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NEW ZEALAND ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER



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EXCAVATING IN FRANCE - SUMMER 1985

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The French prehistory and archaeology magazine Archeologia, No 203, June 1985, pp. 64-82, advertised 2,500 places on excavations for the summer. These were described by region, period, type of site, dates of excavation, accommodation available and contact address.

Our first excavation was advertised here. We spent the four weeks of June 1985 at Levroux, on the four month excavation, the last of a series that began in 1973.

Levroux

The excavations at Levroux in the central plains of France were organised by ADEL (Association pur la Defense et l'Etude du Canton de Levroux). This is managed by Dr Olivier Buchsen-schultz, University of Paris, with financial backing of CNRS, a government research body. The excavation of this particular season was directed by Anne Colin, a Ph.D student at the University of Paris.

For generations the site, just outside the town of Levroux, has been farmed for cereal crops, though its currently used as a junkyard for old agricultural machinery. It is on private property soon to be developed as a supermarket complex.

The excavation was a continuation of several previous adjacent digs. It was located within the original Gaullish village, and about the outer boundary of the later Gallo-Roman village. What was excavated was typical of the Asterix era.

As the excavations were in their twelfth year, the functions of features were fairly well known. The general approach was to extend the known settlement plan, to define the boundaries of the Roman period, ca. 52B.C., overlapping the Gaullish village.

The surface of the first excavation area 50 x 5 m was stripped off by machine to a depth of 40-60 cm (Fig.1). After it was scraped down to yellow chalk clay, features were defined, numbered and planned before excavation. There were a wide variety of feature shapes initially, though several concentrations of intersecting circular pits were found on excavation. There were about a dozen large rectangular grain storage pits, mostly filled with broken coarse ware pottery, pig bones, teeth



FIGURE 1. 50 x 5 m excavation area at Levroux.



FIGURE 2. Miles Nevin in badger holes, Levroux, May 1985.

and tusks, as well as lots of charcoal. Several intact bowls of incised fine ware pottery and a brass ring of a horse bit were uncovered in one small pit.

Several years earlier a magnetometer survey was carried out. From this one of the larger features was assumed to be an iron foundry. The large pit adjacent to it was excavated and bits of iron, blobs, nails, cloak pins, a lot of clinker, pottery fragments, pig bones, specks of bronze and part of an embossed glass bracelet were found, showing that this was partly filled with the floor sweepings of an iron foundry. Perhaps the most disconcerting features of this area were the continuous and intersecting, narrow parallel-sided ditches and scoops. After a good five days of neat dissections these turned out to be the burrows and tunnels of badgers (Fig.2).

During the excavation of the second 50 x 5 m area, the outer boundary of the Roman village appeared. The features which determined this boundary across the north-west corner of the excavated area were pits containing such characteristic pottery as red-glazed fine ware of the Roman period. Another Roman pit was full of worked pig bone and waste shavings. In all this a bone dice, an incised bone toggle and a cotton reel were found.

Roc la Tour

The second excavation we worked on was advertised in Archaeology Abroad, May 1985. The second season of the excavation of the collapsed rock shelter at Roc la Tour, in northern France, occupied two weeks of July 1985. It was directed by Dr J G Rozoy and financed by the people of Montherme and the Conseil General des Ardennes.

Roc la Tour is a well known tourist viewpoint and a popular rock climbers pitch, situated high in the forests of the Ardenne region, 6 km from Belgium.

The 14,000 year old site was an encampment of reindeer hunters established beneath the spectacular granite formations. Less than 1500 years after first occupation, an earth tremor caused a rockfall, damaging the camp while allowing its preservation. Much of the rest is said to have been swept away by erosion.

At the time of the occupation, towards the end of the Bölling Phase, near the end of the Würm glaciation; it was cold with no forest on the high plateau (tundra), apart from a few stands of elder and birch, leaving the site ideal for spotting game. Reindeer, wild horses, auroch (wild ox), ibex,

arctic hare, polar wolf and fox were hunted with spears fitted with bone points.

These Magdalenian hunters possessed a microlithic tool industry made of flint (silex). Struck flint tools such as gravers (burins) were used to work bone, borers (piercers) to sew skins, and backed bladelets were part of complex knives. They lived in sizeable groups of 50-80 people. At Roc la Tour they paved their shelters with thin slabs (plaquettes) of schist, brought from 100 m west. Some of these schist plates wear traces of engravings.

Metre square units were excavated between the fallen quartzite rocks, leaf litter and tree roots (Fig.3). These were quarter-sectioned and the fine loess scraped down in 5 cm spits. X,Y and Z coordinates were taken for each artefact recovered. Artefacts such as burins, blades, truncated blades, borers, pendants, flakes, chips and retouched flint objects were generally found in the top 35 cm.

