

An excavation journey

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Freedom begets creation. For me, the first is linked to the nebulous utopian ideals of those who participated in the events of May 1968. The second drove me to the caves of the Meuse Valley, with a feverish mind mingling with the powerful attraction of the research of my predecessors and the respectful comprehension of our own origins. My doctorate (1970-1975), full of dreams, fragrances, and changes, introduced me to the spirit of adventure that ignited the first Liégeois (Otte, 1979) and to the enchantment of these countless gestures recorded as much in the stone artefacts as in their lithographic plates: yellowed with time but with a fine and faithful drawing style, a damp texture under the hand, as if we entered them (Schmerling, 1833). In the poetic turmoil, mastered with great effort, and held in a tactical repose, several promising situations had already been recorded. So I was brought to touch the sacred deposits on the margins of these celebrated caves, all visited to find in them the spirit of the places where mysterious civilizations had lived in the past: Montaigne, Chaleux, Furfooz, Goyet, Hastière, Modave, Trou Magrite... and Marche-les-Dames, in 1976, directly across the Meuse from Scladina! Examination of the artefacts recovered in the old excavations showed the significance of the bone industry and the homogeneity of the Aurignacian occupations. With Michèle Gustin and Michel Toussaint, we proceeded with meticulous excavations, but the Aurignacian material discovered was dispersed in disturbed deposits, mixed with material from Neolithic burials. The only intact human occupation at the Grotte de la Princesse was attributed to the Early Middle Ages, probably Carolingian, with beautiful painted pottery (Otte et al., 1981). The connection with the opposite bank of the Meuse was established by an ingenious fighter, Commander Hazée, instructor at the center of the commandos of the Belgian army, where, in all innocence, my humble excavations had led me. This Commander had it all: tall and strong, a good drinker, the charisma of an adventurer, long episodes on the hardest fronts (Katanga, Korea, China), and leader of men in combat, both in the bistros and in the caves. We immediately became friends, by the magic of which the stuff of history is woven. Among these military men, devout followers, a speleological group was then found, attempting to explore the rocky entrails on the slopes of the limestone hills on the south side of the Meuse. Training sessions by this circle of brave men were as welcoming as they were demanding, even in the vigor of my twenties. It is not necessary or proper to recount the menu here, but other long evenings were devoted to a limited circle of 'selected friends'. Complete confidence was established in this group and in June 1976 conceived the idea of a collaboration, sharing methods (they wanted to know everything!) and tips on the different cavities found in the rocky massifs surveyed by the Cercle Archéologique Sclaynois (CAS).

Through the incendiary tumult that took place at the Place Saint-Lambert in Liège (June 1977), our enthusiasm did not dampen the dispute and official and efficient excavations only began in August 1978 under the leadership of a local magician, the Mayor of the City of Andenne, Claude Eerdeken. Claude, like myself, believed in this affair and brought to it all of the persuasive determination of his administration for perpetual and untiring support. For example, he

ensured the inspection of the expansion of the quarries neighbouring 'our' caves in the Meuse Valley and reserved exclusive study to our new association. The Ceramic Museum of the city was soon added to the group. Since then, and thanks to the diabolically effective mechanism of this group, systematic excavations have been in progress in this vast complex of chambers, focusing as much on pure scientific research questions as on the training of students and education of school groups and tourists. Meanwhile, having become a professor, several Master's and Doctoral theses were completed under my supervision. Scladina Cave is now renowned worldwide for the quality of the excavations (Bonjean et al., 2011), the innovative research that it has engendered, and the discovery of the remains of a young Neandertal in 1993 (Otte et al., 1993). International collaboration has brought the best specialists in all fields to the site (Ellwood et al., 2004), thus avoiding the narrowness of thought that nationalist schools can impose. The current experienced team, definitive and exclusively focused on the study of this prodigious site, owes its soul and energy to the total dedication of Dominique Bonjean, scientific collaborator at the University of Liège. As a result of his work, he and his team have produced a series of publications, directed the field school and undertaken coordinated research, all within an amicable atmosphere created by each member. Contrary to commonly accepted ideas, the excavations at Scladina have demonstrated that a range of skills were entirely mastered by hominins more than a hundred thousand years ago. Hunting capacities are shown by the flexibility of their adaptations at the base of the Ardennes hills. The frequency of chamois in the range of fauna hunted demonstrates the precision and rapidity of capture methods, probably linked to the mastery of woodworking techniques. Stone artefacts reveal a broad diversity in methods used simultaneously, depending on the intended tools and within very large distribution networks, from local sources to others located many kilometers from the site. Black colorants perhaps indicate a preoccupation with corporal aesthetics. And curious objects (crystals) were brought back to the site, just as 'curiosities' have been throughout human history.



Marcel Otte with some colleagues in Scladina Cave during the summer of 1980s.

