

“The Aurignacian”? Some thoughts*

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ABSTRACT This is a speculative essay that questions the cultural/ethnic/populational reality of the concept of an “Aurignacian”, arguing that to continue to discuss “its” origins and role in the development of human “modernity” may be a waste of energy. I reiterate my belief that the European situation between ca.40-30 kyr BP was a complex *mosaic* and part of a longer process of adaptive change that had begun in Middle Paleolithic times and would continue throughout the course of the Upper Paleolithic, especially in the face of major climatic crises. Many of the things that supposedly characterize the Aurignacian *sensu stricto* were not unique to that

entity, although they may have been more frequent in some assemblages attributed to this culture-stratigraphic unit than elsewhere. Furthermore, rather than seeking an Aurignacian “homeland” in Africa, southwest or central Asia, or Siberia, archeologists must recognize the existence of penecontemporaneous *parallel* developments (especially in lithic technology) in many regions of the Old World, while acknowledging that human groups did have contacts and thereby passed along certain objects and ideas. This may help explain those widespread traits of the Aurignacian (e.g., split-base antler points) that are both unusual and probably functionally advantageous.

Introduction

Sometimes the old comes in the guise of something that appears radically new. Yet, especially in the arcane discipline of prehistory, each generation seems condemned to “reinvent the wheel”. Perhaps there is only a limited stock of ideas “out there”? Maybe the best that can be expected is to reprise and recycle well-worn concepts, repackaging them in novel terminology? Archeology — like the other branches of what we refer to as anthropology — makes a mode of creating new meta-languages to describe notions that have been around before, sometimes several times. In the years when my grandfather was active in such studies (the first three decades of the 20th century), specialists and the educated public were wondering and debating about the nature of the relationship between the “brutish” Neandertals and the “svelte” Cro-Magnons, each with their characteristic technology: Mousterian and Aurignacian respectively. Has much changed? How has the controversy progressed? Are we really much closer to understanding the nature of variability and change during the mid-Upper Pleistocene today than we were at the time of the discoveries of Pilt-down and La Chapelle? Is lack of clarity in the present (and highly polarized) debate due to a paucity of facts or the legacy of old ways of thinking that cloud our vision?

I would argue that we have a lot of facts — admittedly never “enough”, not all unambiguous or conclusive, and certainly biased in a variety of ways, but nonetheless constituting an impressive record on the remote period between about 50 000 and 30 000 BP. The record today includes multidisciplinary data (from sources as disparate as marine oxygen isotopes, rodent spectra, loess stratigraphies and lacustrine pollen sequences) on the complex climatic shifts and environments of the Interpleniglacial, chronometric information (from a variety of new methods that can complement, calibrate and surpass the range of

AMS radiocarbon dating), abundant, well-studied faunal assemblages, and impressive quantities of artifact assemblages analyzed by ever more sophisticated methods used to reconstruct aspects of both manufacturing sequences and function. Increasingly, the record on the so-called “Middle to Upper Paleolithic transition” is being built not only in the “classic” regions of western Europe (especially southwestern France), but also in “peripheral” regions of Europe (e.g., Iberia, Italy, the Balkans, Central Europe, the Crimea) AND in various regions of Asia (e.g., the Near East, Central Asia, Siberia) and in parts of southern, eastern and northern Africa. These developments have had the paradoxical effect of minimizing the importance and generality of the hyper-detailed scheme built up over a century by Lartet, de Mortillet, Breuil, Peyrony, de Sonneville-Bordes, Movius, Delporte, et al. from the caves and rockshelters of the Périgord, while reaffirming the impression of a grand “revolution” in the cultural adaptations of *Homo sapiens* across the Old World. It is this global cultural shift — with ample antecedents in the Middle Paleolithic from Belgium to Israel, from the Maghreb to the Cape — that defies our worn-out and stereotypical “explanations” of progress, migration, acculturation, etc. Likewise it calls into question the meaning and usefulness of the concept of an “Aurignacian culture”, a term applied today to materials not only from the Aquitaine, but also from such distant areas as Bulgaria and the Levant (and even more widely in the past).

