Quaternary International 359-360 (2015) 462-478

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Quaternary International

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/quaint

The Gravettian of El Castillo revisited (Cantabria, Spain)

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history: Available online 2 September 2014

Keywords: Gravettian El Castillo Fauna Noailles Lithic technology

ABSTRACT

The long sequence of El Castillo cave contains Units 12 and 14, attributed to the Gravettian. This paper presents a revision of the lithic industry and the fauna recovered during H. Obermaier's 1910–1914 excavations of the site, as well as a number of new datings that enable us to chronologically place the above Gravettian occupations as one of the oldest in Europe. Unit 14 is dated between 34 and 33 ka cal BP and Unit 12 between 30 and 28 ka cal BP.

The cave's oldest Gravettian level, Unit 14, presents techno-typological features typical of the first phases of the Gravettian in the Cantabro-Pyrenean region, such as Noailles burins, although it also shows some common elements with the Evolved Aurignacian. The youngest Gravettian unit, Unit 12, is characterised by laminar production from bipolar prismatic cores and a greater, albeit still discreet, presence of dorsal pieces. In terms of the fauna, Unit 14 is represented by red deer, chamois and horse, whereas Unit 12 is represented by red deer and horse, a hint as to what would later become the characteristic composition of Late Upper Palaeolithic faunal assemblages. The lithic and chronological characteristics of the Gravettian at El Castillo and the Cantabro-Pyrenean region lead us to believe in a mosaic formation of this techno-complex.

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1. Introduction

Despite not being as 'high-profile' as other Palaeolithic periods, as is the case of the Middle-to-Upper Palaeolithic Transition and the replacement of Neanderthals by modern humans, the Gravettian has been the object of a relatively discreet, yet intense debate. Over the last century its own existence was debated in the so-called 'Aurignacian battle' (Breuil, 1912). Later, the discussion centred around whether or not it was coetaneous with the Aurignacian (Peyrony, 1933, 1936, 1946), its identification as an independent techno-complex (Garrod, 1938), and, even today, the debate continues to be centred around its regional identification and origin(s) (Peña, 2012). The Gravettian, whose geographical expansion ranges from Europe's Atlantic coasts to Siberia, presents cultural homogeneity based on three of its characteristics (Peña, 2012): *Homo sapiens* as the author of these industries, as evidenced by the numerous burials attributable to this techno-complex in the

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central-eastern part of the continent; the generalisation of 'artistic' manifestations, of which the so-called 'Venus' are worth noting; and the characterisation of the lithic industry based on abrupt retouch and dorsal pieces as its typical elements.

The fact that the Gravettian is the first techno-complex clearly made by *H. sapiens* in Europe allows us to study the cultural processes of replacement, acculturation, and/or cultural replacement without a discussion on anthropological issues distorting such a process, as is the case when looking at earlier periods. The transition between the Aurignacian and the Gravettian or the Gravettian and Solutrean have not, however, generated the epistemological debate triggered by, for example, the Middle-to-Upper Palaeolithic or Mesolithic–Neolithic Transitions.

In this way, part of the current debate on the Gravettian centres, on the one hand, around the identification of common traits, and, on the other, on the marked regionalisation of its lithic industries. Despite giving the impression of being a monolithic and homogeneous techno-complex, the Gravettian has been, from a historiographic point of view, the techno-complex with the most subdivisions in the Palaeolithic of Western Europe. The common traits conceiving the Gravettian as a Pan-European techno-complex were proposed by Otte (1985), considering the Gravettian as a







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homogeneous process emerging from a Central European migration, *sensu* Garrod. This hypothesis, which suggests a Central European origin to the Gravettian, and links European and Siberian industries, has recently been argued by other authors (Kozlowski, 2005; Simonet, 2009; Moreau, 2010) although some researchers consider these common elements to be very general, but nonetheless valid as part of the 'bigger picture' (Peña, 2011a; pp. 20). On the other hand, some authors suggest, although still shyly, a mosaic conception of the Gravettian, where, from some common traits, and following a detailed study of the technology and typology, regional trends can be observed beyond the Gravettian facies (Klaric, 2006; Peña, 2011a).

