Modern Human subsistence in Central Quercy (France) during the Upper Palaeolithic

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Introduction

The exploitation of the animal world by human groups during the Upper Palaeolithic responded to necessities of alimentary, technical, and symbolic natures. This exploitation is irregularly documented in the archaeological record by faunal remains, ornaments and worked bone industries, rock art, and mobile art. It is agreed that these material remains result from human choices operating within both physical and ideological realms—the material environment as well the cognitive universe of prehistoric peoples. Nevertheless, it remains difficult to elucidate the true nature of these choices, given that one class of data remains poorly understood that of the availability of fauna through space and time.

Characterizing the “initial stock of animals upon which human ‘selection’ was carried out” regardless of whether they were destined to be sources of food, technical resources, or supports for an imaginative figuration—constitutes one of the objectives of current research into the fauna of central Quercy during the late Upper Palaeolithic (1, 2). This research integrates available data stemming from the analysis of habitation sites, cave art, and natural traps known in the region.

The biosphere in Quercy

We reconstructed the palaeoenvironment using the complement of fauna found in the region, focusing our research on herbivores (3). These animals are excellent indicators of the natural environment due to their particular sensitivity to local shifts in vegetation and climate.

In view of the rarity and heterogeneity of data concerning the Early Upper Palaeolithic, only the latter phases of this period are well-documented, notably, the Upper Solunean, the Badegoulian, and Early and Middle Magdalenian.

Habitation sites and hunting strategies

Habits are located along the major valleys, notably the Dordogne, the Aveyron, the Lot, and especially its affluent, the Célé. A few deposits are also located on the Causse (i.e. Plateau) of Gramat. The available archaeological data are heterogeneous and indices of diversity or richness of the faunal assemblages are difficult to calculate. In central Quercy, seasonality data indicate occupations during the warm season.

During the Upper Solunean, the Badegoulian and the beginning of the Magdalenian, certain continuity in choice of game, in the modalities of procurement independent of local subsistence needs (5).

The territory defined by the distribution of highly stylized personal ornaments indicates possible NW-SE movements during the Solunean and the Badegoulian (3). Similarly, the origins of silicious raw materials from the sites of Cloup Barrat, Peyrugues and Cuzoul de Vers suggest a community consisting of Charente-Périgord Quercy with a near-complete rupture with Aveyron and the Pyrénées. If this pattern stems from the movements of principal migratory prey, it would suggest an optimal organization, and would indicate a north-west/south-east migration of prey.

In Quercy, from the Upper Solunean until the Middle Magdalenian, the permanence of regional patterns of human occupation cannot be disassociated, on one hand, from the availability of faunal resources, and on the other, from the structure of the human groups occupying the region during the summer. Ethnographic data indicate that, in arctic territories, human populations tend to be dispersed during the warm season (7). The pattern observed in the Quercy region during the Last Glacial Maximum and Late Glacial appears to conform with this tendency.

Definitely, the relative continuity in the patterns of territory use, as well as in animal resource acquisition and exploitation in the Quercy region during a period of nearly 7,000 years, stands in contrast to the variety of technological solutions that evolved or changed with different cultures or techno-complexes during this time span. This continuity also stands in contrast, it appears, to the diversity of symbolic expressions.

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Bibliography


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Regional distribution of human occupation

Despite the constant presence, at least on a seasonal basis, of large ungulates, the standard prey selection of human populations during the late Upper Palaeolithic in central Quercy consisted of reindeer, accompanied by a small amount of ibex and horse. Acquisition of red deer, bison, and chamois was sporadic or locally localized. Leopards, fox, and birds were excluded from the hunted spectrum until the later Magdalenian. Modes of animal resource exploitation aimed to maximize the extraction of food for immediate consumption, as a result of a small number of kills. Neither mass killing nor storage are observed, in the valleys or on the plateaus.

The distribution of habitation sites in Quercy results from the inherent structural constraints of the region and the seasonal availability of reindeer. The concentration of habitation sites in valleys is linked to the movements of these species. Preferential capture of these animals at river beds indicates latitudinal migrations.

Cave art and personal ornaments: The symbolic animal

Cave art is concentrated in the Célé valley and dispersed in the rest of the region. Figures of horses, mammoths, felines, and giant deer (Magdalenian) are predominant in the oldest cave art (Pech Merle group). In more recent depictions (Saint-Eulalie group), horses continue to be represented, mammoths, felines, and giant deer disappear, while reindeer appear (4).

The exploitation of the animal world by human groups during the Upper Palaeolithic

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