A REEVALUATION OF THE FRENCH Solutrean

A thesis presented
by
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to
The Department of Anthropology
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in the subject of
Anthropology

Harvard University
Cambridge, Massachusetts
May, 1962
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

A great many people and organizations have contributed to make this study possible since I first began research on the Solutrean in 1957. Much of the debt to individuals, both living and dead, is implicit in their writings which are listed in the bibliography as being utilized in this paper. My gratitude to many others should be expressed more explicitly.

Three prehistorians especially have contributed immensely to whatever of value this paper contains: Hallam L. Movius, Jr. of Harvard University, François Bordes of the Université de Bordeaux and Denise de Sonneville-Bordes (née François Bordes) of Talence (Gironde), France. It was Bordes who originally suggested to me the idea of carrying out research on the Solutrean, when I was being initiated into European prehistoric excavations under his guidance at Laugerie-Haute (Dordogne) in the summer of 1957. Since then he has kindly (but not always gently) given me far more advice and guidance than is perhaps reflected in this paper, especially when I studied at the Laboratoire de Préhistoire de l'Université de Bordeaux in 1958-1959. Movius, my research adviser at Harvard, first attracted me into Palaeolithic studies, made it possible for me to excavate with Bordes in 1957 and gave his full encouragement and cooperation to my proposal to study the Solutrean. The experience of working
in 1958 in his excavation at the Abri Pataud in Les Eyzies (Dordogne) was most enlightening, and I am grateful for many conversations on prehistoric problems in general as well as for the care with which he has examined and criticized the evidence I have gathered here. D. de Sonneville-Bordes has my gratitude and thanks not only for placing her vast fund of knowledge of the Upper Palaeolithic at my disposal whenever I requested advice, and for criticizing searchingly and generously the draft of the present work, but also for the many instances of kindness and hospitality I have received at the Bordes home in Talence over the years. To these three individuals I express my most sincere thanks.

I am also grateful to the Peyrony family of Laugerie-Haute (Dordogne) for many kindnesses in the past five years. M. Elie Peyrony, curator of the Musée de Préhistoire des Eyzies, has at all times made the resources of the museum available to me and given me much valuable information concerning the sites in the Périgord region. Mme. Peyrony and the former Mlle. Lucette Peyrony (now Mme. Philippe Casalis) did much to make my various stays in Les Eyzies pleasant and comfortable. I wish also to thank Mme. veuve Garrigue of the Hôtel du Centre in Les Eyzies for her cheerful consideration in putting me up at times which were often inconvenient to her.

Among French prehistorians I am indebted to the following: the late Abbé Henri Breuil who was generous enough to
discuss the Solutrean with me in several long conversations and later gave me much information by letter; Professor Raymond Vaufrey, co-editor of *L'Anthropologie*, who welcomed me to study in 1959 at the Institut de Paléontologie Humaine in Paris and has been unfailingly generous and courteous in aiding me in my research; the Chanoine Jean Bouyssonie of Brive (Corrèze) who made his collections and knowledge available with his usual generosity during my visits to Brive; Mr. Harper Kelley, Chef de la Section de Préhistoire at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris, who has been most helpful with his own collections as well as with those of the museum; M. Louis Mérou of Toulouse who has provided me with much information concerning the prehistory of the Pyrenees and whose company on an archaeological tour of Provence is still a pleasant memory; M. Jean Combier, who allowed me to study at length his collections from Solutré and the Rhône Valley sites and whose personal hospitality at Romanèche-Thorins (Saône-et-Loire) was most enjoyable; Max Escalon de Fonton who has welcomed me at various times in Marseilles, given me all the information I requested concerning the Mediterranean sites he knows so well and permitted me to join his excavations at the site of La Salpêtrière (Gard) in 1959. Eugène Bonifay has also been very helpful in questions involving the Solutrean of Provence and prehistoric-geological problems in general.