Yet the successive discoveries of disarticulated fragments of human remains, all from a single young individual that is clearly Neandertal, have been the most important scientific aspect of this site since 1993. Although the skull was isolated (all fragments come from it), its selection was dictated by obvious elaborate spiritual concerns because it served to incarnate the care given to those within the community: they ensured collective destiny through rituals. The disposition in caves itself corresponds more to a funerary concern than to a domestic occupation; the burial remained protected as if by a vault, by the natural bowels of the earth formed by the rocky envelope, as perpetual as one could desire. The discrete striations seen on the interior of the mandible appeared to reflect specific treatment of the human remains at first glance, as often this part of the body indicates, both among the Neandertals and modern populations dispersed around the world today ('skull cults of primitive peoples') (Gastaut, 1972).

The remains of this young child followed the same logical line of reasoning: an 'unproductive' being in a hunting society was nonetheless honored, with the worth of an adult hunter and fully integrated within its social rank. This simple note clearly indicates the mythical solidarity of the group, by including all of its members, including the most humble.

The Chair of Prehistory that I have occupied since 1980 results from the long chain of consequences that began in 1817 when the University of Liège was founded. My distant colleague, Philippe-Charles Schmerling, was first a generous doctor. He traded his medical care against the discoveries made by quarry workers as the quarries expanded to cut into cavities rich in fossils. With hard work and a lot of bold, insightful, and free reflection, he foresaw human evolution by combining the remains of extinct animals, stone tools made by humans, and human skeletal remains. This fever of discovery and reasoning continued during the 1820s. He presented his arguments in several articles for the Académie des Sciences de Paris and then in a superb volume which included detailed drawings of stone tools and human skulls and bones, including the first Neandertal ever discovered, known as 'Engis Man' or 'Liège Man' following the nomenclature.

Nearly two centuries separate the discoveries of Engis and Sclayn, but the central pivot of Liège research was at Spy in 1885-86, where two Neandertal burials were found by an interdisciplinary team on the large terrace in front of the cave. Once again, their location supports the ritual value of such a cavity, large and opening onto a river and facing an extended plain on the horizon. During these historical excavations, religious activities were demonstrated for these populations who at the time of discovery were barely accorded the status of being human. Burials, human groups, techniques, and rites were finally associated to give this ancient population a dignity comparable to that, while still hesitant, accorded to exotic modern populations.

Sclayn is thus placed a long trajectory of research by the Liège School in the Ardennes caves and their particular abundance in prehistoric human remains. With the new school of thought that has been formed at Scladina, there is no doubt that equivalent productivity will continue.

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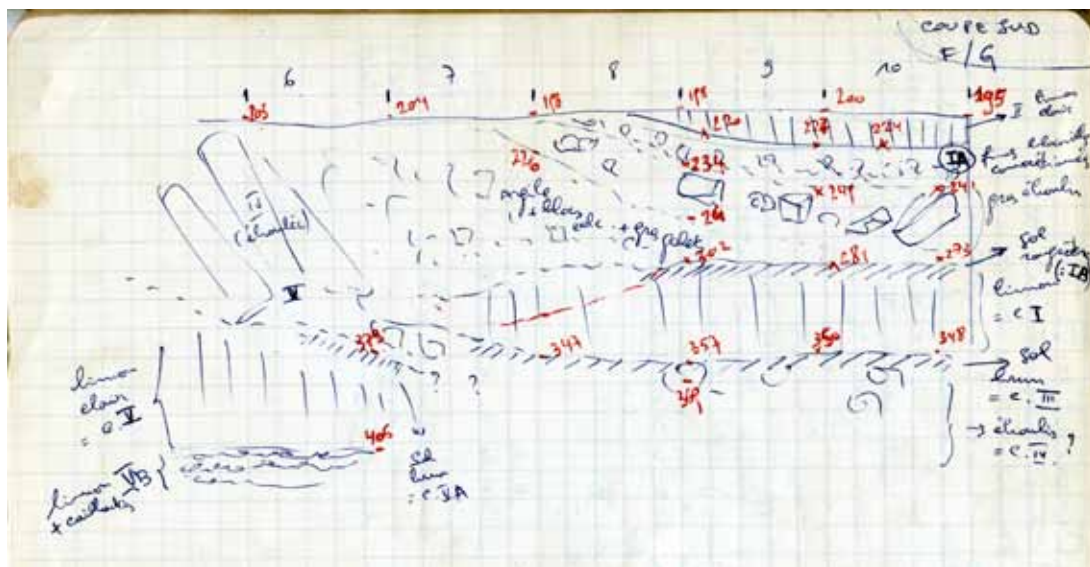
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The south profile (F/G) of the trench dug on the terrace. Sketch of the stratigraphic sequence drawn by Marcel Otte on the 12th of July 1979 (excerpt from the first excavation journal of Scladina).