

# Questioning the Answers: Re-solving Fundamental Problems of the Early Upper Paleolithic

Maureen A. Hays and Paul T. Thacker, Editors

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## Review by Marta Camps

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This book is a collection of broad-ranging papers presented at the 1999 SAA meeting in Chicago, Illinois. Its focus is current research on the transition to the Upper Paleolithic in Europe. Although some papers are based on the authors' previous and usual lines of argument (sometimes, decades-old), there are others that provide the reader with synthesized new information.

The contributions detailed below are loosely organized in three parts: regional perspectives, typological and technological approaches, and interassemblage variability problems. Each section is discussed by a leading researcher who provides a critical overview of the section and highlights the main points of each presentation, thus conferring a sense of cohesion between the different papers. An unfortunate point which they all have in common is the large amount of typographical errors that the texts contain (although this does not diminish their interest and usefulness).

The Regional Perspectives Section begins with Harold and Otte's quick survey of research on the transition in several European regions and the latest models proposed to explain the succession of events during this phenomenon. They highlight questions that remain to be answered, and stress that furthering our knowledge in this field will necessitate a critical revision of the methodological framework presently used.

Zilhão's paper combines interesting late discoveries like the Lagar Velho child, which has been used to modify theories about what could have happened during the transition, with an extended review of the dates for different European sites. It is hard not to consider his claims as very hurried and rather risky when the aforementioned skeleton is the only one of its kind (that is, if it is at all a hybrid), but Zilhão uses it to develop and prove 'extensive hybridization.' Assuming, for discussion's sake, that it is indeed a hybrid, one wonders if Zilhão's Ebro Frontier hypothesis collapses under its own weight, as clearly at least some individuals were in contact with populations from the opposite riverbank. The strongest support for the hypothesis is the extensive lack of research in central Iberia, a point that Zilhão does not mention. Regarding the discussion on chronometrical dates (much more extensively explained in Zilhão and d'Errico 1999a), while the aim for a more accurate database is commendable, Zilhão's support for a 36.5 kyr bp boundary for the Aurignacian is not greatly helped by the fact that it is based on sites such as La Viña (Spain), where only one date seems to be available.

Enloe's paper reviews a combination of studies on the transition—those that focus on the late Mousterian and the earliest Upper Paleolithic, and those that substitute the Magdalenian for the latter. One is left to wonder if the transition is not further over-complicated by extending it throughout most of the Upper Paleolithic. This paper contains important and interesting questions and points for possible and not yet

fully explored research avenues, stressing the importance of looking into subsistence and seasonality. Enloe favors an integrative approach and highlights some research gaps, such as that of the organizational complexity during the periods prior to and during the Last Glacial Maximum.

Bernaldo de Quirós *et al.*'s paper is a meld of: a) a detailed description of El Castillo cave's transitional layer (level 18) and its location in Obermaier's early 20th century excavations and Cabrera Valdés' modern work (1980 onwards), in relation to the other two major sites in the Cantabrian region (El Pendo and Morín caves); and, b) a reply to Zilhão and d'Errico's theoretical reclassification of Castillo's level 18's sublayers. One major reservation about this paper is that it attempts to study the transition in an extremely rich region by using evidence from just three sites, one of which (El Pendo) has been thoroughly studied twice (in 1982 and in 2001) and found to be affected by major stratigraphical problems. Such studies are not acknowledged by the authors, despite the fact that one of the critics (M. Hoyos) worked closely with them and is credited in this paper as having performed "rigorous geological analyses at El Castillo." Not addressing this issue, yet criticizing Zilhão and d'Errico's arguments because they are based on a single line of data, their claims based on just two types of data are two more shadows on research in a rich archaeological region (studied for over one hundred years) from which a lot potentially can be learned about the transition. Bernaldo de Quirós *et al.* favor a multiregional approach to the origins of modern humans in that area, which shows that they refuse to give in to generalizations supported by other areas in Iberia, and this stand is praiseworthy. This, however, should be accompanied by an attempt to provide an explanation of how this process could have happened, rather than advocating it just because it fits in well with their data.

Clark's discussion devotes an extensive part of his contribution to a critique of the Indigenist hypothesis's supporters, led by Zilhão.

Monigal's paper begins the section on Typological and Technological Approaches. She presents a typological approach to the complexity of the record when considered on the continental scale, as well as a portrait of the inadequacies and problems caused by the application of western-developed traditional typological systematics to the transition in Crimea. Her study of this peninsular area provides the reader with a localized glimpse of what the scenario might have looked like throughout Europe and the huge range of industries that were present at the time.

Sackett's typological study of the Beauronnian describes this industry as an 'early Upper Paleolithic' type found at Solvieux, which differs from the Aurignacian and the Chatelperronian. The paper's focus is on the three most representative tool types (Solvieux truncations, burins and retouched bladelets), for which the author provides illustrative and numerous drawings. His comparisons with the Aurignacian and Chatelperronian industries do not seem to take into account that these classifications are our modern constructions, instead of conscious and definite groups. Perhaps this is due to the need to keep contributions within a length-limit, and thus such an issue is taken for granted by the author.

Olszewski presents an informative overview of both the theoretical and practical cases of transitional scenarios in the Levant to introduce less known and more recent studies of the work in the Zagros area, especially the research at the site of Warwasi. She concludes with remarks (which all researchers in the field should carefully consider) such as the application of double standards when looking at Neanderthals and modern humans. This study is severely criticized by Rigaud in his commentary.

