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Eating crow or a feather in one's cap: The avifauna from the Magdalenian sites of Gönnersdorf and Andernach-Martinsberg (Germany)

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ABSTRACT

The Central Rhineland Magdalenian sites Gönnersdorf and Andernach-Martinsberg produced an extremely rich corpus of diverse archaeological finds, including some 14,500 faunal remains at Gönnersdorf and some 4000 at Andernach. Faunal studies have focused on the large game, mainly horse, however favourable conditions of preservation at both sites provide an opportunity to examine not only smaller mammal taxa, but also for detailed analyses of the avifauna. Here we present results of these analyses focussing in particular on the economical and social role of birds in Magdalenian life.

In view of the large numbers of horse hunted at both sites, the relatively small number of bird remains show that they did not play a major role as a food resource. Selection for wing elements of swan and goose suggests these large birds may have been primarily of interest in terms of their pinion feathers or wing bones. In contrast the skeletal representation of ptarmigan or willow grouse suggests that complete carcasses were brought to the site for processing/consumption. Our holistic approach combines zooarchaeological analysis with e.g. spatial patterning, allowing us to assign bird remains deriving from individual carcasses processing to specific locations within the site area, information of relevance for a synthetic interpretation of settlement organisation and site formation. A complete praemaxilla and dentary of a raven from a pit in Gönnersdorf K II were probably deposited originally as a complete head. Its location, together with the overall representation of raven bone, perhaps suggest non-utilitarian motives for the presence of entire feathered skins of ravens within Gönnersdorf dwelling structures.

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1. Introduction

Our concept of Magdalenian faunal exploitation has been greatly influenced by studies of the large game, often horse and reindeer, recovered at many sites. However, analyses of the smaller faunal taxa, including all birds, show that small game was also an important economic and social factor in Magdalenian life.

In accordance with our established approach to faunal analysis, our study of the avian bones at the late Magdalenian Rhineland localities Gönnersdorf and Andernach-Martinsberg took a holistic approach. This combines standard zooarchaeological methods (e.g. exhaustive calculation of NISP and MNI values, detailed recording of human bone modifications to identify individual stages of carcass modification within the butchery and consumption

process) with spatial and contextual data relevant to settlement organisation and site formation. The extremely well-preserved sites, with well-defined concentrations of finds representing the remains of large dwelling structures, provide the necessary basis for detailed spatial analyses which permit the identification of specific locations of butchery or discard activities with the ultimate intention of gaining insights into the logistical organisation of Magdalenian subsistence and social activities practically down to a household level.

2. The Magdalenian sites Gönnersdorf and Andernach-Martinsberg

2.1. Location and chronological context

The Magdalenian sites Gönnersdorf and Andernach-Martinsberg are located in the valley of the River Rhine, only some 50 km south of the point where this exits the Central

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European upland zone and flows onto the North European Plain. Until the very end of the Magdalenian the boundary between the upland and lowland zones marked the northern limit of late glacial human expansion so that the two sites can be considered to lie at the very edge of the contemporary humanly occupied world (Fig. 1). Both Gönnersdorf and Andernach-Martinsberg are situated at the north-western edge of the Neuwied Basin, an extensive, level topographical feature within the Central Rhineland uplands (Fig. 1). Here, Gönnersdorf is situated on the northern bank of the Rhine, shortly before the river exits the Neuwied Basin at the “Andernach gate” to flow north-west back into the narrow Rhine gorge. Immediately opposite, on the south side of the river, is the site of Andernach-Martinsberg. The two extremely similar sites are only 2 km apart and within clear line of sight of each other, although their precise chronological relationship (contemporary, serial or alternating occupations?) remains unknown.

The locations of both sites may have been chosen to provide easy access to the river while at the same time remaining free from flooding, unlike other important contemporary Magdalenian waterside localities such as Pincevent in the Paris Basin (Leroi-Gourhan and Brézillon, 1966, 1972; Bodu et al., 2006; Debout

et al., 2012) or the Swiss sites Champréveyres and Monruz (Leesch et al., 2004, 2012; Bullinger et al., 2006), which were regularly inundated. The absence at these sites of many of the quasi permanent structures found at the Central Rhineland localities might be explained by this factor, whereby the selection of a permanently dry or seasonally inundated location itself probably reflects a compromise between site function (need for proximity to water) and available topographical location (presence/absence of higher ground).

In the case of Gönnersdorf and Andernach-Martinsberg the possibility of more easily crossing the Rhine may have been an additional factor in the placement of the sites at this location. Basalt incorporated into the dwelling structures at Gönnersdorf was probably brought to the site from the opposite side of the Rhine, which suggests the river was not a substantial barrier to movement. Whether this implies use of watercraft or that the river may have frozen in winter remains speculative.