I thank Dr. André Cheynier of Meudon (Seine-et-Oise)
for permitting me to examine his collections from Badegoule and the Abri Lachaude, and the Chanoine A. Lemozi for his hospitality when I visited Cabrèt (Lot) to see the Solutrean collections from that locality. I am grateful to Dr. M. Gruet of Angers (Maine-et-Loire) for much information about the Mayenne sites and for the kindness his family showed me during my visit to Angers in 1958. Jean Bouchaud has been generous with his information on the many questions concerning fauna which I put to him. M. Séverin Blanc of Les Eyzies (Dordogne) generously allowed me to examine his collections. Numerous conversations with Georges Laplace have helped me to understand better some aspects of prehistory. P. Prat of the Laboratoire de Préhistoire of the Université de Bordeaux not only identified the faunal remains excavated from 1956 to 1959 at Laugerie-Haute, but with his unfailing cheerfulness helped me to gather obscure bibliographical sources and references from various libraries in Bordeaux. P. Laurent of the same laboratory has provided some, and certainly the best, of the illustrations for this work. M.J. Ferrier of Bordeaux kindly gave me certain information on sites in the département of Gironde. Dr. and Mme. Gaussen of Neuvic (Dordogne) have given me useful details from their site of Solvieux as well as frequent hospitality in their home.

For allowing me to examine the necessary collections in their institutions, I am grateful to M. André Varignac,
Director of the Musée des Antiquités Nationales at St.-Germain-en-Laye who gave me permission to examine at close quarters the various Solutrean collections exhibited there; to M. Michel Soubeyran, curator of the Musée du Périgord at Périgueux; to Mlle. R. Guillot of the Musée Ernest-Rupin at Brive (Corrèze); and to M.J. Lemoine, formerly curator of the Musée Municipal de Bordeaux.

In Spain I have to thank Professor L. Pericot Garcia of Barcelona for his help during my visit there in 1959, especially for his generosity in allowing me full access to the materials from the cave of Parpalló which Sr. D. Fletcher Valls of the Museo de Prehistoria of Valencia made available to me freely. Eduardo Ripoll Perelló of Barcelona also gave much valuable information concerning the Catalan sites and the problems of Paleolithic art. At the Museo Prehistorico de Santander, P. Joaquin Gonzalez Echegaray placed all the Solutrean collections from Cantabria at my disposal, as well as his personal knowledge. But I am especially grateful to Francisco Jordá Gerdá of Oviedo for his continued assistance over several years, especially during a visit to Asturias in 1959. His work on the Spanish Solutrean was in part a model n to disagree on many details.

In Belgium, Jean de Reinzelin, now of the University of Ghent, has been helpful where the Belgian evidence was
concerned and arranged for me to examine the collections in
the Musée d'Histoire Naturelle at Brussels in 1953. I have
been able to obtain much useful information from Janusz
Kozlowski of Cracow, Poland, when we were students together
at the Institut de Paléontologie Humaine in Paris in 1959;
while Dr. Waldemar Chmielewski of Lodz, Poland, has several
times provided me with valuable details of his work in Poland
and the Soviet Union, some of which is incorporated in the
present text. Dr. M. Gábori of Budapest, Hungary, has also
given me information by correspondence.

I cannot fail to acknowledge debts to two friends at
Harvard University whose recent deaths have been tragic losses
for the field of anthropology: Dr. Clyde Kluckhohn of the
Department of Anthropology, for much indirect help and en-
couragement in the preparation of this paper, and Dr. John
Miller of the Department of Geology for much direct assistance
in the field as well as at the University.

A number of institutions have supported the prepara-
tion of this paper at one time or another. The Department of
Anthropology of Harvard University, through the efforts of Dr.
Gordon R. Willey, made available to me in 1957 a travelling
grant which enabled me to excavate in France with François
Bordes during the summer of 1957 on my way back from Shanidar
Cave in Iraq; the present research on the Solutrean stemmed
directly from that invaluable experience. The Canada Council
provided me with a Pre-Doctoral Fellowship to study in France in 1958-1959, and renewed the Fellowship during 1959-1960 to permit me to write up the bulk of the research as a doctoral dissertation at Harvard University. The Laboratoire de Préhistoire and the Faculté des Sciences of the Université de Bordeaux were generous enough to pay for part of my living costs while studying the collections in the Musée des Eyzies in the fall of 1958, while in the spring of 1959 the American School of Prehistoric Research at the Peabody Museum of Harvard University made me a grant to cover some of my expenses while excavating at Laugerie-Haute: West (Dordogne). I wish to thank all these institutions for their generosity and trust.

