

To the West of Spanish Cantabria. The Palaeolithic Settlement of Galicia

Arturo de Lombera Hermida and Ramón Fábregas Valcarce (eds.)

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Compared with the rest of the Iberian Peninsula, Galicia (NW Iberia) has always been one of the most indigent regions regarding Paleolithic research, contrasting pronouncedly with the neighboring Cantabrian rim where a high number of very relevant Paleolithic key sequences are known and have been excavated for some time.

This discrepancy has been explained, over time, by the unfavorable geological conditions (e.g., highly acidic soils, little extension of karstic formations) of the Galician territory for the preservation of Paleolithic sites, and by the late institutionalization of the archaeological studies in the region, resulting in an unsystematic research history. This scenario seems, however, to have been dramatically changed in the course of the last decade. In fact, the development of new interdisciplinary projects in the region have not only consolidated the dispersed knowledge about the Paleolithic occupation of NW Iberia, but allowed, as well, a contradiction of the low expectations of regions like Galicia or the Portuguese Côa Valley, the latter a paradigmatic case of the importance that inland territories of Iberia must have had to Paleolithic communities.

To the West of Spanish Cantabria is a preliminary synthesis of the results obtained by some of the recent projects conducted in the inland oriental part of Galicia and, as written by the editors, it is not “intended to be a monograph on the Galician Paleolithic” (p. iii). This is the first point that, somehow, may disappoint the reader who had some expectations from the book subtitle (*The Paleolithic Settlement of Galicia*) which, from my critical point of view, turns out to be somewhat inaccurate and pretentious when compared to the content.

The book is structured in two different parts with six chapters each. While the first part intends to draw an evaluation of the state of the art of Quaternary studies in NW Iberia, the second is a synthesis of the results obtained, in the last couple of years, from archaeological studies in open-air and cave sites located in the easternmost territory of Galicia.

All papers are in English except for one (Chapter 2) which, despite having the title in English, is totally written in Spanish.

After a very elucidative foreword where the editors explain the goals and reasons behind the publication, Chapter 1, by Llana Rodríguez, opens the volume with a review of the history of Paleolithic research in Galicia from late 1800's to nowadays. The author travels through several moments of greater importance to the Galician Paleolithic

investigation, stressing the important role of investigators such as H. Obermaier and K. Butzer, and ending with a brief presentation of the projects that are currently taking place, their goals, and auspiciousness.

Chapter 2 is a contribution of Pérez Alberti that, from a geomorphological perspective, presents a very broad Upper Pleistocene paleoenvironmental evolution of Galicia. The first half of the paper is constructed almost like a methodological textbook that through the definition of several concepts and their applicability to the Galician landscape supports the interpretations outlined for the regional inland and coastal sedimentary sequences. As a conclusion, at least three stadial phases were identified in the deposits, related to the Heinrich events H3 (c. 30,000 BP) H2 (26,000 BP), and H1 (between 18,000 and 16,000 BP).

The third chapter is delivered by a group of researchers from the University of Coruña, headed by Aurora Grandal-d'Anglade. It presents a series of stable isotope, DNA, and morphological analysis made on faunal assemblages of cave bears from four Upper Pleistocene cave sites in Galicia. Although the title indicates that the focus will be on a paleoenvironmental approach, the paper ended up having much more a palaeobiogeographic emphasis. Climate changes are, thus, only referred to as possible causes for unexpected gene flow among bear populations from NW Iberia and Central Europe.

Chapter 4 is a short review of the studies of small vertebrate assemblages of three Upper Pleistocene and Holocene sites from Galicia. Rey-Salgado integrates the published data for the sites of A Valiña, Pala da Vella, and Valdavara 1 to conclude that a significant number of species appear to have evolved or migrated during the Upper Pleistocene in NW Iberia, and most of them are still present today in the region. Unfortunately, the data are only presented regarding the presence or absence of some species and a simple table with some percentages would have given the paper a different impact.

Keeping on the topic of faunal analysis, Chapter 5, by Fernández Rodríguez, presents a very solid summary of the zooarchaeological and paleontological research on the Upper Pleistocene and Early Holocene sites of Galicia. Although “the information for northwest Iberia is still very limited in comparison [...] with the available data for the Cantabrian Spain” (p. 49) the identified species are pretty much the same in those two regions. The author highlights that, for now, it is not possible to link human activities to the faunal assemblages because most of these may have

been the result of non-anthropogenic deposition.

The last Chapter (6) of the first part is perhaps the best fitted to the theme of a state of the art evaluation. Rodríguez compiled the available data for the first human occupations of the Iberian Peninsula integrating it in the European context. The author focuses not only on the evidences from Lower Pleistocene sites like Atapuerca and Barranco León 5, but also on the Early Middle Pleistocene sites of Cantabria and Galicia to address the question of rupture and continuity between the two phases. Although very broad in geographical terms, the paper tries to demonstrate the optimistic importance of Galicia to the comprehension of the first human settlement of Iberia.

