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Menez-Dregan (Plouhinec, far western Europe): The lithic industry from layer 7 and its Acheulean components

Anne-Lyse Ravon ^{a,*}, Claire Gaillard ^b, Jean-Laurent Monnier ^a

^a UMR 6566 du CNRS (CReAAH), Université de Rennes 1, Campus de Beaulieu, Laboratoire Archéosciences (bât. 24–25), 74205 CS, 35042, Rennes Cedex, France

^b UMR 7194 du CNRS, Département de Préhistoire du Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle, IPH, 1 Rue René Panhard, 75013, Paris, France

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ABSTRACT

The Lower Palaeolithic site of Menez-Dregan I (Plouhinec, Finistère), located in Brittany at the very tip of western Europe, has been under excavation since 1991. It is an ancient marine cave where the roof has gradually collapsed, and hence partly protected the archaeological living floors from erosion. The fauna has not been preserved due to the acidic environment at the site, leaving only the lithic industry to show the living style of the human groups who settled there and, notably, mastered the very early lighting/control of fire in late MIS 13 or early MIS 12.

Recent digging of layer 7 has provided a lithic assemblage comparable to that of the upper layers at the site and is representative of the Colombanian techno-typological facies. This Lower Palaeolithic industry is contemporary with the Acheulean but differs from it as the heavy-duty tools are mostly cobble tools (choppers). The raw materials used were directly collected from the site itself or from the surrounding pebble beaches; from this stage of collection the use of two *chaînes opératoires* is clearly evident. The flint pebbles/cobbles are preferentially used for flake production. In most of the cases the “SSDA-Clactonian” (système par surface de débitage alternée) method is applied providing flakes with wide striking platforms seldom faceted, prominent bulbs and open angled ventral faces; sometimes flakes are produced by percussion on anvil; they are never Levallois. The small tool kit mainly includes denticulates and notches with a few scrapers. The heavy-duty tools mostly comprised of various types of choppers are shaped on larger cobbles selected for their rather flat, often elongated shape and for their homogenous nature (sandstone or microgranite).

This paper presents some specimens yielded by layer 7; although few, they are typical and definitely akin to the Acheulean techno-typological facies, especially two cleavers made on flakes (quartzite and microgranite), and two bifacial tools roughly shaped on cobbles (sandstone and quartzite), with a third one from the top of the underlying layer 8.

These findings revive the question of the relationship between the Acheulean and the Colombanian. Moreover the position of the site in a setting where the natural rocks are available in the form of pebbles/cobbles, flint only as small pebbles, questions the influence of raw material on technical traditions. This provides arguments for understanding the Lower Palaeolithic variability and contributes to the debate on the definition of Acheulean.

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1. Introduction

The Lower Palaeolithic site of Menez-Dregan I (Plouhinec, Finistère), located in Brittany at the very tip of western Europe, has been under excavation since 1991 (Fig. 1). It is an ancient marine

cave where the roof has gradually collapsed partly protecting the archaeological living floors from erosion (Fig. 2). The fauna has not been preserved due to the acidic environment at the site, leaving only the lithic industry as evidence of the living style of the human groups who settled there and, notably, mastered the very early lighting/control of fire in late MIS 13 or early MIS 12 (Monnier et al., 1996, p.63).

In the current state of research the stratigraphy preserved at Menez-Dregan displays an alternating sequence of levels of human

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: al.ravon@hotmail.fr (A.-L. Ravon).

