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CHAPTER 1

LOCATION AND DESCRIPTION OF THE HERMITAGE SITE AT HUCCORGNE (LIEGE PROVINCE, WALLONIA, BELGIUM)

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INTRODUCTION

In Gravettian times, at the end of the Würm Interpleniglacial, bands of hunters were spread out in territories across the North European Plain from Wales to Russia. This zone of occupation above the Ardennes, Alps and Carpathians comprised the northern frontier of human penetration in a broad west-east band roughly between 50-52º north latitude. It is archeologically manifested by a string of sites of which Huccorgne is one of the most northerly. As one would expect at such high latitudes and under climatic conditions that were far from interglacial in character, the sites of the northern Gravettian frontier are not evenly distributed; indeed, quite to the contrary, they occur in definite concentrations, presumably in areas where combinations of geological and geographic features provided shelter, water, lithic raw materials and favorable opportunities for hunting. Such site clusters, with radiocarbon dates generally ranging between about 28-24 kya, include those of the Pavlov Hills in Moravia (Czech Republic), those of the middle Danube basin in Lower Austria, those of the upper Vistula near Krakow (Poland), those of the Ach and Lone Valleys in Baden-Würtemmberg (Germany), and the older Upper Paleolithic components of the Molodova and Kostenki clusters in the upper Dnestr and Don basins of Ukraine and Russia respectively. Less numerous and perhaps less spectacular, but no less important, are the Gravettian sites of southern Belgium. While stiletto-like straight-backed Gravette and Micro-gravette points are generally present as in the south, the northern Gravettian is stylistically divided in terms of large, stemmed projectile points between centrally tanged Font-Robert points in the west (southern Britain, Belgium, Germany) and shouldered Pavlov-Kostenki points in the east (Austria, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Ukraine and Russia). Leaf-shaped points are also still found in some Gravettian contexts in the northwest, apparently continuing a long-standing technological tradition from Aurignacian and Mousterian times in those regions.

The Belgian Gravettian (a.k.a. "Upper Perigordian") sites are numerous (perhaps as many as about 15 according to Otte [1979]), but, now with two exceptions, badly known. Many are problematical, consisting of finds from very early, small and/or casual excavations or surface or quarry discoveries. Several more-or-less characteristic artifact types (e.g., backed pieces, various kinds of burins, even long, narrow, parallel-sided blades) can also be found in the regional Magdalenian, making highly risky any absolute Gravettian attribution of poorly documented, undated collections (especially small ones from mixed contexts). Unfortunately, the key stratified sequences that had Gravettian components sandwiched between Aurignacian and Magdalenian layers (Spy, Goyet, Trou Magrite) were all caves excavated in the mid-late 19th century and their collections suffered many avatars during the course of history since that time (Figure 1). Other sites have yielded small assemblages that Otte (1979) has characterized as "late Aurignacian", sometimes despite very recent, perhaps problematic (Gravettian-age) radiocarbon dates of 24-25 kya (e.g., Grotte de la Princesse, Trou du Renard, Grotte du Halleux) (Gilot 1984). The recently excavated site of Trou Walou in eastern Liège Province has three conventional radiocarbon dates for a series Gravettian levels that range between 26-23 kya and that overlie a series of Aurignacian levels dating between 30-28 kya (Draily 1998). Uppermost Aurignacian Stratum 2 in recently re-excavated Trou