Both sites were buried under thick ash deposits of the Laacher See Volcano, which erupted 13,000 years ago towards the end of the late glacial Allerød (Bogaard and Schmincke, 1985; Baales et al., 2002). Despite the passage of some 2000–3000 years between

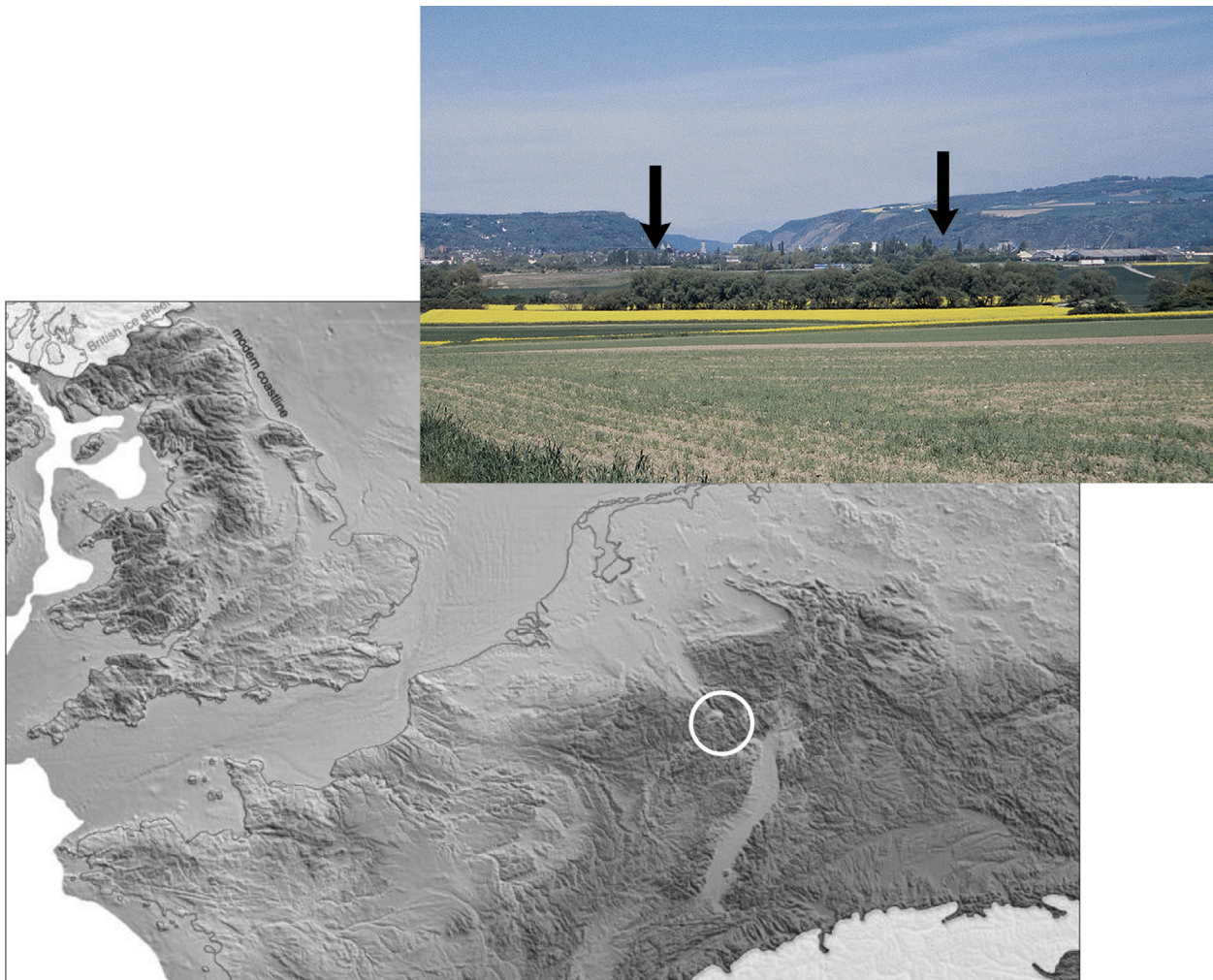


Fig. 1. Map of the North European Plain during the Magdalenian (GS 2a) showing the location of the Neuwied Basin (white circle) in the Rhine Valley. Modified from Map GS-2a created by S. B. Grimm (Grimm, 2013): online archive of the Monrepos Archaeological Research Centre and Museum for Human Behavioural Evolution. http://www.monrepos-rgzm.de/tl_files/monrepos/content/projektarchiv/downloads/NW-Eu%2010W-25E%2045-60N%20-105m%20SW%20GS-2a%20map%204.jpg. Inset: Photograph of the north-western edge of the Neuwied Basin, showing the entrance to the Rhine Gorge at the “Andernach Gates” and the location of the sites of Andernach-Martinsberg (arrow left) and Gönnersdorf (arrow right). Photograph: © Monrepos Bildarchiv.

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