



LABORATOIRE TRAVAUX ET RECHERCHES ARCHÉOLOGIQUES
SUR LES CULTURES, LES ESPACES ET LES SOCIÉTÉS
Proceedings of the International Symposium, May 13-15 2009
University Toulouse II - Le Mirail

2011 # 3

<http://www.palethnologie.org>

ISSN 2108-6532

edited by

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HUNTING CAMPS IN PREHISTORY

Current Archaeological Approaches



Review published by the P@lethnologie association, created and supported by the TRACES laboratory, the Ethnologie Préhistorique laboratory, the University of Liège and the Ministry of Culture and Communication.

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This event and its proceedings received support from



INTRODUCTION

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In a more or less implicit manner, prehistorians necessarily refer to a typology of the sites occupied by the hunter-gatherer groups that they study. For at least the past 40 years, the notion of “site function” has thus played a crucial role in prehistoric archaeology, particularly when the goal is to interpret the variability of archaeological assemblages (the controversy opposing François Bordes and Lewis and Sally Binford concerning the meaning of Mousterian facies is an excellent example). In this context, sites that yield evidence for activities judged to be specialized are designated as *knapping workshops*, *art sites* (and often *sanctuaries*) or *hunting camps*, depending on the artifacts or other indices recovered, as well as the types of analyses performed. Sites that appear to have been occupied for longer periods, on the other hand, and at which the range of activities is more varied, are often qualified as *residential camps*, *seasonal occupations* or, when they have yielded artifacts considered to be quantitatively or qualitatively exceptional, as *aggregation sites*, or even *super-sites*. The notions underlying these terms are highly significant: is it not through them that the entire territorial organization of the groups studied is more or less suggested? And behind the rules governing this supposed territorial organization, are there not certain aspects that are closely linked to the social organization of the group? In effect, the segmentation of activities in space reveals not only the degree of economic planning practiced by a group, but also a certain form of social functioning. Despite this significance, however, these notions and the terms by which they are designated, remain vague. Though, following the initiative of André Leroi-Gourhan, prehistoric occupation features benefit from a vocabulary constructed with the aid of precise criteria – whose pertinence can therefore be discussed based on solid foundations – the bases of the typology of sites alluded to by these terms are much more tenuous, at least in the context of European prehistoric archaeology. When they do exist, the definitions proposed often vary depending on the context or the authors, thus diminishing the validity of spatial or temporal comparisons.

How can this problem be addressed? We see two possibilities. Either we restrict a cultural entity to a defined space and make an inventory of all the archaeological situations observed in order to extract a typology of the sites occupied by the groups concerned, or we free ourselves from all chronological and geographical limits and focus on a particular site type, choosing among those situations considered to be the most widespread and significant. For this meeting, we chose the second option, with the emblematic example of “hunting camps”. Regardless of how trivial it

may appear in the context of hunting societies, the notion of a “hunting camp” is clearly representative of the challenges and difficulties encountered: in archaeological research, there exists no precise definition of what is designated by this term, though it is commonly used to describe a type of site that we could envision, based on its use in ethnographic contexts, as being associated with specialized expeditions implying a division of activities in space and, perhaps, among the members of a group. In many ethnographic contexts, whether case studies or general models, a “hunting camp” designates a location that is in essence complementary to a main residential camp. It is a location that is very temporarily occupied by a social segment of the group, while the main residential camp is occupied for a longer duration by the entire group. Returning to archaeology, meanwhile, we can justifiably ask the following question: is the notion of a “hunting camp” always used with a full awareness of its underlying socio-economic dimension?

This meeting also addressed the challenge of confronting two of the most significant elements of the archaeological record: zooarchaeological data and the data associated with technical equipment, especially lithic and bone toolkits. In addition to evaluating the degree to which the definition of a “hunting camp” may vary depending on the cultural and /or geographic contexts, we thought it would be useful to explore whether it might be viewed differently depending on whether it is addressed from the perspective of the animal or the weapon used to kill it.

All of these issues, encompassing the theoretical and methodological challenges outlined above, were at the heart of the discussions that animated the meeting held in Toulouse in May 2009. During this encounter, many points of view were confronted from a multidisciplinary and multi-contextual perspective, drawing from European and extra-European archaeological examples ranging from the Middle Paleolithic to the Mesolithic. This panoply was completed by the analysis of cases from more recent American and African contexts, thus integrating both archaeology and ethnology, all of which incited highly productive discussions. We sincerely thank each of the participants, who responded with great honesty to what proved to be the highly ambitious question raised by this meeting: are we capable of defining the criteria necessary to identify in archaeological contexts what is, in principle, one of the most “simple” site types, a “hunting camp”? This gratitude is even more heartfelt knowing that the topic of this meeting ultimately made us all somewhat uncomfortable...

We could not finish this introduction without thanking all those who supported us in this endeavor. First, the numerous financial contributors to the organization of the meeting and the publication of these proceedings: the Direction Régionale des Affaires Culturelles de Midi-Pyrénées, the Conseil Régional Midi-Pyrénées, the PRES of Toulouse, the CNRS, the Scientific Committee of the Université Toulouse II-Le Mirail and the TRACES Laboratory (UMR 5608, Toulouse), as well as the ArScAn Laboratory (UMR 7041, MAE Nanterre), the Université de Liège and INRAP for the publication. We also wish to thank the members of the scientific committee who actively participated in the editorial aspects: Françoise Audouze (ArScAn), Michel Barbaza (TRACES), Federica Fontana, (Università degli Studi di Ferrara), Jesus Emilio González Urquijo (Universidad de Cantabria), Jacques Jaubert (PACEA), Dominique Legoupil (ArScAn), Monique Olive (ArScAn), Jacques Pelegrin (Préhistoire et Technologie) and Boris Valentin (ArScAn). The material and logistical organization of this meeting was realized by the Centre de Promotion de la Recherche Scientifique of the Université de Toulouse-Le Mirail, whose members we thank for their efficiency and availability. Finally, we express our particular gratitude to the editorial committee of the review *P@lethnologie* and especially Vanessa Léa for her patience (yes, it’s true...), Céline Thiébaud

for her editorial revision of the contributions, Fabien Tessier for their layout design and realization, and finally Magen O'Farrell for all of the French-English translations and Karim Gernigon for the English-French translations.

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