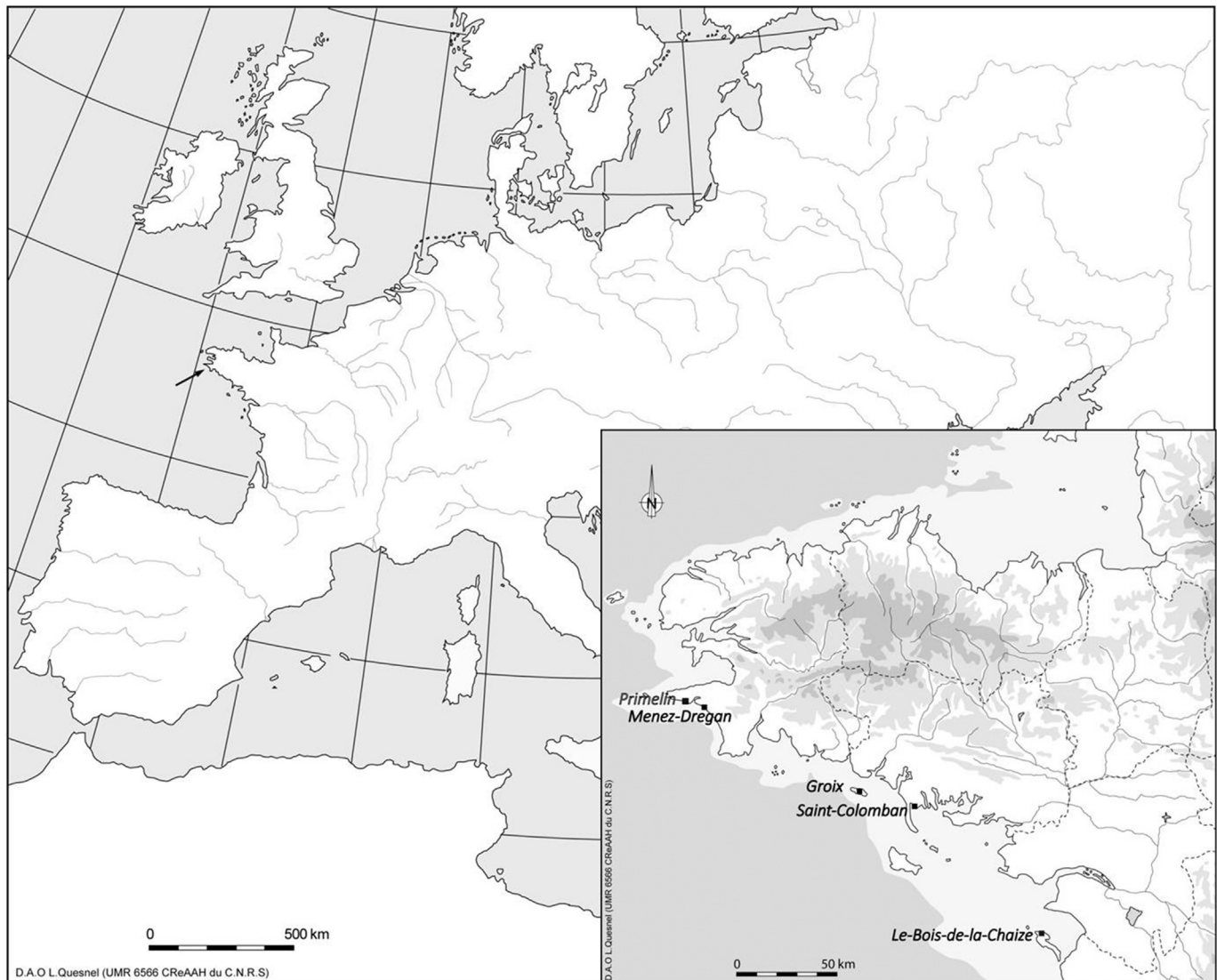


Fig. 1. Geographic location of the Lower Palaeolithic site of Menez-Dregan I (CAD: L. Quesnel).

occupation and marine deposits (Fig. 3) between ca. 465 and 113 ky (Mercier et al., 2004), and the excavation has yielded more than 200,000 lithics artefacts and millions of knapping fragments. This paper presents the lithic industry of layer 7, notable for its Acheulean components (Gaillard and Ravon, 2014).

2. Regional setting: the Lower Palaeolithic in Brittany

The Lower Palaeolithic in the Armorican Massif consists of two different groups, which are Acheulean *sensu stricto* on one side, and “archaic” lithic industries characterised by cobble tools on the other side. The name “Colombanian” was given to this second group whose type site is Saint-Colomban (Carnac, Morbihan, Brittany) by J.-L. Monnier in the late 1980s (Monnier and Le Cloirec, 1985; Monnier, 1996).

The lithic industry of the site of Menez-Dregan has been attributed to this “Colombanian group” by J.-L. Monnier (1996) on the basis of its composition: predominance of cobble tools among the heavy-duty tools, retouched light-duty tools on flake-blanks comprising mostly notches and denticulates, and knapping method akin to the “SSDA – Clactonian” (Forestier, 1993). The flakes have prominent bulbs, wide butts rarely faceted and wide open

flaking angles, resulting from an alternate flaking of the cores (SSDA – “système par surface de débitage alternée”, Forestier, 1993). The Levallois method is lacking, handaxes are absent or extremely rare, and there are very few scrapers. Thus the Colombanian proves to be an industry of the Lower Paleolithic, essentially localised on the south Armorican shoreline, between Crozon and Noirmoutier, contemporary with classic European Acheulean but typologically distinct (Monnier and Molines, 1993; Monnier, 1996; Molines, 1999; Molines et al., 2005). The “Colombanian group” is composed of the sites of St Colomban, la Croix Audran, the island of Groix, Menez-Dregan, Primelin, and Le Bois-de-la-Chaize, plus a large number of isolated finds all along the shoreline (Fig. 1), and is the subject of a new study that focuses mainly on the Lower Palaeolithic site of Menez-Dregan I (Ravon, in prep.; Ravon and Monnier, 2013; Ravon et al., 2015).

All the Colombanian sites are located on the current shoreline, their deposits sheltered in corridors of marine erosion or in collapsed marine caves. Settlements are always found on ancient marine beaches, this position seems to indicate that the human occupation occurred at the transition between interglacial and glacial periods, in rather mild climatic conditions (Monnier, 1996).

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