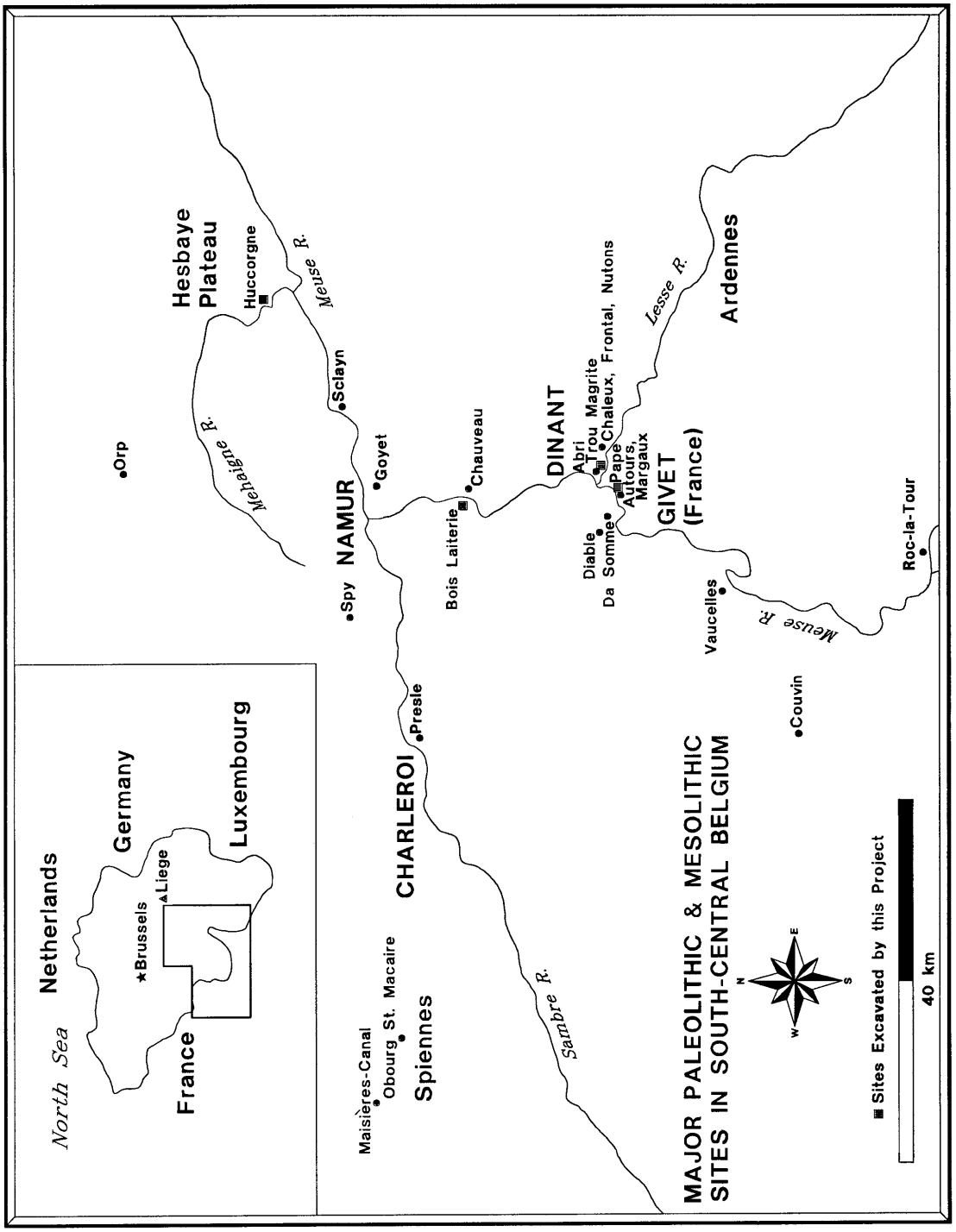

Figure 1. Map of Southern Belgium showing location of Huccorgne, plus other Paleolithic and Mesolithic sites.

Magrite (Namur Province) dates by four conventional radiocarbon determinations between 34-23 kya, with the older dates being more likely (Otte & Straus 1995). These are all caves in or near the Ardennes. There is an apparent overlap (or near-overlap) between late Aurignacian dates and early Gravettian dates in Belgium that remains to be explained satisfactorily. More significantly, the separate realities and individual unity of these traditional archeological constructs is subject to serious question, although we continue to use them as heuristic analytical devices.

