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Preliminary results from new Palaeolithic open-air sites near Bayonne (south-western France)

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ABSTRACT

Rescue archeology operations conducted by INRAP (Institut National de Recherches Archéologiques Préventives) over the past five years on the eastern plateaus of Bayonne (south-western France) have contributed significant new elements to our knowledge of the Paleolithic occupations of Basque Country. New stratigraphic data, combined with numerical dating techniques, have enabled us to develop a new and reliable chronology for the region, enabling a better understanding of the evolution of the landscape since the end of the Middle Pleistocene. A brief Gravettian occupation, unusual in the classic Pyrenean context, provides evidence for complex economic and territorial strategies. Several late Mousterian occupations show an intensive and complementary exploitation during MIS 3, while the Patinated Mousterian lithic assemblages from MIS 5 may correspond to the oft-argued "classic" low mobility strategies of Neandertal groups. Despite their disturbed conditions, the Acheulean assemblages, predating the Eemian, are mostly composed of flint and raise new questions regarding their Cantabrian–Pyrenean context, where coarse stones usually dominate.

1. Introduction

1.1. Archaeological history and context

The Basque Country (Fig. 1a) is located in the western part of the Pyrenean isthmus, along the natural path between Chalosse and Cantabria. Famous sites discovered in this region, such as Brassempouy, Isturitz, and El Castillo, to name a few, had a significant impact on the development of the European Prehistoric tradition, having been excavated by key figures of the discipline.

In this area, open-air contexts, despite being explored since the mid-19th century (synthesis in Passemard, 1924), remain poorly documented due to their poorness and unsuitable contexts. The Saint-Pierre-d'Irube plateau (Fig. 1b), which sits above the city of Bayone at the confluence of the Adour and Nive Rivers, is particularly rich in open-air sites. In its eastern part, the site of Le Basté (Chauchat and Thibault, 1968) was exceptional in its preservation of a stratified Paleolithic sequence and has quickly become a reference.

1.2. Context of the operations

In the 2000s, increase in urban development on this zone threatened to obliterate the last evidence of its rich Paleolithic

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occupations. To rescue these important archaeological sites, the Ministry of Culture authorized INRAP to conduct a dozen diagnostic archaeological interventions (Fourloubey; Fig. 1c), covering more than 12 ha. Systematic test-trenches excavated in the zone to be developed, revealed several identifiable sites. Two, Le Prissé and Jupiter (Fig. 1b, c), have been excavated, also by INRAP (Colonge, reports in progress).

These excavations cover vast surfaces: 2000 (1300 + 700) m^2 at Le Prissé and 5000 m^2 at Jupiter. Their average depth is 2 m, but may exceed 4 m. These large volumes, where the archaeological

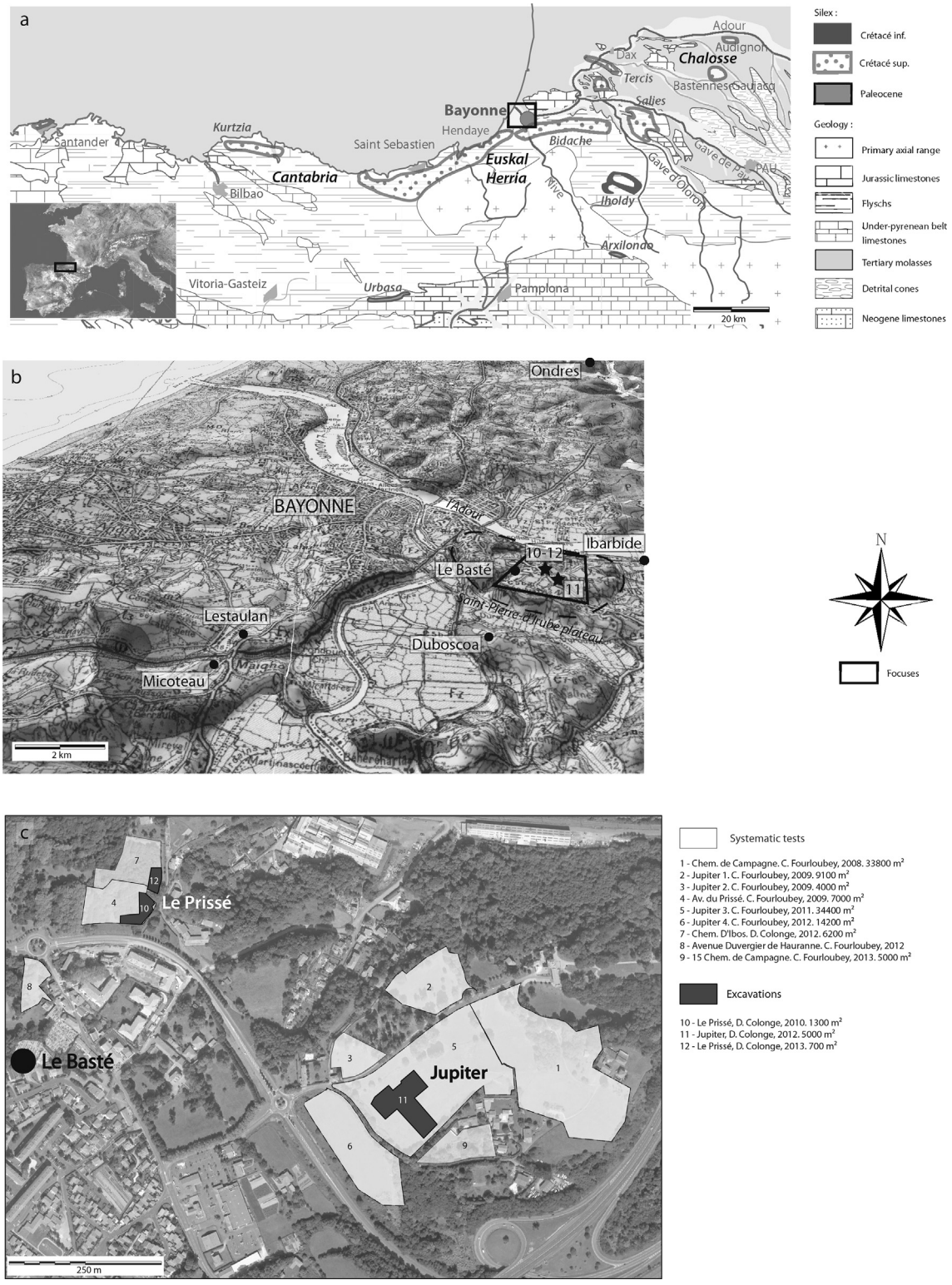

Fig. 1. Bayonne location on a) a regional structural framework with main flint outcrops (M. Deschamps, 2014 after Colonge et al., 2013), b) a 3D view of the Saint-Pierre-d'Irube plateau with location of the quoted comparison sites (F. Prodeo after BRGM 1/50,000 geological map), c) detail of the eastern part of the Saint-Pierre-d'Irube plateau with all the tested and excavated areas (V. Pasquet) (layout N. Busseuil).