The second part of the volume starts with a contribution by Fábregas Valcarce who makes an introduction to the current research programs on the Paleolithic settlement of inland Galicia. The main goals of the projects were to carry out extensive survey in the middle tract of the Miño river valley, specifically in the so-called Monforte basin, and to excavate a set of limestone caves located in the Eastern Galicia mountains. In the first region there are, presently, more than eighty identified sites, most of them attributable, by typological criteria, to the Acheulian, five to the Middle Paleolithic and only three to the Upper Paleolithic. As for the caves, a total of three sites were excavated (Cova do Xato, Valdavara, and Eirós), but a particular importance is given to Cova Eirós, where the identification of both Middle and Early Upper Paleolithic occupation levels makes this “the only site in NW Iberia where we can observe directly the differences in technology and subsistence strategies between *H. sapiens* and *H. neanderthalensis*” (p. 78).

Chapter 8 is an excellent contribution by Ameijenda-Iglesias who cross checks information on the geomorphology and on the technological patterns of the lithic assemblages from sites of the Monforte basin to establish a relative chronology for these deposits. A preliminary sequence of nine terraces is recognized, where Acheulian sites are consistently located in the 32.5–25 meter height terraces group and Middle Paleolithic locations in the 15 meters mark formations. This sequence is partially in agreement with other studies from the Lower Miño valley, with some inconsistencies found especially in the lower terraces series, most certainly due to tectonic phenomena and different formation processes for each course of the river.

The ninth chapter is a collective contribution, led by Lombera Hermida, on the Paleolithic settlement of the Monforte basin. The paper is organized in a rough chronological order, solely obtained by the techno-typological analysis of the lithic industries, using Clarke’s modes scheme. Mode 2 assemblages are the most common (25 sites) followed by Mode 3 (17) and Mode 4 (9). Unfortunately, although the techno-typology patterns of the assemblages are described throughout the text, summary tables are organized according to the Logical Analytical System, a method that some Spanish authors insist on using, but that due to its marginal nature, makes it difficult to integrate and compare with results from other sites and regions.

Also a contribution of Lombera Hermida, Chapter 10

deals with the archaeological research conducted in the limestone caves of the eastern margins of Galicia. The author presents first the historical context of investigation and then a synthesis of the works carried out in the sites of Cova de Valdavara, Cova de Xato, and Cova Eirós, with particular emphasis on the chronological data and site functionality. A table with the radiometric dates obtained for these and other sites is presented but unhappily with some faults, like the fact that there is no reference to what type of material was dated in each of the cases, and the use of both calibrated and uncalibrated dates in the same column. Site functionality interpretations are based mainly on the density of artifacts and no other factors, such as presence/absence of specific objects or activities, are presented, resulting, in my opinion, in what must be seen as a very provisional assignment of the function of these caves over time.

Chapter 11 deals with the results from the 2008–2010 excavations of Cova Eirós. Rodríguez Álvarez and colleagues present the preliminary results of both lithic and faunal analysis from each occupational level of the cave. Just one chart is presented with raw-material frequencies and, unfortunately, once again no tables with counts of lithics or fauna are given. Broadly, Cova Eirós has six archaeological levels with Middle and Upper Paleolithic assemblages. The most dense occupations are the Mousterian ones (Levels 3 and 4) with the dominant presence of Levallois and discoidal flaking strategies on good quality quartz and fine-grain quartzite. The Upper Paleolithic levels, on the other hand, are represented by initial and late stages of the technocomplex. A greater use of rock crystal and flint, the presence of bladelets, backed points and portable art in the later phase provide the arguments for the aforementioned division. Regarding the faunal assemblages, the major identified shift between the Middle and Upper Paleolithic occupations is a decrease of bear and carnivores over time, a pattern that the authors emphasize to be similar to the references known from Cantabrian Spain.

The volume closes with a contribution of Vaquero Rodríguez and colleagues who present the first results of the excavations carried in the sites of Cova de Valdavara and Valdavara 3. The former is a cave site with a well-dated archaeological sequence, starting in the final Upper Paleolithic and ending in the Bronze Age. The most preeminent artifacts from the Pleistocene levels are a set of *Dentalium vulgare* shells which, analogous to other sites in Iberia, must have been used as body adornments. Valdavara 3 was discovered as a consequence of quarry works that exposed a 16 meters thick infill of a vertical gallery, from where a small number of uncharacteristic lithic artifacts were recovered in association with a large assemblage of faunal remains highly marked by carnivore toothmarks.

Overall, *To the West of Spanish Cantabria* represents a turning point in the history of archaeological research in Iberia. Not because it integrates outstanding datasets or innovative interpretations on the Iberian Paleolithic, but mostly for the reason that it starts a very promising research avenue in what was considered, for a long time, a

“peripheral” region to mainstream Paleolithic archaeology. The embryonic state of the projects presented throughout the volume is well evident in the already mentioned content deficiencies and restricted depth of knowledge of some papers. In sum, the book might leave the reader with

a huge thirst for more data and results but with a hopeful feeling that the still existing gaps concerning the Paleolithic settlement of NW Iberia will be certainly filled in a very near future.