In a pattern very similar to that which was to also typify the Magdalenian after the abandonment of northwest Europe, the Gravettian settlement pattern in Belgium consists of cave sites along the northern and western flanks of the Ardennes and open-air sites on the loess covered plains of the middle zone of the country. These two very different habitats are, however, contiguous; the straight line distances between Trou Magrite (one of the southernmost sites in the Ardennes) and Huccorgne and Maisières on the plains are only 45 and 70 km respectively. (The distances via the main river valleys are not significantly greater---clearly within the realm of hunter-gatherer mobility ranges.) Some cave sites (e.g., Spy, Goyet) are even closer to the plains. Such a bipolar distribution of nevertheless nearby sites lends itself to an hypothesis of (seasonal?) human movements between the uplands in the south and the lower midland plateaux. The former regions are replete with karstic caves in the deeply entrenched valleys of the upper Meuse and its tributaries (notably the Lesse River), thus providing abundant shelter, as well as water, wood for fuel and construction, and excellent terrain for ambushing game animals. The plains of Middle Belgium, in contrast, have rich, accessible sources of excellent-quality Upper Cretaceous chalk flint, which is completely lacking in the Ardennes or their foothills. The flint occurs in two major areas: the Hainaut Basin around Charleroi and Mons in the west and the Hesbaye Plateau which stretches across northern Liège Province and into the Dutch enclave of Maastricht in the east. The latter is generically known (especially in the German literature, since this stone is found in Magdalenian sites of the Middle Rhine) as "Meuse flint". The seasonal aspect of the obvious potentially functional complementarity of the two regions (neither Gravettian nor Magdalenian sites have been found on the sandy lowlands of northern Belgium or the Netherlands, although Epipaleolithic and Mesolithic sites are abundant in this area) is made logical by the high latitude of this area (50-51º) and by the scarcity of caves (and hence shelter) on the plateaux of Middle Belgium. Unfortunately, the open-air sites of all periods are very poor or totally lacking in faunal remains and thus lack seasonality indicators. However, there are limited indications of cold season occupation (and none for summer occupation) in the Aurignacian and Magdalenian cave sites of the upper Meuse/ Lesse valleys (see discussions in Otte & Straus 1995, 1997). It is very likely that the essential reasons for which Gravettian (and Magdalenian) settlement was possible so far north as Belgium was in fact the juxtaposition of the Ardennes and the northern plains, with their mutually exclusive and hence complementary resources of shelter and flint, together with the presence of a variety of game species (notably reindeer, horse and mammoth) that also probably moved between protected upland areas in winter and more exposed, but grass-covered plateaux in summer. It is worth noting that there is little or no evidence of Gravettian occupation in northern France above the cluster of sites at c. 48º N latitude near the confluence of the Loing with the Yonne, about 50 km southeast of Paris (Schmider 1990). The Belgian Gravettian group is even more distantly separated in space from the sites of southwest Germany. The Belgian site cluster (which falls entirely within the borders of Wallonia) seems to represent a distinctive, geographically bounded phenomenon, even if the presence of tanged Font-Robert points does suggest contacts with France and the territory that is now the island of Britain.

