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New data on Late Pleistocene small vertebrates from northern France

*Nouvelles données sur deux assemblages microfauniques du Pléistocène supérieur du Nord de la France*Emmanuelle Stoetzel^{a,*}, Héloïse Koehler^{b,c}, Dominique Cliquet^d, Noémie Sévêque^{e,f}, Patrick Auguste^f^a HNHP UMR 7194, CNRS, Muséum national d'histoire naturelle, Département de préhistoire, Sorbonne Universités, UPVD, Musée de l'Homme, Palais de Chaillot, 17, place du Trocadéro, 75016 Paris, France^b Pôle d'archéologie interdépartemental rhénan (PAIR), 2, allée Thomas-Edison, ZA Sud, CIRSUD, 67600 Sélestat, France^c ArScAn UMR 7041, équipe AnTET, CNRS, Maison archéologie et ethnologie René-Ginouès, 21, allée de l'Université, 92023 Nanterre cedex, France^d Service régional de l'archéologie, Direction régionale des affaires culturelles de Normandie, 13 bis, rue Saint-Ouen, 14052 Caen cedex 4, France^e Université Lille, CNRS, ministère de la Culture et de la Communication, UMR 8164 – HALMA, 59650 Villeneuve d'Ascq, France^f Université Lille, CNRS, UMR 8198 – Évo-Éco-Paléo, 59650 Villeneuve d'Ascq, France

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ABSTRACT

Quaternary small vertebrate assemblages from northern France, and more generally from northwestern Europe, are poorly recognized, and studied less than those from more southern, Mediterranean areas. However, important sites of human occupation are often found in these northern areas, with significant issues related to the occupation of these sites by Neanderthals and previous humans, as well as faunal dynamics under climatic pressure. In this paper, we present preliminary results from the study of small vertebrate assemblages from two Late Pleistocene sites of northern France: Mutzig (Alsace) and Le Rozel (Normandy). Both are ancient rock-shelters that have been excavated recently and have yielded evidence of Neanderthal occupation, but in very different contexts: Le Rozel is located in a coastal area of northwestern France contemporaneous with a temperate period, while Mutzig is located at the foot of the Vosges mountains in northeastern France and was occupied during a cold period. Consequently, even if these two sites are chronologically close to each other, differences in faunal composition are observed and discussed in relation to the geographic, climatic and biochronological context, in comparing the results from small vertebrates with those from other disciplines (numerical dating, large mammals).

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R É S U M É

Les assemblages microfauniques du Nord de la France, et plus généralement du Nord-Ouest de l'Europe, sont encore peu étudiés par rapport aux zones plus méridionales, notamment en région méditerranéenne. Cependant, plusieurs sites d'occupation humaine

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* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: stoetzel@mnhn.fr (E. Stoetzel), heloise.koehler@pair-archeologie.fr (H. Koehler), dominique.cliquet@culture.gouv.fr (D. Cliquet), noemie.seveque@etu.univ-lille3.fr (N. Sévêque), patrick.auguste@univ-lille1.fr (P. Auguste).

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paléolithiques importants ont été découverts dans ces régions septentrionales, posant d'intéressantes questions sur l'occupation de la région par les Néandertaliens et par les groupes humains plus anciens, ainsi que sur la dynamique des communautés fauniques sous pression climatique. Dans le présent article, nous exposons les premiers résultats issus de l'étude d'assemblages microfauniques inédits provenant de deux sites du Nord de la France datés du Pléistocène supérieur : Mutzig (Alsace) et Le Rozel (Normandie). Tous deux sont d'anciens abris sous roche ayant fait l'objet de fouilles archéologiques récentes et ayant livré des vestiges d'occupations néandertaliennes, mais dans des contextes très différents. En effet, Le Rozel est un site côtier du Nord-Ouest de la France en contexte tempéré, alors que Mutzig a une position plus continentale, au pied des Vosges, dans le Nord-Est de la France, et est contemporain d'une période froide. En conséquence, bien que ces deux sites soient chronologiquement proches, des différences de composition faunique ont été observées et sont ici discutées en lien avec le contexte géographique, climatique et biochronologique, en comparant les résultats issus de l'étude des microvertébrés avec ceux des autres disciplines (datations numériques, grands mammifères).