Finally, but not least, I acknowledge my gratitude to my wife Fumiko for her great patience and understanding.

Philip E. L. Smith

The University of Toronto
Toronto, Ontario
March 14, 1962
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Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

"I need not dwell on the Solutrian episode, which forms the next stage in the French sequence, as this is already well known and understood". (Carrod 1938:23).

The present work seems to be the first attempt to bring together all the available data concerning the French Solutrean and, with the help of new research specifically undertaken for resolving certain problems, to organize it in a lengthy treatment within its Upper Palaeolithic context. Jordi Cerdà has recently (1955) made such an attempt for the Spanish Solutrean, and there have been a number of summaries of the French Solutrean sequence over the years; the principal ones are by the de Mortilletts (G. de Mortillet 1883, 1885; G. and A. de Mortillet 1900), Dâchelette (1908), Breuil (1913, 1960), D. Peyrony (1932a, 1948a) and Pericot (1942). Quite recently (1960) de Sonneville-Bordes has described the Solutrean of the Périgord region in an already classic presentation to which the present writer owes much. Nevertheless, in spite of a superficial general feeling among prehistorians that the Solutrean offers comparative little difficulty, it is probably the least understood of the major Upper Palaeolithic divisions in France. Authoritative opinion has often hardened too easily into accepted dogma, and the scarcity of
Solutrean sites available for excavation has probably aided in provoking poorly founded conjectures rather than reasoning based on reliable data.

The cause of this neglect certainly does not lie in any discrimination against the Solutrean alone, for none of the other French Palaeolithic industries has, since Déechelette's time, received a long and intensive study on a country-wide basis involving exhaustive re-examination of the original archaeological materials. The reasons for this situation seem to lie deep in the trends in French prehistory, especially since 1914, and constitute a topic which cannot be discussed at any length here. It may be enough to mention that until fairly recently the treatment of prehistory in France, with the exception of the syntheses mentioned above, has been regional and fragmentary, i.e., with the main emphasis on a limited problem or phase in a given area -- usually the investigator's own patrie. Recently, in the summaries by Escalon of the prehistory of Basse-Provence, by de Sonneville-Bordes of the whole Upper Palaeolithic in the Périgord area, and in the unpublished work of Combier in the Rhône Valley, there seems to be a swing towards full regional studies in depth such as are features of British archaeology. (These new studies are of course really more sophisticated versions of the regional traditions which such writers as J. Bouyssonie and D. Peyrony had attempted in the
judgments on the conclusions which have been reached after
study of this corpus. The attempts to form conclusions have
often been without much profit; perhaps because of the paucity of data in some cases, perhaps because of the contradic-
tions inherent in much of it and which, although doubtlessly
in good part due to the methods used by the original inves-
tigators, may also be in part due to true superficial para-
doxes which the present writer does not understand well enough
to be able to unravel. But at least one positive advance has
been scored in the present treatment; the problems, the areas
of contradiction and controversy, the questions which must
be asked to reach a more complete understanding of the Solu-
trean in France and the rest of Europe, have been pointed up
so that the future workers in this field will be able to ask
more significant questions of their sites while in the field,
and be able to relate their achieved data to a broader net-
work of relationships than was previously possible. Whether
the conceptual framework and interpretations offered in this
paper find acceptance or not, it is hoped that the attempt to
present new, firmly established facts and to document old data
will prove useful in understanding this particular division
of prehistory.

It should also be pointed out that this paper is
primarily an attempt to describe what the Solutrean is rather
than to discover its origins and fate, important though these
problems are. For various reasons the problem of origins has been an enthralling one for most people discussing the Solutrean, and this writer can confirm that it is the question most frequently asked him by people inquiring into his research. This is perhaps understandable in the case of the Solutrean, which seems to have darkness at both ends; yet it is a rather unfair question considering the difficulty in pinpointing the genesis of any archaeological culture. Instances such as the Middle Mississippian in America, or the Etruscans, spring readily to mind; the origins of the Magdalenian are by no means clear, and if the beginnings of the Perigordian and Aurignacian are considered less obscure, we still have no better idea of what happened in their terminal phases than we do for the Solutrean. But, as will be brought out in the following chapter, it is true that there seems to be less consistency among authors on the nature of the Solutrean than for the other well-established Upper Palaeolithic blocks, even taking into account the recurrent Aurignacian—Perigordian controversies.