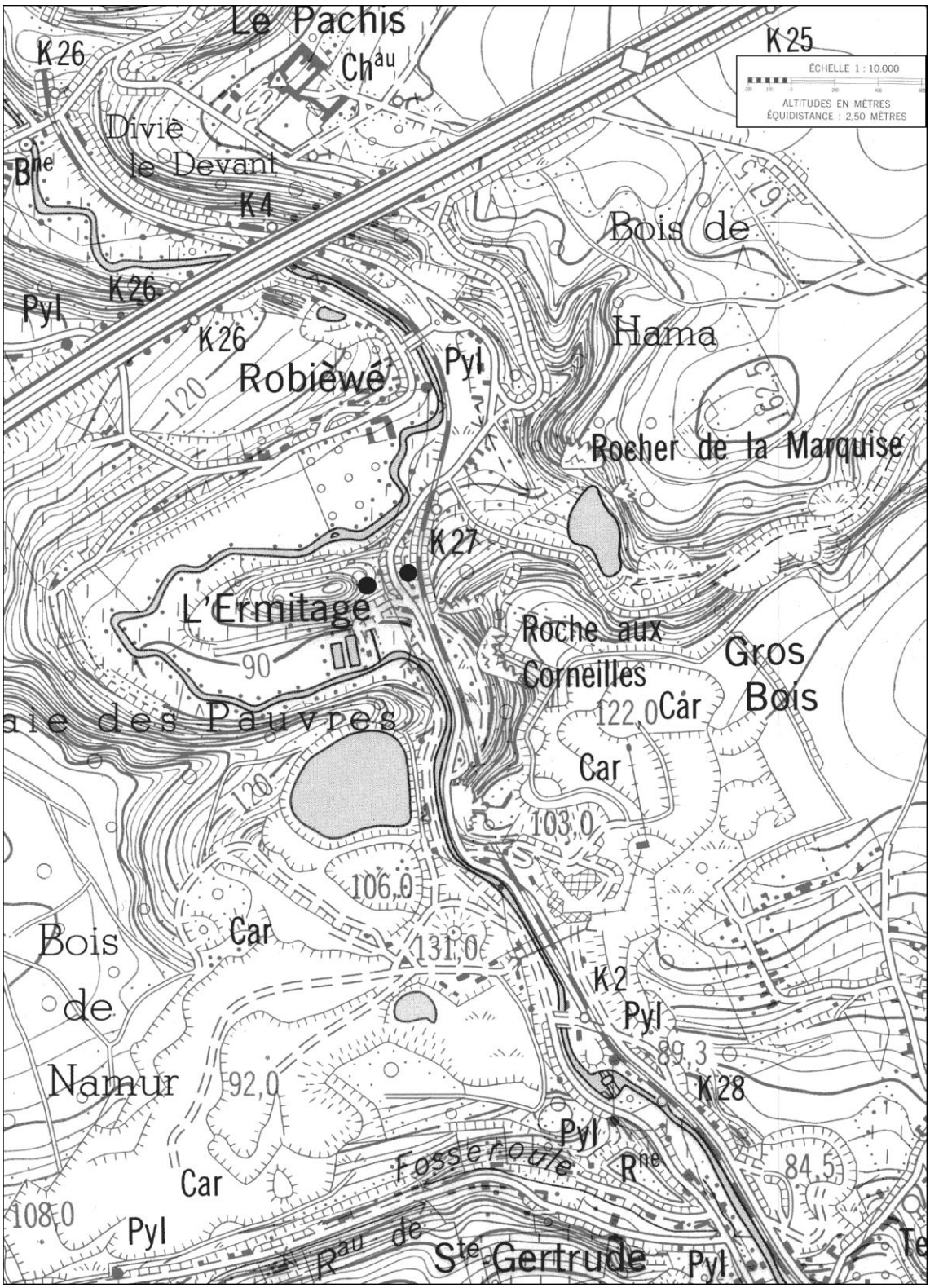

Figure 2. Detailed map showing location of the Huccorgne-Hermitage site on an oxbow meander ridge within the Méhaigne River gorge and transected by road & railroad trenches. (after Institut Géographique National map 41/6, scale 1:10000)

MAISIÈRES-CANAL AND HUCCORGNE-HERMITAGE

As of 1990, our knowledge of the Gravettian in Belgium was limited to the old references and collections (mainly from caves) assembled and analyzed by Otte in his dissertation (1979) and the major, monographically published excavations of Haesaerts and de Heinzelin (1979) at the open-air site of Maisières that had been discovered as a result of canal-digging in 1966. The Hermitage open-air site at Huccorgne (hereafter, "HH") had been known since the late 1880s (observations by M.de Puydt and M. Lohest in the road and railroad trenches that had been cut through the site in the 1870s; excavation by F.Tihon in 1886-90). A century later, in 1969-71, HH was the object of large-scale (c. 150 sq.m) excavations by an amateur archeological society, Les Chercheurs de la Wallonie, led by J. Destexhe. This work remained unpublished until now, although a radiocarbon date from a bulk bone sample obtained by Destexhe was known (Gilot 1984). Finally, in 1976 and 1980, long sections were dug and large areas of Gravettian occupation were exposed along both the eastern and western faces of the road cut and a deep stratigraphic section was cleaned from the top to the base of the western face of the railroad cut under the direction of P.Haesaerts of the Institut Royal des Sciences Naturelles de Belgique (IRSNB). Although the geological sequence and paleoenvironmental reconstruction developed and published by Haesaerts (e.g., 1978, 1984; Haesaerts & Laville 1988) as a result of the sections he excavated along both the road and railroad trenches at HH (in conjunction with his work at Maisières and elsewhere) were very significant, the abundant archeological materials that he and his student, S.Froment (1980), had uncovered during their work were unstudied and unpublished.