Almeida's research is a practical approach to the problems caused by many researchers' blind faith in typologies and extensive use of these systems which are unrealistically expected to give answers to all

our questions. He combines experimental knapping, morphometric attribute analysis, use-wear studies and refitting exercises to examine the purpose of Upper Paleolithic carinated tools, such as carinate endscrapers. His conclusion is that rather than tools, they were cores for the production of bladelets. He does not “solve” early Upper Paleolithic typological problems, but he clearly demonstrates that these exist, they are serious, and they need to be dealt with urgently.

Experimental work on Dufour bladelets produced from Aurignacian scrapers is the focus of Lucas’ paper. One might disagree with the author’s comment that Dufour bladelets have long been ignored (99), as bladelets have been acknowledged by many researchers as being the real innovation of the early Upper Paleolithic, instead of blades, which are present in earlier periods. Lucas’s very useful diagrams aid in understanding the different technological processes of bladelet production (*grattoir* and burin origins).

Hays and Lucas present further research on Dufour bladelets, this time looking at their fragmentation, to draw inferences between the patterns observed and the possible hafting of these pieces, as well as their use. This research used the Dufour bladelets from the site of Le Flageolet as its sample.

The final section, *Interassemblage Variability Problems*, is led off by Cole’s study, which is a clearly explained research exercise introduced by a thorough revision of several shortcomings of the replacement hypothesis and the ‘facts’ that supposedly back it. He examines lithic technology and raw material use as observed in six Paleolithic (Mousterian, Chatelperronian and Aurignacian) assemblages from the sites of Caminade Est, Le Flageolet I, Le Moustier, and La-Côte. These show no great differences throughout the period of the transition. Cole acknowledges that his results do not prove the replacement scenario incorrect as a whole, and other results, such as the largest number of tools manufactured with local raw material during all periods, are not surprising either, but expected. Unfortunately, his basic premise that assemblages from before and after the transition should be different in every way is not thoroughly discussed. Why should they be? If they look different, to what degree are differences due to the typological systematics used to classify them? These issues need to be carefully considered before attempting this kind of study.

Rather than the dramatic changes expected by Cole, Miller and Straus note two phases of change in the lithic procurement strategies of Paleolithic populations in the area of modern Belgium, yet none of these changes take place during the transitional period. The first one is due to a variation in quality requirements during the Middle Paleolithic (between 130 to 100 kyr bp), when the use of allochthonous flint increases. The second is during the early Gravettian, when large open-air sites appear near areas with good flint sources. This is interpreted by the authors as a more sustained effort to obtain a larger amount of this raw material to be transported to cave sites. They also discuss Zilhão and d’Errico’s perspectives on Le Trou Magrite Stratum 3 and Zilhão and d’Errico’s conceptual ideas on the Aurignacian at the site, which Miller and Straus consider erroneous.

Thacker presents a regional analysis of the Aurignacian and Gravettian in Portugal and the differential patterns of site locations—concentrated in central Portugal during the Aurignacian and spread all over the country during the Gravettian—and their numbers as substantially larger during the Gravettian. These patterns do not seem to be due to research bias-related problems. This point is particularly relevant at the peninsular level because the Spanish Meseta is a clear example of the effects of such biases and the dilemmas to which they lead, for example, the Ebro Line hypothesis. It is unclear where exactly Thacker applies his ‘elastic scaling’ technique, and the cause for the differences between the two Upper Paleolithic periods is attributed to difficult environmental conditions that would have resulted from temporal proximity to the last Glacial Maximum.

Larsen Peterkin presents a detailed study of the weapon systems of the Aurignacian, Perigordian, and Solutrean periods in relation to the most abundant faunal remains in sites or layers of those periods. She shows the importance of relating these two types of data, especially when discussing the validity of the transitional tenet that focuses on the 'increased *tempo* of technological change during the Upper Paleolithic' (e.g. Mellars 1991). This is a well-documented study that includes a rich reference section, which adds to the value of the paper.

Appropriately following Larsen Peterkin's contribution, Grayson and Delpech's paper is a preliminary report of their analyses of the ungulate remains from Grotte XVI's Upper Paleolithic levels in relation to diet breadth, taking into account these remains' richness and evenness across the archaeological record. The authors address the difficulties and shortcomings of this type of study and draw comparisons to the faunal assemblages from Le Flageolet. No large changes are seen during the transition to the Upper Paleolithic, except a clear decrease of bear in cave sites, although a definitive opinion on this issue will have to wait until the study of the Mousterian remains is completed and integrated with the results of the research presented here.

Simek's discussion is the final contribution to the volume. In it, he warns against the oversimplification of results and perspectives on the transition, as well as the problems that must be acknowledged prior to attempting any research on this topic. He highlights the poor resolution of much of the archaeological record when studying events that occurred so long ago.

Overall, this volume offers a glimpse at the immensely varied approaches to the phenomenon of the Middle to Upper Paleolithic transition and the breadth of the issue. Research on this topic is some thirty years old at present, and although it is clear that there is a lot that remains to be done, the papers included here show that the study of the transition is as thriving and active as ever. Publications such as Hays and Thacker's edited volume are important contributions to researchers' understanding of the events that constitute the famous transitional episode, and should be welcomed by scholars interested in this field of research.