The cave of El Castillo represents one of the key sequences to understand the Palaeolithic of the Cantabrian region. This is especially true in the case for the Gravettian, a techno-complex better known in the eastern part of the region (Basque Country), which appears to develop differently to that of the western part (Peña, 2011a), and which shows with a clear polymorphism, as attested by a number of recently published sequences such as the Cuco rockshelter (Rasines and Muñoz, 2013), or with few diagnostic features such as Altamira o Mirón (Heras et al., 2013, González-Morales and Straus, 2013). In this study, we present the chronological framework of the two Gravettian units from the cave of El Castillo -12 and 14-; the preliminary study of the fauna from the collection excavated by Obermaier; and a revision of the lithic collection housed in the *Museo Arqueológico Nacional* (MAN) in Madrid.

2. El Castillo cave

El Castillo cave is located in Cantabria, in northern Spain, and was discovered by H. Alcalde del Río in November 1903 (Fig. 1). The site was excavated by the *Institut de Paléontologie Humaine* (I.P.H.) after an agreement was reached between Prince Albert I of Monaco and Alcalde del Río. The I.P.H.'s excavation was initially directed by H. Breuil, H. Obermaier and J. Bouyssonie between 1910 and 1914 although it was mostly undertaken by H. Obermaier and P. Wernert.

Visits to the site by famous researchers, such as P. Teilhard de Chardin, M. Burkkit, E. Hernández-Pacheco or the Count of Vega de Sella, contributed towards increasing the site's popularity (Cabrera-Valdés, 1979, 1984). When the excavations were completed, the archaeological material was deposited at the I.P.H. in Paris until its return to Spain in the 1970s, where it was later studied (Cabrera-Valdés, 1979, 1984). Small portions of this collection, however, were divided mostly between the *Museo de Arqueología de Cantabria* (MUPAC), the *Museo Arqueológico Nacional* (MAN) and a small part went to Paris' I.P.H. However, since Obermaier's excavations, samples have been sent to numerous European and American museums.

El Castillo's sequence is composed of stratigraphic units showing human occupation interspersed with sterile units. The stratigraphic sequence is approximately 21 m deep and, based on the study of the collections of the aforementioned excavations (Cabrera-Valdés, 1984; Cabrera-Valdés et al., 2001; Bernaldo de Quirós et Maíllo-Fernández, 2009; Bernaldo de Quirós et al., 2010; Maíllo-Fernández et al., 2011), it is composed of the following archaeological units (Fig. 1): Late Acheulean (Units 26, 25, 24); Mousterian (22 and 21); Transitional Aurignacian (Unit 18); Archaic Aurignacian (Unit 16); Gravettian (14 and 12); Solutrean (10); Lower Madgalenian (Unit 8); Upper Magdalenian (Units 7 and 6); Azilian (Unit 4); Bronze Age (Unit 2); and Middle Ages (Unit 1) (Fig. 2). This sequence was used by Breuil as one of the arguments to corroborate his hypothesis regarding the seriation of the European Upper Palaeolithic (González Echegaray, 2013; pp. 26).

The first great revision of the site was undertaken by Cabera-Valdés (1979, 1984), who updated the stratigraphy and carried out the first modern study of the collections. From the wide series of units discovered, in the present study we only focus on those described as Gravettian, Units 12 and 14 (Fig. 2), according to the revised stratigraphy by V. Cabrera-Valdés, and which correspond to those labelled by Obermaier as Aurignacian a and b (Units 12 and 14 respectively).

The reason why these Gravettian levels were referred to Alpha and Beta Aurignacian is linked to the division of the Upper Palaeolithic devised by H. Breuil: Aurignacian, Solutrean and



Fig. 1. Map showing the location of main Gravettian sites cited in the text. 1. El Castillo; 2. Cueva Morín; 3. Pendo; 4. La Garma; 5. El Cuco; 6. Altamira; 7. El Mirón; 8. La Viña; 9. Cueto de la Mina; 10. La Riera; 11. Sopeña; 12. Santimamiñe, Antoliñako Koba; 13. Bolinkoba; 14. Amalda, Irikaitz; 15. Lezetxiki; 16. Aitzbitarte III; 17. Ametzagina; 18. Alkerdi.

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