In light of the extreme paucity of information on, but great importance of the topic of Gravettian occupation of Belgium immediately prior to the climatic downturn and human abandonment of the Last Glacial Maximum in the wider context of northwest Europe, Otte proposed to Straus the limited re-excavation of HH in 1990. This possibility was opened up due to the willingness of the landowners (first, M.& Mme. B.Dock for the main site and, later, Mme. Smetz for the extension of the site to the west of the road trench) to permit us to dig on their properties. A joint excavation project of the Universities of New Mexico (UNM) and Liège (ULg) was organized under the co-direction of Straus and Otte. The former was on site daily; the latter visited frequently. HH was excavated along with Trou Magrite during the summers of 1991 and 1992; work at HH (Smetz property) was finished along with the excavation of Abri du Pape during the summer of 1993. Research at HH was funded by grants from the US National Science Foundation, the National Geographic Society, the L.S.B.Leakey Foundation and the Regional Government of Wallonia, with material support from the Universities of Liège and New Mexico.

Obviously there are two axes of interest for the comparative study of HH in the context of the Belgian Gravettian: 1.) the relationship between the sites of the plateaux and those of the uplands and 2.) the similarities and differences between HH and the other major plateau site, Maisières. The former axis of interest has scanty bases for detailed analysis, due to the poverty and/or stratigraphic uncertainty of the collections and lack of chronostratigraphic or paleo-environmental data from the caves (but see Miller 2000, for lithic raw material analyses). (The recent re-excavation of a small remnant area of intact deposits on the terrace in front of Magrite Cave revealed that the once-present Gravettian component had been entirely removed, apparently in the 19th and early 20th centuries [Otte & Straus 1995]). Comparisons between HH and Maisières are more readily practical, due to the modernity of the (latest) excavations, the fact that the sedimentology of both sites was studied by the same geologist (Haesaerts), the existence of multiple radiocarbon dates at both, and the broad similarity of their environments.

An additional (albeit secondary) interest of the HH site is the presence of traces of a Mousterian and/or recent Acheulean component(s) found by Haesaerts, by Destexhe, and by Tihon

in lower strata along the railroad cut. These traces are particularly interesting in light of the large number of Mousterian occupations in caves closely contiguous with HH in the Méhaigne gorge between the towns of Huccorgne and Moha (e.g., grottes de l'Hermitage I & II , du Docteur, du Chena, du Curé, abri du Sandron)(Ulrix-Closet 1975).

THE LOCATION OF HUCCORGNE-HERMITAGE

HH is located at 50º33'45" N latitude, 5º10'50" E longitude (Lambert coordinates: x=207, y=139.3 on the Wasseiges-Braives [No.41/5-6] 1:25,000 map of the Institut Géographique National de Belgique) in the town of Huccorgne, northwestern Liège Province (Wallonia, Belgium)(Figure 2). It is at an approximate elevation of 100 m a.s.l. HH is situated on an osterbeek oxbow cutoff ridge between the Méhaigne River to the west and south and the Roua stream (which had been captured by the Méhaigne, thereby creating the osterbeek type of oxbow meander) to the north. The Roua originally had flowed southward, hugging the eastern cliff base and joining the Méhaigne downstream of which is now the site. Acccording to Haesaerts (personal communication) the Roua channel had run down the area now occupied by the main HH site in the pre-Würm period. After capture by the Méhaigne further upstream, the Roua's former alluvial channel filled up with colluvia and loess during the Würm glacial. The Huy to Burdinne road and railroad trenches were cut through these sediments without having to blast through limestone bedrock, although this is exposed at the base of the two cuts (P.Haesaerts, personal communication; also see Froment 1980).

The site is bounded to the east by the c. 30 m-high Roche-aux-Corneilles limestone cliff. Just upstream of HH, north of the Roua stream, there is another vertical limestone cliff: Rocher de la Marquise, also bounding the left bank of the Méhaigne. HH is 500 m downstream (south) of the viaduct of the E42 highway between Namur and Liège. The place-name, "Hermitage", refers to a manor house immediately downstream of the site. The HH open-air site is not to be confused with the nearby Hermitage cave site, which is one of several small caves along the Méhaigne valley in this vicinity to have yielded small Mousterian and Upper Paleolithic assemblages, including possible Aurignacian materials in the Trou du Docteur recently radiocarbon dated to 36,650±1000 BP (Miller et al. 1999).

