



Lithic cultural variability during the Gravettian in the Cantabrian Region and the western Pyrenees: State of the art



Aitor Calvo ^{a,*}, Marcel Bradtmöller ^a, Lucía Martínez ^b, Álvaro Arrizabalaga ^a

^a Universidad del País Vasco/Euskal Herriko Unibertsitatea (UPV/EHU), Facultad de Letras, Departamento de Geografía, Prehistoria y Arqueología, C/Francisco Tomás y Valiente s/n 01006, Vitoria-Gasteiz, Álava, Spain

^b Universidad de Oviedo, Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, Área de Prehistoria, C/Teniente Alfonso Martínez s/n 33011, Oviedo, Asturias, Spain

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ABSTRACT

The field and laboratory work carried out in recent decades have substantially changed our vision of various aspects of the Gravettian in the Cantabrian Region and the western Pyrenees. The objective of this work is to carry out a critical synthesis of the available data for the lithic industry of the Gravettian in this region, according to raw material procurement, exploitation strategies and typological markers. Thereby several aspects are of importance: (1) the alternating availability of high quality raw material, where two territories can be divided: one to the West, where raw material acquisition is showing a wide range of raw materials (notably flint, quartzite, quartz), and one to the East, where assemblages are completely dominated by a single raw material: flint; (2) the great similarity between different reduction strategies, mainly in relation to flint; and (3) an existing polymorphism throughout the territory in case of the tool types, within which protrude two typological groups: back elements and burins, notably the Noailles burins. The latter are massively present in the eastern part of the Cantabrian Region and the western Pyrenees. This variability does not seem to correspond to chronological phases, but has to be probably understood in functional terms.

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1. Introduction

Field and laboratory work carried out in the past several decades has yielded new, important data on the artistic representations, material culture, subsistence strategies, palaeoenvironmental context and geochronology of the Gravettian in the Cantabrian Region and western Pyrenees (e.g. De la Peña, 2009, 2011a; Arrizabalaga and Iriarte, 2010; Castaños and Álvarez-Fernández, 2013; Cuenca-Solana et al., 2013; Garate and Rios-Garaizar, 2013; García-Díez and Ochoa, 2013a, 2013b; Iriarte-Chiapusso and Murélagua, 2013; Martínez and De la Rasilla, 2013; Rivero and Garate, 2014; Bradtmöller et al., 2015a). Whereas three decades ago the Gravettian was thought of as a brief, bridge-like period between the two better-known Aurignacian and Solutrean techno-complexes, it is now known to have spanned approximately 9000 years (ca 34–25 ka cal. BP), almost a third of the whole of the Upper

Palaeolithic. In terms of its lithic material culture, the above studies have revealed a great industrial variability, the cultural and/or chronological meaning of which still remaining to be determined. In this respect, in the eastern area of the Cantabrian region and the western Pyrenees the predominance of a particular burin morphotype, the Noailles burin, is striking; this type of burin has been noted in the oldest levels (e.g. Aitzbitarte III Va, ca 29–26 ka BP; Ríos et al., 2011) through to the most recent (e.g. Antoliñako Koba Lab, ca 22 ka BP; Aguirre Ruiz de Gopegui, 2013), the opposite pattern to the one noted in the general sequence proposed for France, where it is basically confined to the middle phase of the Gravettian (e.g. Djindjian, 2011; Noiret, 2013). On the other hand, the central and western sections of the Cantabrian region are, technologically-speaking, more ambiguous, and backed tools represent their most diagnostic element types. Despite this, it has not yet been possible to determine this cultural interval's internal organisation through the study of its lithic industry, as has already been done in reference regions such as the Dordogne (Arrizabalaga and de la Peña, 2013; Bradtmöller et al., 2015a).

Another important development in terms of fieldwork is the growing number of open-air site discoveries. These kinds of

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: aitor.calvo@ehu.es (A. Calvo), marcel.bradtmoeiller@ehu.es (M. Bradtmöller), lucia_satis@hotmail.com (L. Martínez), alvaro.arrizabalaga@ehu.es (Á. Arrizabalaga).

findings have been especially significant in the eastern section of the Cantabrian Region and the western Pyrenees: over the past several years discoveries have been made of a number of settlements linked to either the more or less systematic utilisation of various flint sources in the region (Mugarduia Sur, Pelbarte, Prado, Tercis, Le Prissé), or to the setting up of more or less recurrent settlements (Irikaitz or Ametzagaina). This record, the opposite to the classic cave-site record, is progressively transforming our views on the settlement in and organisation of the territory/landscape by Gravettian groups (Arrizabalaga and Iriarte, 2011a; Arrizabalaga et al., 2015).

The main aim of this study is to present a critical overview of the available data on a wide range of aspects of the lithic industry of Gravettian groups, such as patterns in the provision/sourcing of raw materials, the exploitation strategies or typological traditions. Additionally, we will reflect on the meaning of the industrial variability noted in this region for this time period and its links to other nearby areas.

