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THE DECORATED MESOLITHIC ROCK SHELTERS SOUTH OF ÎLE-DE-FRANCE:
Revision of the Archaeological Data and Research Perspectives

Alain BÉNARD, Colas GUÉRET

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Abstract
The rock shelter art in the sandstone formations south of Île-de-France is mostly non-figurative. The blunted sandstone and flint objects interpreted as engravers and discovered in the stratigraphic levels of a few decorated caves enable use-wear analyses. A new study of ancient collections renews and refines chrono-cultural attributions in the Mesolithic.

Keywords
Rock engravings, non-figurative art, rock shelter, Mesolithic, new study of ancient collections, renewed typology, use-wear.

1 - The main features of rock art south of Île-de-France

Known since 1864, the decorated rock shelters south of Île-de-France are dispersed among the Stampian sandstone formations known as the “Fontainebleau Massif”. Currently, approximately 1 200 of these sites of variable interest are known.

Mainly present in small cavities, this rock art comprises some Paleolithic, Protohistoric and Medieval engravings, but it is mostly attributed to the Mesolithic.

The majority of the engraved images are non-figurative (figure 1), consisting of single or parallel sets of grooves, cupules, grids, chevrons, cruciforms, arboriforms, scalariforms, etc. Most were realized by grooving, which favors the production of straight lines. The few circular representations are composed of small, straight lines that are joined together. A few semi-figurative engravings of humans or animals are also present, but are extremely schematic.

The proposed Mesolithic chrono-cultural attribution of this rock art is based on the presence of blunted objects interpreted as engravers and found only in the Mesolithic levels of the few shelters containing archaeological deposits. While the presence of these engravers supports the attribution of these engravings to the Mesolithic, an even more convincing element was discovered in the decorated shelter called the “Grotte à la Peinture” in Larchant, in the Seine-et-Marne department. Here, one part of the decorated wall collapsed onto a Mesolithic level and was then gradually covered by other Mesolithic and later levels (Hinout, 1993).
These engravings are dispersed on the rock shelter walls with no perceptible organization or preferential association. The locations of the rock shelters themselves also seem random. This rock art appears to be accumulative in nature. The engravers would thus have succeeded each other in time, realizing the graphic motifs imposed by their collective culture, but with no intention to create a coherent entity with the preceding engravings. Only the cavity itself seems to have been meaningful. The small size of nearly all of the decorated rock shelters allowed only individual actions. We currently know of no engravings in the open-air. We observe a relationship between the dispersion of the decorated shelters and the hydrographic system. This relationship may be nonetheless insignificant, being linked to the preferential location of campsites near water sources. We thus propose the concept of diffuse ritual sites in proximity to occupation sites.

2 - Archaeological data and research perspectives

The very abstract nature of the engravings has always complicated their chronological attribution. Beginning with the earliest studies, several researchers thus realized numerous test pits in order to find associated artifacts. Often very old and poorly recorded, these data are now of little value.

The four sites excavated by J. Hinout from 1974 to 1981, in the communes of Buthiers (Essonne) and Larchant (Seine-et-Marne), are exceptions. The published maps and drawings enable a revision of the data; the aim of this first phase of study is to verify the Mesolithic attribution of the majority of the engravings. To achieve this, it already appears necessary to distinguish the different occupation episodes (figure 2) associated at each site with elements from the last chrono-cultural studies. The Grotte à la Peinture also yielded faunal remains that might be datable by 14C. A specific analysis will focus on the 302 flint and sandstone engravers found at the four sites. Through a technological and typological approach, we will attempt to attribute the blanks to specific Mesolithic phases. Use-wear analysis will provide information on the correlations between the tools and the engravings by comparing dimensions of the blunted edges with the grooves made on the rock shelter walls.
If we are able to confirm the Mesolithic attribution, as indicated by our first observations, a large scale collective research program will be developed for the coming years. The sector of the cirque of Larchant was selected as a test zone due to its numerous engraved rock shelters and recorded Mesolithic elements. Survey and recording operations have recently increased in number and are currently being aided by the use of photogrammetry. From an archaeological perspective, new fieldwork will likely be necessary since the available data are insufficient and new questions have been raised. Re-excavating the stratigraphic sections of Hinout’s excavation at the Grotte à la Peinture will enable us to make new observations of this 2.70 m deep sequence. The aim of a parallel survey program will be to identify the habitable rock shelters and evaluate their stratigraphic potential. An auger could be used to rapidly estimate their sedimentary depth and locate Mesolithic levels. The long term objective of this work is to revise and significantly augment the archaeological data in order to integrate the rock art of the region south of Île-de-France into the heart of the questions that currently orient research on the Mesolithic in the Paris Basin. Long neglected by the scientific community, this artistic entity unique in Europe must now play the role that it should have from the beginning.

Figure 2 - Larchant - Grotte à la Peinture. 1: engravers (smoothed zones in black); 2: points with a retouched base; 3: backed bladelets; 4: trapezes; 5: triangles.

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