As mentioned above, the HH site lies on an oxbow bend of the Méhaigne within the deep, cliff-lined valley of this river at the point where it cuts down from the Hesbaye Plateau between Liège and Namur toward its confluence with the middle course of the Belgian Meuse, some 7 km downstream along the Méhaigne (5 km in a straight line to closest point on the Meuse). The Meuse in this sector is currently at around 90 m a.s.l. and the highest points on the Plateau above HH are at between 170-180 m a.s.l., so relief is quite gentle. Being near the valley floor of the Méhaigne gorge, HH would be somewhat sheltered from west or east winds, but one can imagine cold, north, winter winds sweeping down the valley and ripping across the site's low, east-west-oriented ridge. It would also have suffered from cold air drainage especially in winter. While the site is below, in or atop loess, colluvia and alluvia filling an old channel (that of the paleo-Roua stream), the western end of the oxbow is a relict limestone hill (c. 110 m a.s.l.), around which the Méhaigne bends. This hill and the oxbow ridge itself would have provided commanding views both up- and downstream and good vantage points for spotting and then killing game animals moving along the strategic passage that the Méhaigne provides between the Plateau and the Meuse Valley, itself the major corridor for communication in eastern and central Belgium. The ridge, as a natural obstacle across the gorge, is an ideal setting for ambush hunting.

In straight line distances, HH is about 17 km from the Gravettian site of Engis also above the