It may seem a methodological regression that, in an age when the emphasis in archaeology is away from the typology and classification of artifacts and towards the interpretation of man's past by multiple examinations of his environment and the vestiges of his economic and social activities, this work should be so overwhelmingly typological in nature.
Certainly this is not done in any spirit of reaction; no one could wish more heartily than does this writer that more data provided by the methods of the natural and physical sciences were available for the French Solutrean. But unhappily they are not. Not a single important Solutrean site has yet been treated in this way (at Laugerie-Haute and La Salpêtrière the recent excavations have by necessity been restricted to salvage archaeology in small sections of the sites, although these two operations are the best done to date for the Solutrean), and the context of the overwhelming majority of sites dug in the past can never be re-examined. Indeed, for many sites the artifacts themselves are lost and totally unknown. So at the present time we must work with what we have. Where non-artifactual data are available they will be exploited to the limit, but that limit is soon reached in the case of the Solutrean at the present time.

There need be no illusions that this is the final word on the French Solutrean. I am convinced that when a few of the remaining sites have been dug with the necessary ingenuity and conscientious standards, they will not only shed proportionately far more new light per site but also they will render the typological information we now have far more meaningful and precise. But in the meantime it seems that not only would a summarization of present data for the Solutrean be eminently useful for such future work -- but that
also such a study, based almost entirely on typology, might be a good exercise in its own right. The purpose of this exercise would be not simply to emphasize the "uses and abuses of taxonomy" and the inherent limitations of the method beyond a certain point when it must be supplemented by information of a different order; but also to point out the absolute necessity of perfecting typology as an heuristic device inside the boundaries of its possibilities, for with all its defects and limitations the typology of stone and bone artifacts remains the vertebra of all studies in the older Stone Ages. There is no need, then, to apologize for trying to make the best use of the tools we have and to explore new devices for exploiting them.

A later chapter will deal with the historical attitudes towards the Solutrean culture and the general views at the present time. This might be anticipated by stating that there seems to be a generally accepted impression that the Solutrean represents some kind of interruption in the Upper Paleolithic sequence between the Aurignacian (in the widest sense) and the Magdalenian. Jordá's recent parallel of the Solutrean with the Arab régime in Spain is a dramatic case in point (Jordá, 1955); many others have felt that the Aurignacian/Perigordian and the Magdalenian have affinities which are abnormally broken into by the Solutrean "intrusion". A glance at the charts used by Mayet and Pissot (1915:180) and by
Zeuner (1954:111), to mention only two, reveals this difficulty in adjustment. I suspect that as the increasing complexity of the Upper Palaeolithic is shown by the discovery of such heterogeneities as the Proto-Magdalenian (in Peyrony's sense of the term), the Solutrean will seem less like an eccentric irruption in an otherwise fairly orderly development. One result of a study of the Solutrean, therefore, may be to throw light on the nature and continuity of the other Upper Palaeolithic Industries.

Anyone with a reasonable first-hand knowledge of the Solutrean assemblages will agree that despite its anomalies (especially in its stone-working technique), it fits squarely in the Upper Palaeolithic tradition. In its general kit of burins, scrapers, perforators, etc., it seems to reflect the same traditions as do the other industries between the early Perigordian and the Upper Magdalenian times in France. One of the aims of this paper is to bring out, by a study of the minutiae of material culture as well as by the large-scale comparisons possible through the graphic presentation of typological data, the idea that the Solutrean content does represent a large measure of continuity, although some Solutrean forms may be unique.

Traditionally, those studying the Solutrean have put great emphasis on its peculiar and spectacular aspects, especially in its elaborately worked stone points and foliates.
The failings of such a one-sided approach are too obvious for mention here, and I do not think that anyone in this generation of prehistorians will quarrel with the idea that an even more profitable approach is through the study of the form and occurrence of the non-characteristic components of the assemblages, i.e., to fix the range of diversity among the burins, scrapers, perforators, etc., in order to see if these are distinct from the preceding and following industries, distinct from each other in the Solutrean stages, and what variations are detectable regionally.