These Magdalenians are said to have come from Belgium, as they used a great variety of different flints. A later Tardenoisian camp of 11,000 BP, 200 m west, used only one flint source, that comes from hills to the south-west.

La Mastine

The third excavation we visited for two weeks in August was also advertised in Archaeology Abroad, March 1985, p.12 (published by Archaeology Abroad, 31-34 Gordon Square, London WC1H 0PY).

This was the second season of excavation at La Mastine in the Charente Maritime District, near the village of Nuaille-d'Aunis, 20 km east of La Rochelle (Fig. 4). The site had been discovered while studying aerial photographs around the edges of the marshland known as the Marais Poitevin, during the dry summer of 1976. From the form of the cropmark, particularly the distinctive 'pince de crab' entrancework, it was identified by Scarre as a late neolithic enclosure of the third millenium B.C. There are about thirty known similar sites within the Marais Poitevin area. Several of these enclosures had been investigated by site surveying and excavation over the previous ten years, but little information had been gained about the prehistoric environmental setting of the sites. La Mastine was chosen for excavation, because of its low-lying position on the marsh edge, which is partially covered by marsh sediments.

A general environmental approach was taken to investigate the relationship between the occupation deposits and the

marshlands formations. Preserved organic material was looked for in the more swampy areas. Excavation of part of the interior was carried out to ascertain if the neolithic occupation surface had survived intact through burial beneath the overlying marsh sediment.

The project was funded by the British Academy and the Society of Antiquaries with an authorisation permit from the French Ministry of Culture. It was planned as an interdisciplinary study including sedimentology and palynology. Samples of each were taken for environmental analysis, under the auspices of the ATP (Action Thematique Programme) - a body formed early in 1984 devoted to prehistoric man-environment relationships in the marshland of west-central France.

The second excavation was again directed by Dr Chris J. Scarre, formerly of Cambridge University, England. The site which was formerly on a small island at the edge of the marshland, is currently under maize and sunflower fields, due to recent conversion from sour pastureland and hedgerows, stimulated by the new EEC agricultural policy.

The soil consisted of chalk cobbles to large stones mixed with thin black topsoil 10-15 cm deep over fractured chalk. The drained marsh edge that surrounds the southern side of the site, contains a fine-grained blue-grey sedimentary clay, locally known as 'bri'.

Excavation in 1985 on the highest area of the maize field began with a search for the enclosure ditch entrance. Picks and shovels removed the cultivation surface to the chalk bedrock. A one metre wide section of ditch was easily identified, with small stones cutting through the otherwise blocky chalk. The area was then extended to ascertain the angle of the ditch to locate its position in the 'pince de crab'. Another larger ditch was discovered, butting at right angles to the first ditch.

As further surface areas were cleared, work began excavating sections of the two major intersecting ditches. Surface finds included fragments of coarse ware pottery, flint flakes, some unidentified iron objects and fragments of marine oysters. Twelve centimetres of black soil, broken pottery and finely crushed marine shell (possibly the results of a storm as it appeared to be beach material) was removed. This was followed by black rubbly fill and broken pottery over yellow fill. Beneath this was a series of black fill layers containing differing proportions of finely crushed marine shell, charcoal and lots of broken coarse pottery. Progress was slow as X, Y and Z coordinates were taken for each artefact collected. An almost intact coarse ware bowl in very soft wet condition

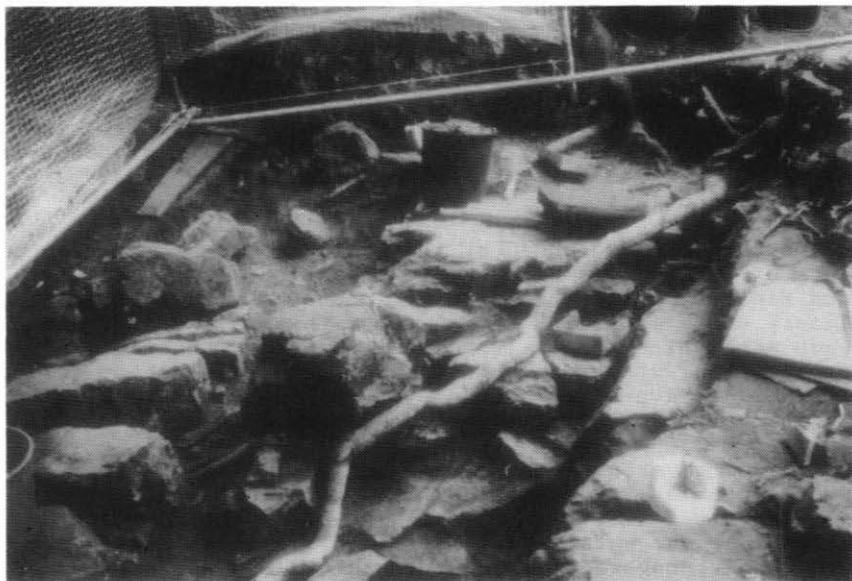


FIGURE 3. Roc la Tour, June 1985



FIGURE 4. La Mastine, July 1985.

