's long

profile dipped downwards in the direction of the Channel, with a disappearance of the Low Terrace under the floodplain in the low valley between Amiens and Abbeville, close to Longpré-les-Corps Saints.

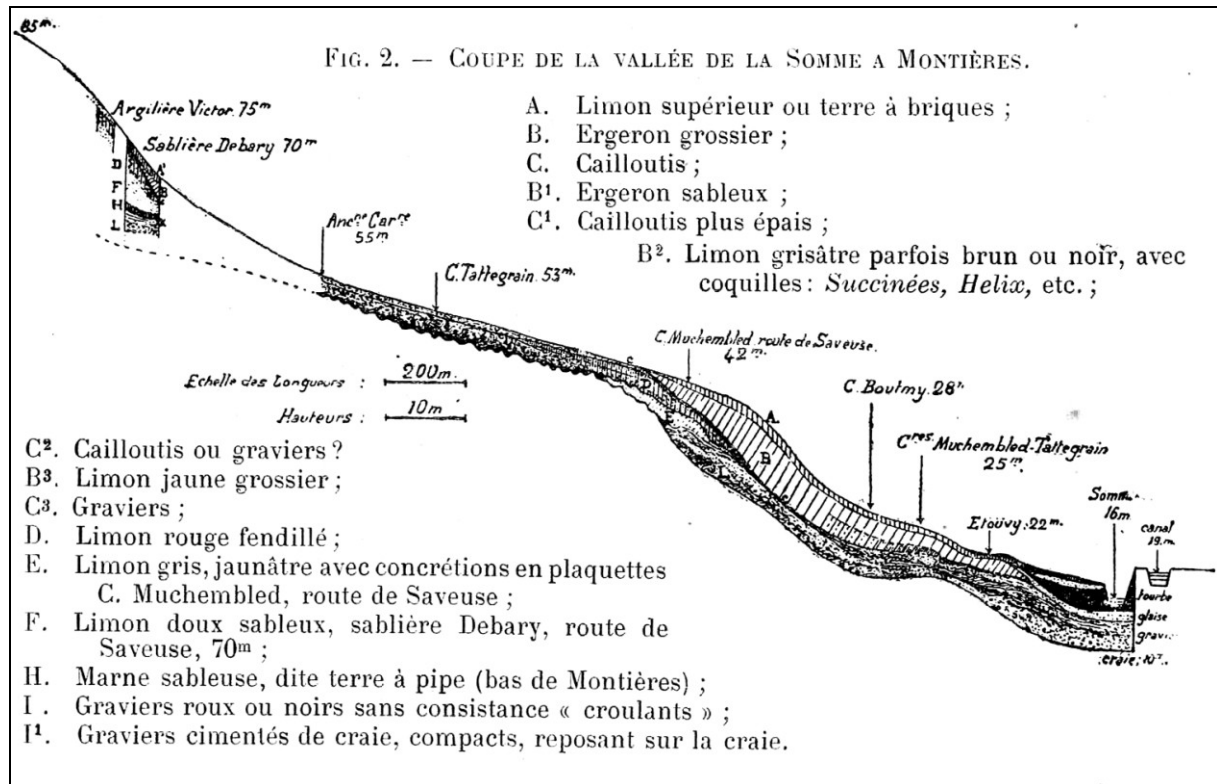


Figure 2: The Somme terraces at Montières, after V. Commont

He observed the presence of a “limon fendillé” (soil of the Last Interglacial) above an old (i.e. older than the Last Glacial) loess, visible in a depression of the Buhant-Muchembled-Tattegrain pit at Montières, a western suburb of Amiens, and located in the upper part of the Low Terrace deposits. Victor Commont (1909, 1913a) assigned a Würmian age to the Low Terrace and a Rissian age to the 2nd Terrace. In this context it is important to recall that at the beginning of the last century, references to the glaciations had a different meaning to those of today: the glacial divisions did not have a strict chronological meaning but were interpreted as phases of till extensions.

Commont could not observe the Palaeolithic sites of Abbeville as frequently as those of Saint-Acheul and Montières, because of their distance from his home. However, he gave us precious descriptions of the Quaternary deposits at Abbeville (Commont 1910b). With the help of a collaborator he sampled, like G. d'Ault du Mesnil, remains of large mammals in a calcareous silt, called “marne blanche”, at the Carpentier pit, although no Palaeolithic implements have been found in this deposit or in the underlying gravels attributed to the 40 metre Terrace.