Recent years have witnessed a number of “shocks” that should have served to at least urge caution in the reflex association by anthropologists of anatomical and cultural change. I refer to such fossil human discoveries as Saint-Césaire and Zafarraya and the direct AMS dating of Vindija and Hahnöfersand. The paleoanthropological profession should have expected “anomalies” since the days of Garrod and McCown’s “progressive Neandertals” at Mount Carmel, but the chronology of the Israeli caves has been slow to come, complex and disputed in its establishment, despite long recognition of the fact that different “physical types” could make the same Mousterian stone tools and hunt the same animals. Yet old dogmas and prejudices are hard to break. And in this case, it seems so much simpler not only to teach and to write in textbooks that complex, “modern”, verbal Cro-Magnon people of African origin and with blade technology, bone points, art and ornamentation, abruptly and completely replaced simple, “primitive”, linguistically challenged European Neandertals with their flake tools and opportunistic subsistence, but also to believe it, even in the face of much evidence to the contrary.

Elsewhere I (and others) have enumerated the anomalies that defy this stereotype. These include 1) Neandertal remains associated with industries that used to be called “Upper Paleolithic” and that now are called “transitional”; 2) an early Aurignacian prior to ca.30 000 ¹⁴C BP that has yet to be found anywhere in Europe with any diagnostic human remains — either Neandertal or Cro-Magnon; 3) plenty of evidence of true blade technology in the Middle Paleolithic — some very old — as well as rare but credible instances of “artistic” or “decorative” expression prior to 40 000 ¹⁴C BP; 4) some early Aurignacian artifact assemblages that show clear continuity with local Middle Paleolithic ones in raw material use, typology, etc., and others that attest to an abrupt technological break; 5) evidence for subsistence change *during* the late Middle Paleolithic, but no clear difference *between* it and the early Upper Paleolithic in the same regions; 6) late survival of Neandertals with (equally “unevolved”) Mousterian tools in the proximity of “advanced” technology and/or supposedly “modern” humans, as in the case of southern Iberia which is sandwiched between northern Spain with its chronologically very early Aurignacian and the Maghreb with its non-Neandertal fossils and Aterian artifacts. I have characterized *the* “transition” as a temporal and geographic *mosaic* and as more of a frequency distribution shift in a number of habitual behav-

iors and material culture traits than a punctuation event. This is perhaps because I am more interested in the nature of the *process* of adaptive change by humans throughout the Upper Pleistocene, as opposed to taking the broader view of hominid evolution from the standpoint of the much vaster geological timescale. What may look abrupt and punctuated from one perspective may appear gradual and irregular from another. My view is that “the devil is in the details” — and these are murky in the cases of what happened both in Europe and more widely in the Old World between about 50-30 000 ¹⁴C BP. In this brief paper, I want to focus on the obsession of prehistorians with the notion of *the* “Aurignacian” as a real thing, meaning an identifiable, ethnically bounded cultural entity.

The Aurignacian

It is sometimes good to recall that concepts such as “the Aurignacian” were the creations of 19th century archeologists. And the avatars of “the Aurignacian” have been far more convoluted than those of most such “cultures”, “technocomplexes”, “periods” or “culture-stratigraphic units”. The industry of Aurignac (Haute-Garonne) was among the first Paleolithic subdivisions to be identified (and correctly placed in relative stratigraphic position) by Edouard Lartet in the mid-1800s, only to later be alternately dropped or misplaced between the industries of Solutré and La Madeleine by Gabriel de Mortillet in the late 1860s-1870s. Downright falsification of stratigraphic sequences was used by (the — by then — late) G. de Mortillet’s followers to defend the “official” scheme against the well-documented assaults of Henri Breuil during the famous “Aurignacian Battle” of the first decade of the 20th century. Subsuming a great amount of admitted interassemblage variability (not the least of which were vast disparities in the supposedly characteristic representation of osseous artifacts such as antler points), Breuil’s “Aurignacian” became the first culture in his Upper Paleolithic (or “Leptolithic”) sequence of stages.