was removed from the next layer. All the finds were cleaned, catalogued and sent to Cambridge for analysis.

Along the outer side of this ditch, it was thought an entrance wall or dry stone rampart had once stood, as huge quantities of large flat stones had tumbled into the ditch. Part of this ditch section also included the junction of the abutting principle wall enclosure.

Very little debris was found in the fill of the broader ditch. The entrance work post-dated the broad enclosure ditch, but by what length of time is unknown, as neither excavation was completed in the time available. In that respect, it was all rather inconclusive. To search for the western side of the circular enclosure a 10 x .6 m trench was dug at the southern end through a recently filled ditch over 'bri', to the bedrock. Two ditches were uncovered. The first was probably mediaeval and the second part of the 'pince de crab' enclosure. The depth of ploughing to bedrock destroyed the possibility of finding any settlement layer intact within the enclosure.

Material excavated in 1984 from a section through the eastern side of the enclosure ditch contained a few flint blade fragments and flakes, part of a bone handle with saw and drill marks, a corroded iron fragment with a rivet, pottery handles, several bases of coarse flat-bottomed vessels, coarse and fine ware rim sherds (a few fine ware rims with incised decorations), fragment of a polished stone axe and a finely worked bone point. This section of the ditch had an infill of 'bri' and no post-neolithic material was discovered beneath it.

In both years the associated French team, from the University of Paris, did resistivity surveys across the probable ditch locations. They were ineffective apparently due to the 1.6 m depth of overlying 'bri' deposit. However, 1984 excavations revealed a 3 m wide and 2 m deep ditch. Beneath the puggy 'bri', two layers of rubbly chalk fill overlay a dark organic peaty layer, rich in charcoal and potsherds.

The next excavation here is planned for 1987.

Digging in France

Virtually anyone who applies will be accepted as a volunteer, though the more experience the better. Most digs seem to use students and interested people from all walks of life. From the absurdly arrogant 18 year old Argentinian student, to the refined 55 year old unemployed English accountant, looking for a cheap holiday in France. We were the most ex-

perienced volunteers in each case, apart from the director who was experienced in his own period, if not in the field itself.

Children are pretty acceptable. Miles was the only child on two excavations, and there was a 12 year old Scottish girl at Roc la Tour.

None of these excavations required you to write up anything, and there was no follow-on analysis for volunteers although notes were of course taken concerning every feature or spit dug.

All French digs take 20 people, unless otherwise stated, as the directors can claim a small reimbursement from the government. There is a minimum age of 18 years. For those without personal accident or life insurance it is mandatory to pay F.80 (about NZ\$20) upon application. Anti-tetanus injections are usually a requirement too. Directors arrange to pick up volunteers without their own transport, from bus and railway stations, and return them when they finish.

For all volunteers food and accommodation are provided free. Both of these vary greatly depending on basis of funding and location. At Levroux, a government funded 'dig', the food was tremendous. Truly international, cooked by two rostered volunteers each day. Plus lots of cheap French wine (amazingly good for 70c (NZ) a 1 litre bottle - cheaper than milk!). We lived in a Youth Hostel with two large bunk-rooms. Toilets, hot showers and a large kitchen. Particularly well catered for. We were provided with 20 bicycles to ride to the site about 3 km away on the outskirts of the town.

At Roc la Tour, privately funded by a small group of people, there was sufficient food but no wine. We camped in our own tents in the forest, right beside the site. Food was cooked by a local Frenchwoman, under appalling conditions (mosquitos everywhere, rained every second day). There was no water available. Hot showers at \$1/person were taken at the closest camping ground about 4 km below in the valley. The four cars available transported everyone to the camping ground where we also filled 15 plastic drums with drinking water for the camp.

If you wanted to work in France you could easily find six months of voluntary work on 6-12 excavations per season. I recommend hiring a 2CV Citroen car, from the Citroen dealers in Paris (apply and pay for before leaving New Zealand through local travel agents - about NZ\$10 per day!).