THE LOAMY CAPPING

Victor Commont continued Jules Ladrière's (1843–1923) investigations of Pleistocene loam deposits from Northern France (Ladrière 1890). He studied the profiles of the Somme Basin, especially in the area of Amiens, located in the south. The Bultel-Tellier pit (Figures 3 & 4) played an important part in these studies. Commont (1912a) demonstrated that the major chronostratigraphical division was the "limon fendillé" (a palaeosol). Now attributed to the Last Interglacial pedogenesis (Figure 5), this unit is visible in the upper part of the old loesses (of Middle Pleistocene age). From a chronostratigraphical point of view, the major division is the "limon fendillé" because it corresponds to the boundary between the Last Interglacial and the Last Glacial. But Ladrière thought that the major division was between the "limon gris" (a pedological complex of the Early Last Glacial) and the "ergeron" (a loess of the Last Glacial) because the "limon fendillé" is often visible under the "limon gris". For Commont, the Last Glacial loesses were subdivided into three units, of which the oldest was the "limon gris" (cf. Sommé & Tuffreau 1978). He thought that the major cause of these loess deposits was reworking of Tertiary deposits from the upper part of the slopes or from hillsides, but he also suspected an aeolian influence in the loess formation.

The recent loess covering the Low Terrace and underlying the Holocene soil was interpreted as post-glacial. The age of its basal layer of gravels was Würmian and the age of the older loess was considered to be interglacial because of their stratigraphical position between two layers of gravels corresponding to the Rissian and Würmian tills.

THE LITHIC INDUSTRIES

Victor Commont (1911, 1912a) recognized three key lithic industries in the Lower and Middle Palaeolithic of the Somme: the Chellean, in the old fluvial deposits; the Acheulean, from the old loesses; and the Mousterian, discovered in the "ergeron". The oldest industry was the Pre-Chellean, including crude hand-axes and small flake-tools, found in the gravels of the 2nd Terrace and at the external part of the 3rd Terrace at Saint-Acheul. The Chellean was characterized by the presence of pointed hand-axes with thick butts called "ficrons", collected from the sands overlying the gravels of the 2nd Terrace at Saint-Acheul. The evolved Chellean, discovered in the gravels of the Low Terrace at Montières, some kilometres downstream from Saint-Acheul, was recognizable by its pointed hand-axes, called "triangular" by Commont.

The Lower Acheulean, found at the basis of the old loesses (at the Bultel-Tellier pit: "station Commont" for A. Vayson de Pradenne or "atelier Commont" for F. Bordes; and the "sables roux" unit at Cagny Street, Saint-Acheul; Commont 1908), included various types of handaxes. A younger level with twisted ovate hand-axes and "amygdaloidal" forms was recognized at Saint-Acheul, above the sandy loam of the "atelier Commont". Pointed handaxes ("lancéolés") typical of the Upper Acheulean were found in the "limon fendillé" (Last Interglacial pedogenesis).

The old Mousterian was present in the gravels (C2) between the "limon fendillé" and the lower sandy "ergeron" (B2). Its handaxes were flat and triangular (shapes typical of the Type A Mousterian of Acheulean Tradition). Other pieces appeared to be Micoquian, in particular at Saint-Acheul (Commont 1909, 1910a, 1913a, 1913b). The Middle Mousterian, which has been compared to that of Le Moustier, has been found in the gravels (C1) of the middle part of the "ergeron". Influenced by the



Figure 3: The Bultel-Tellier pit in exploitation (Commont 1909)