A new generation of excavations by Denis Peyrony at the deeply stratified sites of Laugerie-Haute and especially La Ferrassie (Dordogne) forced the issue of “Aurignacian” unity and led to his creation in 1933 of separate “Aurignacian” (*sensu stricto*) and “Perigordian” cultural phylla. The old “Middle Aurignacian” of Breuil became the new Aurignacian, now replete with its own stages. One “culture” had become two (or three). Attempts to demonstrate phylogenetic “connections” (or lack thereof) between the “Lower” and “Upper Perigordian” (a.k.a. Châtelperronian and Gravettian respectively) and between the Aurignacian 0-IV and the so-called Aurignacian V occupied the better part of the 1960s and 1970s, notably by Denise de Sonneville-Bordes, Henri Delporte and disciples. Meanwhile, Dorothy Garrod had extended the use of the name “Aurignacian” to assemblages in the Levant, mainly on the basis of the presence of carinated and nosed scrapers and retouched bladelets in layers *above* the earliest, blade-rich Upper Paleolithic industries. Also between the World Wars, the term “Aurignacian” would begin to be applied on an ever wider basis across central and eastern Europe. At the Abri Pataud (Dordogne) in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Hallam Movius began the systematic application of radiocarbon dating to levels pertaining to what had once been Breuil’s “Aurignacian” and, with his students, further challenged the cultural unity of one of its derivatives, Peyrony’s “Perigordian”, while Georges Laplace built a theory of a common origin of Aurignaco-Perigordian industries out of local Mousterian traditions. Beginning in the late 1960s, the temporal significance of Perigordian fossil directors came under increasing attack as a result of the work of Jean-Philippe Rigaud and Henri Laville, and a plethora of new facies of early (“pre-”, “proto-” and “archaic”) Auri-

gnacian stages was created, especially in southern Europe — with often the same term meaning different things in terms of specific typological composition in different regions. Most recently, some researchers have identified assemblages tentatively characterized as “Epi-aurignacian”, despite radiocarbon dates and chronostratigraphic evidence that place them in the LGM or early Tardiglacial (!). This development is reminiscent (but with far greater temporal separation from the classic Aurignacian) of the “Aurignacian V” debate: phylogeny versus convergence.

So what is “*the* Aurignacian”? There is a “classic” version, with large blades bearing marginally invasive scalariform retouch and sometimes bi-concave (“strangled”) edges, keeled and nosed endscrapers (that may in reality be cores for the production of fine bladelets), busked burins, split-based and (later) lozenge-shaped and biconical antler points. However some of these types are rare, absent or very atypically represented in other regions — or, instead of co-occurring in the kinds of associations thought to be characteristic of particular Aurignacian phases in southwest France, may appear individually or in different combinations. This has led researchers in various regions of Europe to propose their own characteristic (but plural) *Aurignacians*, especially for the all-important initial phases. Thus, in some cases Dufour bladelets have become fossil directors (assuming fine mesh screening during excavation), while in others split- (or massive) base points are seen as essential diagnostics, and in still others various kinds of thick “endscrapers” are taken as critical markers. What in one region are “Aurignacian” artifacts that appear at a chronologically early period, may however be found much later in the record of another region. Some “Aurignacian” diagnostics appear in other named cultural contexts (e.g., Bohunician, Szeletian, Olchevian, Lincombian).

The ubiquity of some of these types (both in time and across space) — notably the thick endscraper/cores or retouched blades — really would seem to disqualify them as particularly useful cultural or evolutionary markers. However, one could argue that the split-base, massive base (“Mladeč”) and lozenge-shaped antler points are so peculiar (though not entirely unique) that they may represent objects and/or designs that did spread fairly quickly among human groups in Europe because of their manifest haftability, efficacy and resilience, presumably as weapon (spear?) tips. But they need not necessarily equate to “a culture” or “a people”, any more than do scalariform retouched blades, carinate endscrapers or Dufour (a.k.a. Krems) bladelets.

The hemispheric perspective

Was what occurred in Europe between about 40 000 and 30 000 radiocarbon years ago all that unusual? Was there a likely region of origin for the so-called Aurignacian technology? Is there evidence of a migration of better adapted humans into Europe from Africa or Asia coincident with and causative of the cultural changes that were occurring around 40 kyr BP? Did these new people absolutely differ from the local Neandertal populations by having fully articulate speech and the ability to use symbolic representation? These are some of the main questions and they must be answered by looking outside the narrow peninsular confines of Europe itself. They could not be seriously addressed earlier in the history of research 1) because of the relative lack of significant research in Africa and Asia (still unfortunately scanty compared to Europe) and 2) because of the lack of radiometric dating methods to permit independent demonstration of synchronic or diachronic developments among regions or continents.