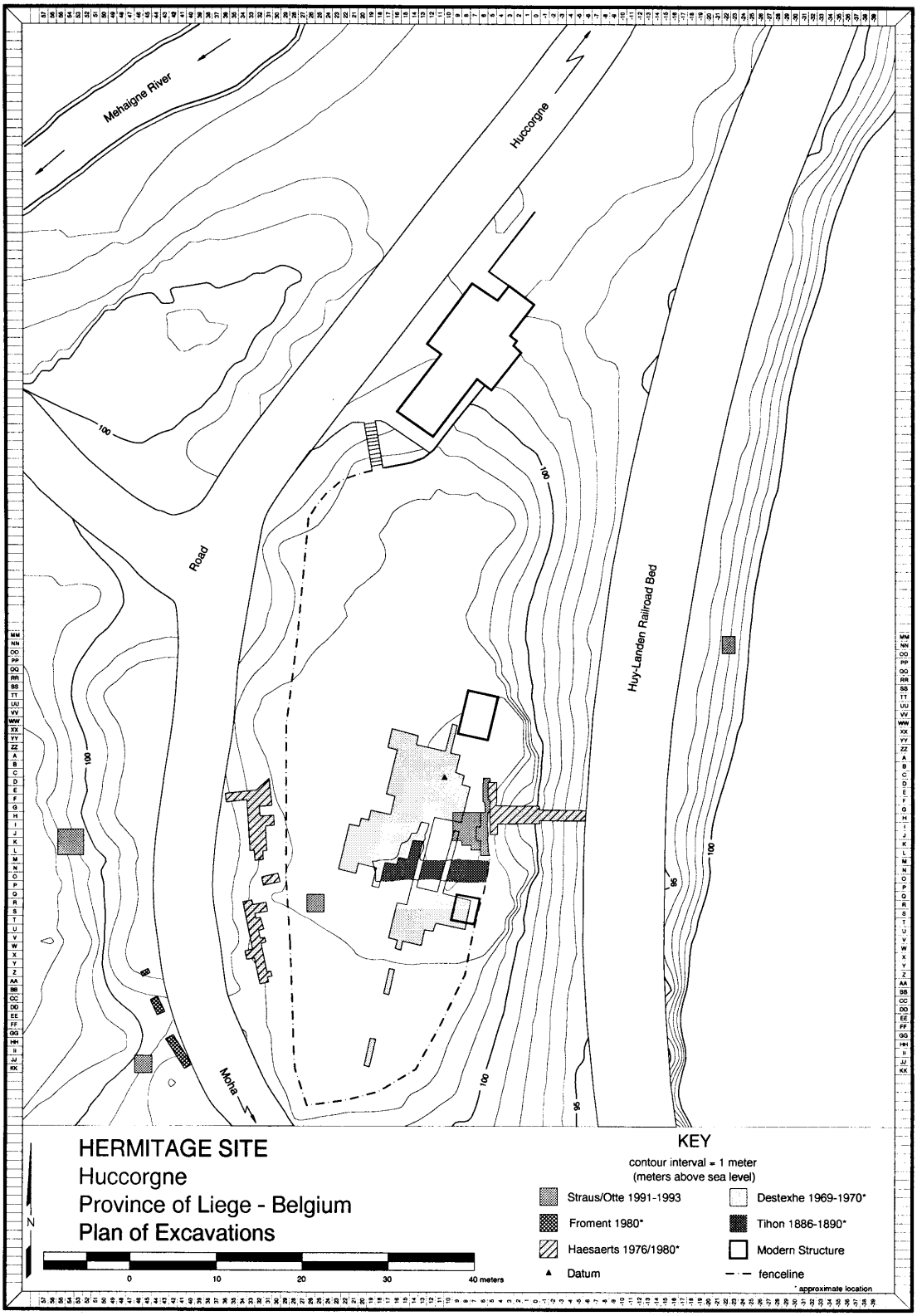

Figure 3. Plan of the Huccorgne-Hermitage site, showing locations of the various excavations in the main (eastern, "Dock") and western ("Smetz") areas, as separated by the road trench.

left bank of the Meuse near Liège, about 19 km from Goyet above the right bank of the Meuse between Andenne and Namur, about 35 km from Spy above the left bank of the Meuse's main western tributary the Sambre between Namur and Charleroi. It is about 18 km from the various poorly known Upper Paleolithic sites of Marche-les Dames on the left bank of the Meuse just downstream (east) of Namur. In addition, HH is about 13 km from the major Mousterian cave site of Scandina at Sclayn (near Andenne on the right bank of the Meuse), which also had remnants of (disturbed or redeposited?) Upper Paleolithic components in its uppermost deposits (Otte 1998). Finally, HH is about 16 km north-northwest of Trou Al'Wesse, a site in the low Condroz hills (Liège Province) across the Meuse, that has Mousterian and Aurignacian components, the latter of which date between c. 36.5-31 kya (Otte et al. 1998). In short, HH is not only immediately adjacent to several small cave/rockshelter sites, but it is also within a day's walk of numerous other sites along the course of the middle Meuse, just north of the edge of the Ardennes foothills in southern Liège and Namur provinces.

From the plateau above HH one can easily see the stretch of the Meuse Valley between Huy and Andenne and the Condroz foothills of the Ardennes to the south. Beyond them lies the upland cluster of Mousterian and Upper Paleolithic sites in the lower Lesse Valley, 40-45 km south-southwest as the crow flies.

Besides its strategic, albeit rather exposed position on a natural route of passage between the Meuse Valley and the Hesbaye Plateau (attested by the existence of the very railroad and road whose construction led to the site's discovery), HH is immediately surrounded by a significant source of good nodular flint. Derived from the Upper Cretaceous limestone through which the Méhaigne and Roua cut the top their valleys (the base of the Méhaigne valley cuts through much older Devonian and Carboniferous deposits) , this flint is readily available in abundance. At present it can be found in gardens and ditches in the valley-side and valley-bottom village of Huccorgne, as well as in plowed fields atop the plateau along the rims of the Méhaigne gorge. (For example, excellent, large nodules were found by Mr.Smetz at their home, about 250 m upstream of the site, during excavation for a new septic tank at the time of our 1992 work.) Presumably during the less densely vegetated conditions of the end of oxygen isotope stage 3/ early stage 2, with unstable slopes, flint nodules would have been easy to obtain in the valley during Gravettian times. So, as at Maisières, while hunting, as facilitated by its physical situation, was done at HH, the most significant "magnet" which (repeatedly) drew humans to the Méhaigne gorge was probably the abundance and availability of good-quality, large nodules of chalk flint.

THE LAYOUT OF THE HERMITAGE SITE

It is a bit difficult to visualize the natural configuration of the HH site, as it has been so heavily altered by major human activities over the past century and a half, notably the digging of two major trenches across the ridge of the oxbow bend. The deep, straight railroad (RR) trench (with overgrown tracks of the now-abandoned Huy-Burdinne line) hugs the western edge of the ridge at the base of the cliff and may have destroyed relatively little of the site, based on the relative scarcity of finds at the western end of our main excavation and the absence or minimal presence of a Gravettian component in a small test section we dug on the eastern side of the RR trench. The curving Moha-Huccorgne road trench (broad, but far less deep than the railroad cut) to the west may have destroyed much more of the site, judging from the wealth of materials found by Haesaerts in his 1976/1980 excavations along the eastern edge of this cut and by Froment in 1980 along its western edge. However, there are various indications that the road cut may approximately correspond in location to a Gravettian-age channel which had led to some reworking of the cultural materials and

destruction of faunal remains in this sector of the site. The site today is a residential property: a large lawn with trees, sheds and a house with its out-buildings at the northern end of the site area. The whole is dramatically bounded by the two trenches which converge at the south, where the road and railroad run next to one another along a narrow bench between the base of the Roche-aux-Corneilles cliff and the recurving Méhaigne opposite the Hermitage manor house (Figure 3).