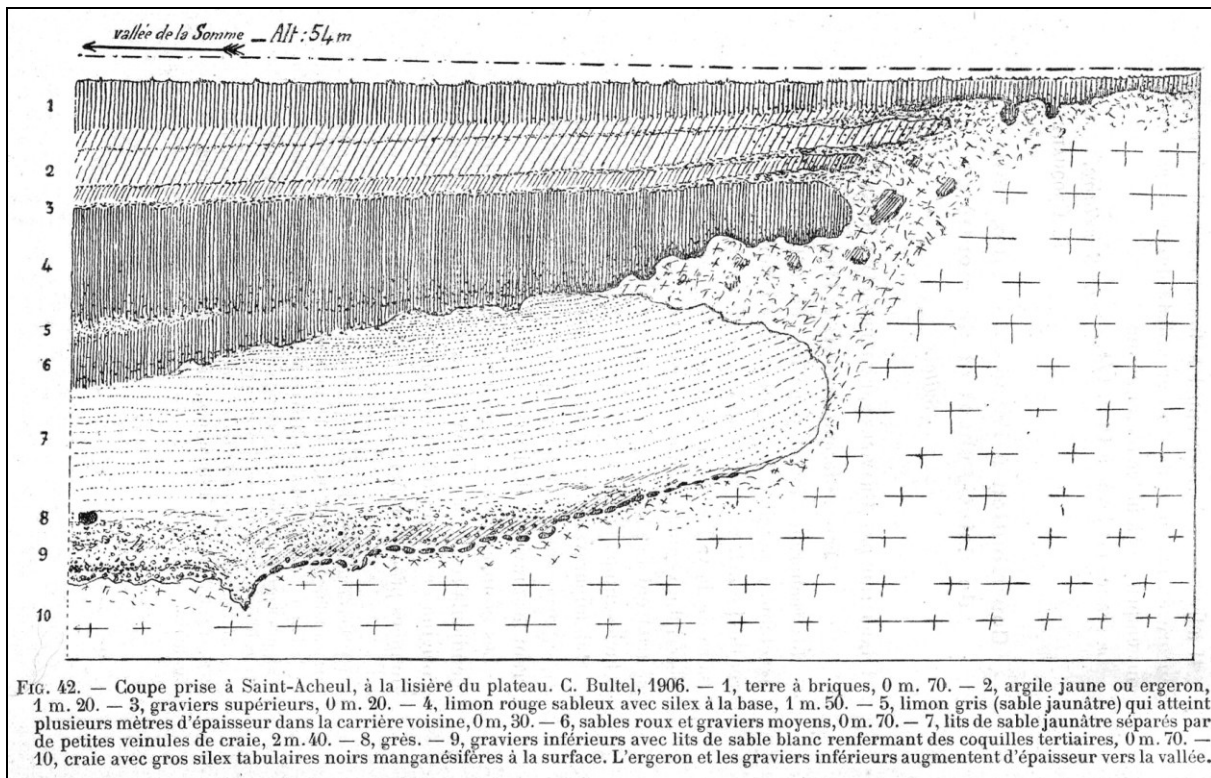


Figure 4: The stratigraphy of the Bultel-Tellier pit, after V. Commont



Figure 5: The Last Interglacial Soil covered by recent loess, at Saint-Acheul in 1995. [© A. Tuffreau]

South-West France discoveries, Commont also compared the latest Mousterian to the “Upper Mousterian” of La Quina in his later publications (Commont 1913b).

The Northern French Mousterian is most often characterized by the presence of Levallois, the débitage of which was well described by Commont (1913a). Commont (1912b) also recognized at Montières (Boutmy Pit) a Mousterian-associated assemblage including numerous elongated blades, found in sandy and calcareous layers of the Low Terrace attributed to MIS 7. These blades were associated with pointed handaxes. This assemblage appears to be one of the oldest Middle Palaeolithic industries of continental north-west Europe where a volumetric laminar débitage is present (Révillion & Tuffreau 1994; Tuffreau 1983). This Mousterian has been described as “warm” because the fauna (*Elephas antiquus*, Hippopotame, *Rhinoceros mercki*, *Equus stenonis* aff., *Equus caballus*, *Felis leo* sp., *Cervus elaphus*, *Cervus* sp., *Bos priscus*, *Bos primigenius* (?), *Ursus arctos*) found in the same units is typical of temperate conditions.

VICTOR COMMONT’S HERITAGE

The various different studies into the Somme terraces (Agache *et al.* 1963; Antoine 1990, 1994; Bourdier 1969; Haesaerts & Dupuis 1986; Tuffreau 1982, 2001; Tuffreau *et al.* 1981) have demonstrated the soundness of the majority of Commont’s observations, which remain especially precious today because of the scarcity of visible profiles.

Henri Breuil (1877–1961; see Davies, this volume) in particular recognised Commont’s great contribution. His famous paper (Breuil & Koslowski 1931, 1932, 1934) “Études de stratigraphie paléolithique dans le Nord de la France, la Belgique et l’Angleterre” was highly influenced by Commont’s works, and numerous of Victor’s profile drawings were adopted. Breuil’s Abbevillian corresponded

to Commont’s Pre-Chellean, although the originality of Breuil’s classification (Breuil & Kelley 1954) was due to his division between the flake industries (Clactonian, Levalloisian) and the handaxe industries (Abbevillian, Acheulean).

François Bordes (1919–1981; see Pettitt, this volume) refuted Breuil’s theories using, in large part, Commont’s stratigraphical observations. In this way Bordes demonstrated the numerous inconsistencies of Breuil’s chronological scheme (Bordes 1950).

Now, the Acheulean *sensu stricto* refers to the handaxe industries with poorly standardized flake-tools of the Somme Middle Terrace (Formation V-Garenne, Formation IV-Epinette: Tuffreau & Antoine 1995). The industries with low handaxe frequencies and with diversified flake-tools found in the Low Terrace and in the old loesses and loams (MIS 8 to 6) have been designated the Epi-Acheulean, one component of the oldest part of the Middle Palaeolithic (Tuffreau 1981, 1982; Tuffreau *et al.* 1981).

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