The search for “Aurignacian origins” has led prehistorians to investigate the Near East, north and Sub-Saharan Africa, central Asia and even Siberia. While both Levallois and prismatic blades, along with so-called Upper Paleolithic stone tool-types had occurred well before the Last Glacial in various regions of the Old World — sometimes repeatedly — it is now clear that there were litho-technological and typological developments afoot around 40 kyr BP, from the Haua Fteah (Libya) to Boker Tachtit (Israel), to Kara-Bom (Siberia). Bone points are now being found in late Middle Paleolithic contexts from coastal South Africa to the Crimea. None of these manifestations is very specifically similar to “the Aurignacian” as originally defined in southwest France. Ironically, for those who sought specific Aurignacian origins in the Near East, the so-called Aurignacian of the Levant has now been shown to be considerably *younger* (i.e., ca. 30 kyr BP) than the early Aurignacian (or Aurignacian-like) industries of *both* southwestern *and* southeastern Europe. And this technocomplex lacks the osseous hallmarks of its European namesake. (Similarly flaunting common sense, the powerful likelihood of independent invention, and tens of thousands of years of age difference if one were so inclined, one could seek the “origins” of the Upper Magdalenian or the Maglemosian — with their barbed osseous harpoons — in the MSA of eastern Congo, if the associations and 90 kyr BP dates from the Semliki Valley are correct.)

In short, the obsession with finding origins (especially extra-European origins) for the Aurignacian assumes that 1) there is *an* Aurignacian and 2) that “it” must have come from somewhere as the result of a folk migration. What if there really was no such thing as *an* Aurignacian “culture”, but — more likely — a great deal of parallel change going on in sometimes widely separated regions of the inhabited Old World around or just before 40 000 radiocarbon years ago? And what if human neighboring groups inevitably had some contact among one another — at least enough for some novel ideas and/or objects to circulate? The challenge to archeology, it seems to me, is not to seek so-called Aurignacian origins, but rather to understand 1) on a general level, such broad, parallel (but by no means irreversible) developments as the frequency distribution shift toward the manufacture of blade/bladelet blanks from prismatic cores and the more generalized use of hafting in many parts of the Old World at more or less the same time, and 2) what conceivable relationship (if any) there might be between the cultural shifts and the anatomical changes that occurred in Europe during the mid-Upper Pleistocene. With regard to the first “mega” question, clearly the transitions among technological “modes” continue to beg explanation at well above the level of anything like ethnographic “cultures”, and probably have something to do with the convergence of major environmental shifts, demographic factors and the cumulative characteristics of technology, with secondary roles for diffusion and human mobility. The second question is more specific to Europe and the replacement of the Neandertals. It is worth keeping in mind that it is still the case that the only diagnostic hominid finds we know of that are in clear, dated archeological context in the period between >40 000 to ca. 32 000 or maybe 34 000 radiocarbon years ago in Europe are *Neandertals* and these are associated with a wide variety of types of industries (Mousterian, Châtelperronian, Olchevian, and possibly Uluzzian and various leaf-point “cultures”). Put otherwise, there are currently no Cro-Magnon remains associated with either early Aurignacian or “transitional” assemblages in Europe, making it hard to argue that the Aurignacian can be “explained” by an invasion of modern people into the continent. On the other hand, it is abundantly clear that the Neandertals were capable of considerable change on their own, not only in terms of technology, but also in the realms of subsistence and even — on rare occasions — symbolic expression. This situation is clearly paralleled by what was going on in the MSA

(including the Howiesons Poort and Umguzan) of Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle Paleolithic (including the Pre-Aurignacian, Aterian and Nubian Complex) of North Africa.

In contrast, what was so absolute about behavioral change associated with the Aurignacian in Europe? Rock art and personal ornamentation (while possibly even older in Africa and Australia) is neither 40 000 years old nor ubiquitous in Europe. There are limited geographical foci of ivory statuette carving in southwest Germany at most around 36 000 radiocarbon years ago and cave painting at Chauvet in southern France around 31 000 years ago, but otherwise the record is very limited. According to the stratigraphic reconstruction by Michel Dewez, the famous works of portable art found by Edouard Dupont in le Trou Magrite more than 130 years ago, probably came from a level that Marcel Otte and I have established as dating to around 40 000 radiocarbon years ago and containing Aurignacian-type tools and bifacial leaf points. Rock art (mainly simple linear engravings) in a few caves in Cantabrian Spain (e.g., Venta de la Perra, Hornos de la Peña, La Viña, El Conde) was possibly/probably made during the late Aurignacian. Sophisticated personal ornaments (perforated shells, teeth, stones, etc.) appear in several Aurignacian contexts, but not the earliest ones, although the *Châtelperronian* at La Grotte du Renne also has such objects at an early date (ca. 35 kyr BP) and in association with *Neandertal*. There simply was not an explosion of art and adornment at around 40 kyr BP — whether on the part of Neandertals or (yet-to-be-proven) Cro-Magnons in Europe. And yet such isolated objects as the engraved flint nodule from Quneitra (Golan Heights) at ca. 54 kyr BP — contemporaneous with Israeli Neandertals such as Kebara — can only be described as early “art” ... probably not the oldest.