Before moving onto the overview, we must note the presence of a number of constraints that have prevented us from undertaking a more rigorous and objective assessment of this subject matter. These limitations include, amongst others, the wide range of methodologies and approaches used in the different lithic analyses; the difficulties presented by old (e.g. Morín, El Castillo, Bolinkoba or Isturitz) vs new (e.g. Irikaitz, Aldatxarren, Alkerdi or Le Prissé) excavation data when undertaking inter-site comparisons; the differences in the quality and detail of the published information; the various kinds of archaeological sites: cave vs open-air; the notable diversity in statistical significance for the different assemblages; the small amount of information available on the technology and the total absence of data on the functionality of tools; the scarcity of chronological and palaeoenvironmental data; or institutional, administrative and/or geographical barriers. All of them make harder to reach to an accurate synthesis.

2. Regional setting and assemblages under study

2.1. The Cantabrian Region and the western Pyrenees

The area under study here comprises the Cantabrian Region and the western Pyrenean foothills, in the central and western portions of the northern Iberian Peninsula. This choice of study area was based on both geographical and archaeological criteria. The Cantabrian Region represents an east-west-running corridor, demarcated in the north by the Cantabrian Sea and, in the south, by the Cantabrian Range's sharp relief. This resulted in the area becoming a preferred route for human groups, animals, etc., therefore rendering it relatively culturally and archaeologically homogeneous. From a politico-administrative point of view, this area is found within the present-day Spanish autonomous communities of Asturias, Cantabria and the Basque Country. The Galicia region has been excluded from the present overview, given the little data available from this region for this time period (cf. Lombera Hermida and Fabregas Valcarce, 2011).

The easternmost edge of the Cantabrian Region has been more complex to define as a result of the existing political and institutional barriers. However, both of the Pyrenees' versants/slopes (Peninsular Basque Country and Navarre to the south, and Continental Basque Country/Aquitane Basin to the north) are closely connected by means of the Txingudi corridor. It was through this natural coastal path that a constant flow of people between both regions took place throughout the Upper Palaeolithic, as attested by the lithic and bone industries and the evidence for lithic raw-material sourcing found here. Because of this, we believe it necessary to include the western Pyrenees' northern versant/slope

into the classic definition of the Cantabrian Region which, together, constitute a single, consistent macro-region, representing a first-order geographic and cultural corridor in the Upper Palaeolithic of southwestern Europe (Arrizabalaga, 2007).

2.2. Analysed sites

For the present study we have chosen to focus on 20 of the main Gravettian sites (Fig. 1 and Table 1) from within the study area (comprising a total of 30 archaeological levels), and which include the three site-types we are aware of: cave settlements (14), rock shelters (1) and open-air sites (5). The latter group can be subdivided into two types of sites: those believed to be more or less recurrent campsites (Ametzagaina and Irikaitz), and those linked to, amongst others, knapping activities given their proximity to flint outcrops (Mugarduia Sur, Le Prissé and Tercis).

We have to remember here the limits given in the introductory chapter, which results in a highly heterogeneous archaeological record. This is inherently reflected in the data exposition carried out in this section. The exposed data was essentially taken from the literature, selecting the sites with greater volume of published information about their lithic industries or those considered of special interest. In addition, a significant part of the data comes from analyzes conducted by several of the authors of this work. For more detailed information on the stratigraphy and/or the archaeological context of these sites, we refer the reader to the specific bibliography provided in Table 1 and in the text.

3. Raw materials, technology and typology: available data

We will now present all the available information on the raw materials, technology and typology of the Gravettian for each of the three areas being considered here: the western (Asturias), central (Cantabria) and eastern areas (Peninsular Basque Country and Navarre, and Continental Basque Country and the surrounding territories of the Aquitaine Basin) of the Cantabrian Region and the western Pyrenees.

3.1. The western Cantabrian Region

The Gravettian techno-complex in the western Cantabrian Region will be discussed using data obtained from the current lithic analyses of La Viña rock shelter's levels X–VII (Western Sector), Llonín's level V (Gallery) and Cueto de la Mina's level VII (modern excavations). This study will provide primary information on lithic raw material procurement in the region and, at the same time, it allows for this typo-technological complex in the Cantabrian Region to be characterized and studied in greater depth.

3.1.1. Raw-material availability and procurement patterns

In marked contrast to the eastern sector of the Cantabrian Region, Asturias is relatively poor in silica outcrops as a result of its geological formation; this resulted in the exploitation of other lithic resources such as quartzite, which are abundant in the region and are easy to collect as pebbles on beaches and in river beds near the sites. The regional siliceous varieties known for their good-suitability for knapping include Piloña flint (Santonian, Late Cretaceous), which has been documented in Middle and Upper Palaeolithic levels at several sites in Asturias and Cantabria; other siliceous types of a lesser quality, such as the Piedramuelle flint (Cenozoic) and various other kinds such as the Palaeozoic radiolarites, Pendueles Flysch flint (Paleozoic) and the 'Caliza de Montaña' flint (Paleozoic) have also been identified (Fortea et al., 2010; Santamaría, 2012; Tarrío et al., 2013; Duarte et al., in press). Other

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