Conservatively estimated by the east-west distance between the two trenches and the north-south distance between the most distant archeological pits to yield Gravettian remains, the main HH site totals about 1000 sq. m. What is unknown is the extent to which the cultural deposits might continue northward toward the Dock's house, as the 35 m-long area between it and Destexhe's main trench at the highest point in the center of the lawn ("*la butte*") has not been archeologically tested. Thus the site could conceivably be at least twice as large. In addition, it is clear that at least a light scatter of probably Gravettian (and definitely Mousterian) artifacts extents at least 20 m further west into the Smetz property. As we did not dig pits any further west than along the western rim of the road cut, it is possible that the site (as defined by lithic scatters) might (have) extend(ed) to the limestone hill at the western end of the oxbow ridge. Excavations have obviously been limited not only by the usual constraints of money and time, but also by the unusual situation of the site mainly being on the lawn of a private residence.

Plate 1. The Hermitage ridge open-air site looking southward across the Mehaigne River meander from hamlet of Robiewe. Roche-aux-Corneilles cliff is at left.

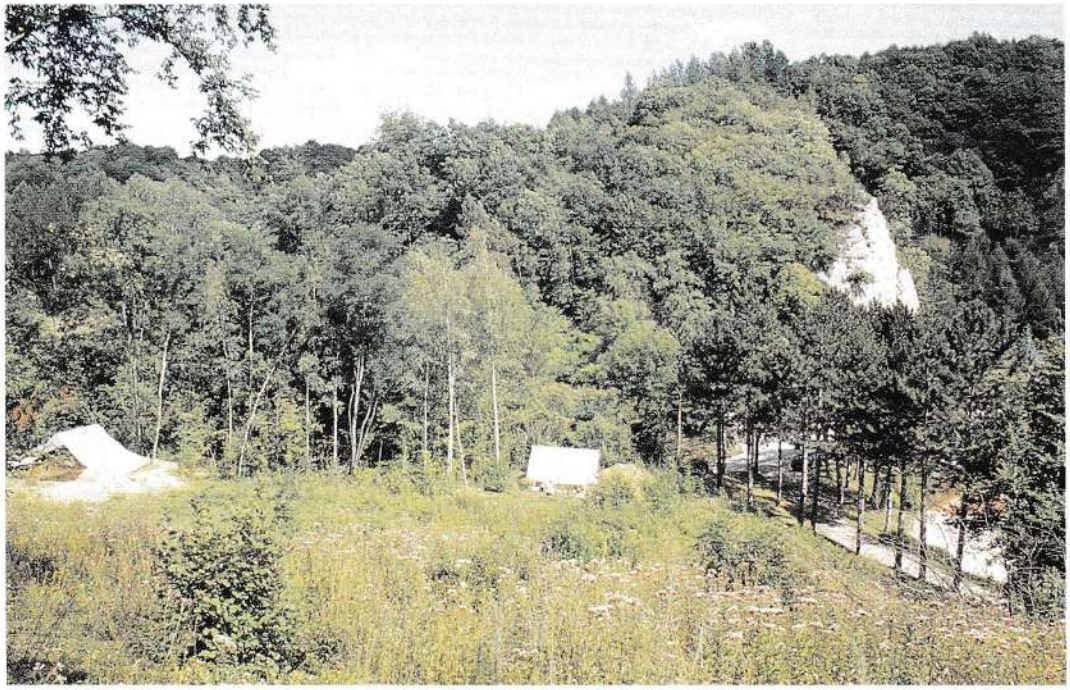

Plate 2. The Hermitage ridge open-air site looking eastward: western ("Smetz) area in foreground with tarps over both *sondages* and main ("Dock") area behind the trees; Roche-aux-Corneilles cliff is at background.