In addition, there is no obvious evidence for significant change in subsistence strategies across the Middle-Upper Paleolithic transition in Europe, although there was plenty of intensification (through situational specialization and overall diversification) *during* the Upper Paleolithic, especially centered on the rigorous conditions of the LGM. Of course the Aurignacian antler points probably did represent an “advance” in terms of simple projectile technology, but spears (untipped and even tipped) do seem to have existed in the Mousterian.

And some Mousterian subsistence activities occasionally did resemble those of the Late Upper Paleolithic (and *vice versa*). Again, it is a question of frequency distribution shift in habitual behavior, rather than an abrupt break.

On the other hand, many stereotypical characteristics of the Mousterian (flake-based technologies, large sidescrapers and denticulates) can appear in assemblages of Upper Paleolithic age, sometimes with few or no supposed Upper Paleolithic artifactual hallmarks (e.g., osseous artifacts, blades or bladelets). And yet that does not make those assemblages “Mousterian”!

Summing Up

We continue to use 19th century terms such as “Aurignacian” as short-hand descriptors for somewhat variable suites of artifacts and manufacturing techniques dating in the approximate time range between 40-30 kyr BP in Europe and some adjacent regions. I personally do this to facilitate communication, but have no illusions as to the cultural unity or ethnic (social identification) meaning of this archeological construct. Indeed, assemblages sometimes attributed to the category “Aurignacian” have also been given more specific regional names (e.g., Bachokirian, Olchevian, Ranisian, Lincombian). But neither lumpers

nor splitters can really show that their entities in this remote period have ethnic or human (sub-)specific significance.

I think we have been missing the mark by continuing to discuss the Aurignacian as if it were a real thing with the same (presumed socio-cultural) meaning across the whole European continent. Instead, we should be trying to establish regional sequences of change and then to seek to explain similarities (which could include human contacts) and differences among them. This requires more a reorientation of thinking than of what archeologists actually do in terms of chronostratigraphic, paleoenvironmental, technological, art historical and archeozoological studies. To reduce much of the variation that existed during this period to the concept of an Aurignacian culture and then to talk about the termination of the Mousterian as the result of an invasion is tautological and ultimately deceptive. To seek to understand the apparently rapid spread of a few new inventions such as split-base antler points within a complex (environmental, cultural and biological) mosaic situation that seems to characterize Europe at the end of isotope stage 3 is, on the other hand, fascinating and most worthwhile as a scientific problem. But let us not mistake archeologically-created names for ethnographic realities. Even if this were so, the concept of fixed, bounded cultures (identifiable ethnic units) is increasingly contested in the ethnographic present — all the more reason to be suspect of a construct that supposedly had a duration of some 10 000 years and an extension of at least 3300 x 1700 km: from Torremolinos to Tel Aviv and from Brindisi to Brussels¹.

* This essay is not meant to be a comprehensive research article, but rather a personal reflection. Because of space limitations I have not even begun to recapitulate the vast bibliography on the MP-UP transition. To cite just a few items would slight many scores of others of equal significance. Many can be found in the several topical symposium volumes of the last decade.

¹ Since this was written, I have read the book by François Bon, *L'Aurignacien entre mer et océan. Réflexion sur l'unité des phases anciennes de l'Aurignacien dans le sud de la France* (Mémoires de la Société Préhistorique Française 29, 2002). I am encouraged to see yet one more detailed study that seriously questions the unity of the so-called Aurignacian cultural concept, particularly in its critical early stages. I hope that Bon's work will be taken seriously in the on-going debate, although I fear that such old, solidly reified units as "the Aurignacian" die hard in the minds of commentators and textbook writers, if not among practicing archeologists of the European Paleolithic.