Important as are chronology and finer typologies, the ultimate aims of the study of prehistoric assemblages are historical and processual. This, again, is a point of view with which few anthropologically-trained prehistorians would quarrel. The purpose of typological studies should be to get beyond description and classification into processual interpretation -- to establish correlations, if any, between human types, environments and economies, and artifacts; to establish how well industrial differences might reflect cultural differences and attitudes. In the immediate case, the data will be presented to show that although clearly integrated into an Upper Palaeolithic context, the Solutrean does have a unique cast of its own which sets it apart; and in addition it has certain fully unique elements (in form and retouch) whose presence calls for explanation. But the pro-
cessual problems involve the determination of the mechanics, the causation for this twist or change in emphasis in the Solutrean industry and the factors giving rise to the unique elements and the absence or elimination of certain elements found in preceding assemblages.

The biggest problems of Palaeolithic research have hardly yet been touched, even in so reasonably well-advanced a subject as the Upper Palaeolithic of Western Europe. We still know virtually nothing of the demographic situation, the size of the population in an area at a given period, whether increases or decreases occurred, and why. We are beginning to understand something of the degree of sedentary life some of the groups had, and occasionally get a hint of the extent of the geographical range of a single sub-group. But we cannot yet be certain of the extent to which different "cultures", i.e., different artifact-making groups, coexisted in the same regions or had contemporaries in other adjoining provinces, and how they impinged on each other. We can say nothing about the advantages, if any, of one industry or tool-kit over another, nor whether they were specialized adaptations to specific economies or merely different ways of solving the same problems. Most serious of all, we do not understand what it means when Palaeolithic "cultures" change or evolve or disappear, nor whether it is due to internal streamlining pressure, to foreign influences or to local invention.
responding to new needs. Clearly this can only be answered when we know better what the objects were used for, a field of investigation which has seen more conjecture than profitable research.

Again, we are still not sure of the significance of several rather similar industries (e.g., certain Mousterians) being found in widely separated areas, nor of the meaning of contiguous but basically different industries which show some very similar elements (e.g. the Aterian and the Spanish Solutrean).

These are extremely broad and basic problems which can only be solved by the eventual synthesis of much intensive and reliable research directed towards such questions. The present paper is certainly not an attempt to tackle such giants, but rather an effort to approximate an understanding of the French Solutrean in the light of such vital questions. The approach is necessarily more narrow, and I have been concerned mainly to direct the work towards such elementary questions as these:

1. What is unique about the Solutrean, and how does it fit in the matrix of the other Upper Palaeolithic industries in the regions concerned?
2. What is its chronological position and the length of its life-span?
3. What are the indications regarding its origins?
4. What is the significance of its areal distribution in France and Spain insofar as ecology and population are concerned?

5. Can culture areas or sub-areas be isolated within the main Solutrean provinces on typological grounds, and can this be linked with the nature and position of sites and natural science data to reveal demographic information, local groupings and population movements?

6. What are the cultural and social equivalents of the diversity-in-unity seen in the Solutrean industries in separate regions?

7. Does the Solutrean offer a consistent internal continuity through time, and what are the points where innovations or shifts in emphasis indicate calibrations into periods or phases? Or is there any foundation for the recent attempts to set the early phase of the Solutrean entirely apart from the later phase, as a separate culture?

At any rate, such are the main objectives of this paper. Whether a synthesis of this sort is justified will have to be decided from the results and conclusions attained. One of the objects of any synthesis is to outline and define the problems involved. This paper will at least serve to map the boundaries of our ignorance concerning this part of the Upper Palaeolithic, and this alone may justify a synthetic work based on the presently available data and with the methodologi-
cal techniques used here. Certainly it is hoped that this treatment of the Solutrean will not invoke the criticism directed at a certain French writer who had attempted to evaluate and redefine the confused literary trends of his day -- that he had merely entered that particular Augean stable pour y ajouter.

NOTE: In this paper I have used the familiar spelling "Solutrean", rather than the more puristic "Solutrian" which is often preferred in England and elsewhere. It is true that "Solutrian" is more consistent in its ending with the other Anglicized forms such as Magdalenian, Mousterian, etc. However, I feel that the spelling used here is most familiar to the majority of people; and in any case, a perfect consistency would also require changing "Chellean" to "Chelian" in English.