



## Human Palaeontology and Prehistory

A Magdalenian decorated *baguette demi-ronde* from Grotte de l'Abbé (Charente, France)*Une baguette demi-ronde décorée magdalénienne de la Grotte de l'Abbé (Charente, France)*Michelle C. Langley<sup>a,b,\*</sup>, Dominique Augier<sup>c</sup>,  
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## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 11 October 2014

Accepted after revision 6 January 2015

Handled by Marcel Otte

## Keywords:

Magdalenian

Baguettes demi-rondes

Charente

Projectile Point

Osseous

Antler

## Mots clés :

Magdalénien

Baguettes demi-rondes

Charente

Pointe de Projectile

Osseux

Bois de Renne

## ABSTRACT

During a recent study of osseous Middle to Late Magdalenian projectile technology housed in the *Musée d'Angoulême* (Angoulême, Charente), a small but insightful collection of newly recovered Magdalenian technologies from a site known as Grotte de l'Abbé was examined. In this box, the most significant items were two matched *baguettes demi-rondes* components. As the recovery of both halves of one of these composite projectile points is exceedingly rare, this find alone is exceptional. What makes this find truly extraordinary, however, is the fact that this implement also displays a complex engraved design. This paper describes this rare find along with other projectile point and ornament components found alongside this artefact.

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## R É S U M É

Lors d'une récente étude sur la technologie de projectiles osseux du Magdalénien moyen-supérieur, déposés au musée d'Angoulême (Charente), une collection réduite, mais significative d'objets de technologie magdalénienne, en provenance d'un site connu sous le nom de grotte de l'Abbé et récupérés récemment, a été examinée. Les objets les plus intéressants sont constitués de baguettes demi-rondes appariées. Comme la récupération des deux moitiés de l'une de ces pointes est extrêmement rare, la découverte en elle-même est

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exceptionnelle. Ce qui est réellement extraordinaire, cependant, est le fait que cet objet révèle un dessin complexe gravé. Cet article décrit cette trouvaille rare, de même que d'autres constituants, projectiles ou éléments ornementaux, également découverts.

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## 1. Introduction

During the last few years, the Museum of Fine Arts in Angoulême (Angoulême, Charente, France) has been conducting a detailed inventory of its collections, including its wealth of prehistoric materials. As part of this work, one of us (D.A.) “re-discovered” a small box with various categories of artefacts, labelled “Grotte de l'Abbé”, without any further information attached. While the artefacts included in this collection conform to the known osseous projectile and ornamental technologies belonging to the Middle to Late Magdalenian, what stands this small collection apart from numerous similar others, is the inclusion of an extremely rare matched pair of decorated *baguettes demi-rondes* components. Thus, while little is known about the excavation history of these particular artefacts, the recovery of such an exceptionally rare near complete and intricately decorated *baguette demi-ronde* necessitates that it be reported to the archaeological community.

*Baguettes demi-rondes*, known as ‘half-round rods’ (HRRs for short) in English, are a two-part composite projectile point technology usually manufactured from antler, though the occasional example made from bone or ivory has also been identified. In general, the HRR is made up of a pair of elongated plano-convex pieces which when fixed together (presumably in conjunction with a fixing agent) form a single whole with an oval section (Fig. 3). While the distal (tip) end of the complete HRR point is cylindrical in section and piercing, the proximal (hafted) extremity may be of a number of different morphologies, including conical, bevelled, or fork-based (Feruglio, 1987). This method of point construction allowed the Magdalenian toolmaker to construct a projectile point of much larger proportions than the physical constraints imposed by the raw material (that is, antler beams) usually allowed. Having been reported since the early 20th century, this weapon type has long been considered as a *fossile directeur* for the Middle Magdalenian (18,700 to 15,800 cal. BP), though these artefacts are also known to appear (though in far less numbers) in Early and early Late Magdalenian contexts (Feruglio, 1987, 1992). Recently, a number of HRRs from Isturitz were dated radiometrically (Szmidsztajn et al., 2009, Table 1), with the dates falling between 17,100–15,800 cal. BP, confirming a late Middle Magdalenian attribution of this technology.

While some debate still surrounds the functionality of *baguettes demi-rondes* as a whole, it has been pointed out that not only is the proximal end of the implement consistent with having been hafted as a spear point, but the way in which they are manufactured (minimization of the spongiosa section through the fixing together of two parts constructed from the cortical section of antler; See Fig. 3) provides great resistance and elasticity – perfect for a projectile weapon (Feruglio, 1987; Rigaud, 2006). Additionally, the use wear (e.g. impact fractures, crushing, rounding, and

chipping of both extremities) found on these particular GdA artefacts are consistent with having been used as projectile points (see Langley, 2013 and Pétilion, 2006 for examples of these wear patterns on Magdalenian osseous projectile technologies). However, Feruglio (1987) maintains that not all *Baguettes demi-rondes* may have functioned as projectile points, and other researchers have found comparisons with ethnographic implements, including bag handles and fishing rod components (Breuil and Robert, 1951; Leroi-Gourhan, 1965).

While fragments of this technology are commonly recovered from Magdalenian sites, near complete examples (where both halves of a single weapon are identified) are exceedingly rare, previous examples only coming from several sites including, Isturitz (Feruglio, 1987; Passemard, 1916), Mas d'Azil (Péquart, 1960), Freudenthal (Boskinski, 1978), Gazel (Sacchi, 1986) and Le Roc-aux-Sorciers (Pinçon, 2009) (cf. Feruglio and Buisson, 1999). Heavily decorated paired examples, even more so (Feruglio, 1987). Consequently, the Grotte de l'Abbé point, being both near complete and intricately decorated, is worthy of detailed description, and in conjunction with the associated artefacts found alongside (also to be described herein) provides a small insight into the osseous toolkit of Magdalenian hunter-gatherers.

## 2. The site: Grotte de l'Abbé (Vilhonneur, Charente)

Grotte de l'Abbé is located on the left bank of the Tardoire river, on the townland of Vilhonneur, department of Charente, France (Fig. 1). In this area, the geology consists of Bajocian (Jurassic) age limestone, and yields unique features in the form of a complex karstic system (i.e. the “Karst of La Rochefoucauld”). Along the Tardoire river, between the towns of Montbron and La Rochefoucauld (a length of about ten miles), this karstic system contains a large concentration of caves and deep underground galleries. At about the center of this particular geological feature, the town of Vilhonneur is punctuated by several “mounds” where numerous caves are located. Some of these mounds hold meaningful names for prehistorians, such as Rochebertier, Le Bois-du-Roc, and Les Garennes (Airvaux et al., 1999; Balout, 1959; Debénath, 2006, 2014).

Indeed, archaeological pioneers (e.g., Jean-Louis Fermond, Arthur de Maret), followed by more experienced researchers (e.g. Gustave Chauvet, Henri Breuil), have invested in this region since the 1850s and this interest continued into the early 20th century. These researchers are thus responsible for revealing the prehistoric wealth of this region by carrying out more or less systematic explorations of the landscape and thus discovering numerous Palaeolithic sites (see Breuil, 1912; Chauvet, 1910; Fermond, 1873; de Maret, 1879). Notable sites discovered include, at

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