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1. Introduction

Northwestern Europe has yielded important Middle and Late Pleistocene archaeological sites with significant issues related to Neanderthal occupations and faunal dynamics under climatic pressure (Auguste, 2009). Unfortunately, small vertebrate assemblages from these septentrional areas remain poorly recognized, and studied less than those from more southern, Mediterranean areas, preventing an understanding of the environmental context of human occupations in these regions. The paper aims to address this issue by presenting new data from small vertebrate assemblages from two Late Pleistocene sites of northern France: Mutzig (Alsace) and Le Rozel (Normandy), which have been integrated in a broader, regional context.

2. Presentation of the study sites

2.1. Mutzig

Mutzig, located in northeastern France (Figs. 1 and 2), represents an exceptional site for the understanding of the Middle Palaeolithic in the upper Rhine region. The archaeological site of Mutzig is an ancient rock-shelter (now collapsed) located at 340 m ASL at the foot of the Mutzigberg rock mass composed of sandstone, near the Bruche river. The site was discovered in 1992 during construction work in the garden of a house. The site was covered by sandstone rocks, which would have played a key role in the preservation of the archaeological material, protecting it from erosion. Several excavations were undertaken between 1992 and 1996 by J. Sainty (Sainty, 1992, 1993a), and since 2009 by J. Detrey and T. Hauck (2009–2012) and then H. Koehler (since 2013). Several periods of Neanderthal occupation have been identified and yielded Mousterian industries, small and large faunal remains, some of them displaying burning and butchery evidences. OSL dates yielded an age dating to the end of MIS 5 for UE 7a, 8, 9 (Detrey and Hauck, 2011; Koehler et al., 2013; Preusser et al., in prep.). ESR-U/Th dating is in progress (J.-J. Bahain, MNHN). The “old collection” of

large mammal remains (i.e. Sainty's excavations, called Mutzig 1, 2, 7 and 8; Sainty, 1993a, 1993b) are represented by several species: *Rangifer tarandus*, *Bison priscus*, small bovid (cf. *Rupicapra rupicapra?*), *Equus* sp., *Cervus elaphus*, *Megaloceros giganteus*, *Capreolus capreolus*, *Mammuthus primigenius*, *Canis lupus*, *Vulpes vulpes*, *Ursus* sp., a small carnivore (Auguste, 2012; Patou-Mathis, 1993). The large fauna coming from the recent 2010–2014 excavations (in association with the small vertebrates) are a little different from the old corpus: *Rangifer tarandus*, *Bison priscus*, small bovid (cf. *Rupicapra rupicapra?*), *Equus* sp., *Coelodonta antiquitatis*, *Mammuthus primigenius*, *Canis lupus*, cf. *Alopec lagopus*, *Ursus* cf. *arctos*.

2.2. Le Rozel

Located on the western coast of the Cotentin (Manche, Fig. 1), to the North of the Surtainville beach, the Rozel ancient rock-shelter was revealed by coastal erosion. The site is part of a dune formation formed by the wind during the early stages of the last glaciation and ‘trapped’ in an old creek opening in a rocky cliff composed of schist crossed by quartz veins (Cliquet et al., 2014; Scuvée and Verague, 1984, 1988; Fig. 3). The site was discovered by Y. Roupin in 1967, and was then the subject of excavations in 1969 and 1970 by F. Scuvée (Scuvée and Verague, 1984). New excavations directed by D. Cliquet are ongoing since 2012. Investigations conducted on the sedimentary deposits and on the lithic and bone material suggest that the site was occupied by Neanderthals at least twice (two occupation soils; Van Vliet-Lanoë et al., 2006; Fig. 2). OSL dating on the “Grande dune” levels have yielded ages corresponding to the middle or end of MIS 5: around 107–87 ka according to Folz (2000) and 115–102 ka according to Van Vliet-Lanoë et al. (2006). Le Rozel is a major Middle Palaeolithic site in northern France, due to the exceptional preservation of anthropic structures (hearths), bone material (large and small vertebrates), insect remains, Neanderthal footprint, and the originality of its lithic industries (Cliquet, 2012; Cliquet et al., 2014; Scuvée and Verague, 1984; Van Vliet-Lanoë et al., 2006). Unfortunately, the coastal

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