

Is it still appropriate to talk about the Gravettian? Data from lithic industries in Western Europe

Ist der Begriff des „Gravettien“ noch relevant? Kritische Anmerkungen anhand von Untersuchungen zu lithischen Inventaren aus Westeuropa

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ABSTRACT - There appears to be a general consensus as to the validity of naming all the complexes after the Aurignacian and preceding the Solutrean or the Epigravettian as "Gravettian". However, this term encompasses different assumptions and the definition of the Gravettian varies widely depending on the author, the region or the research theme. For those who study lithic industry, funerary traditions or feminine representations, the limits of the Gravettian are very different. In addition, these data sets all have their own distinct meaning, leading to different interpretations from a geographical or a chronological point of view. It is thus pertinent to question the appropriateness of the term Gravettian to group together all these different complexes. This paper elucidates the validity of this term through the study of lithic technical systems from complexes in Western Europe and particularly in France, where there is an abundance of sites and a widespread diversity. In the article, it is shown that the technical systems in complexes ascribed to the Gravettian are characterized by a marked diversity, and that it makes no sense to interpret this diversity as a representation of a variability within one and the same entity, the Gravettian. Instead, it appears more appropriate to discern features which associate these complexes with the Gravettian in order to gain a better understanding of the underlying historic dynamics. It is important to recall the artificial nature of this taxonomical framework, and thus to focus on defining the inferred correlations between these complexes. At present, apart from the occurrence of Gravettian points in most of the assemblages, no clear evolutionary processes have been demonstrated between the different elements attributed to the Gravettian.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG - Es besteht ein breiter Konsens darüber, Inventare als „Gravettien“ zu klassifizieren, die nach dem Aurignacien und vor dem Epigravettien oder Solutréen datieren. Die Kriterien für eine Einordnung als Gravettien variieren jedoch je nach Autor, Region und Forschungsthema. Je nachdem, ob Stein- oder Knochengewerke, die weiblichen Darstellungen oder der Grabbruch im Vordergrund der Untersuchungen stehen, variieren die geografischen und chronologischen Abgrenzungen gegen andere Industrien beträchtlich.

Insbesondere in Frankreich hat sich der Terminus des Gravettien spät durchgesetzt, weil die definierenden Elemente dort nur selten vorkommen. Stattdessen wurden eigene Bezeichnungen wie das Bayacien, Fontirobertien, Noaillien, Rayssien, Laugérien oder Protomagdalénien eingeführt. In dem vorliegenden Artikel werden die Ergebnisse von Untersuchungen an Steingeräteinventaren aus Westeuropa und speziell aus Frankreich vorgestellt, bei denen sich zeigt, dass sowohl die typologische Varianz als auch die Bandbreite der Techniken zur Herstellung der Steinwerkzeuge in der Tat sehr vielfältig sind. Diese Vielfalt übersteigt bei weitem solche, die innerhalb und zwischen den anderen Kulturkomplexen des Jungpaläolithikums akzeptiert werden. Im zweiten Teil des Artikels wird eine neue Seriation für Inventare aus Südwestfrankreich und dem Norden der Region Aquitaine vorgestellt. Es stellt sich heraus, dass selbst das Vorliegen von Gravettespitzen variabel ist. Im Übrigen ist die Gravettespitze eine Werkzeugklasse, die sich in mehrere Typen mit unterschiedlichen chronologischen Laufzeiten aufteilt. Weil die Typen nicht dieselben funktionellen Eigenschaften haben, ist die Gravettespitze, wie der Begriff des Gravettien, lediglich auf einem verhältnismäßig hohen Abstraktionsniveau relevant, das vor allem von den Essentialisten akzeptiert wird.

KEYWORDS - Upper Palaeolithic, material culture, technological studies, essentialism
Jungpaläolithikum, materielle Kultur, Steintechnologie, Essentialismus

Introduction

Given the diversity of the various technical features of the Gravettian, it is difficult to grasp a global

understanding of this period. Although certain rare elements are common to some of these sites, each complex remains inimitable. It is hazardous to merely take account of exceptional characteristics, which only

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concern a minority of the sites, given the mass of data available. The gaping breach between the rare common denominators and the overwhelming majority of data that tend to break away, disconnect and thus lead us to question this “Gravettian entity” is constant.

In different contexts, the relevance of this taxonomic classification has been called into question: for the Acheulean (Nicoud 2013), the Mousterian (Shea 2014), the Aurignacian (Clark & Riel-Salvatore 2006a; Goring-Morris & Belfer-Cohen 2006; Teyssandier & Loliolios 2008), the Gravettian (De la Peña Alonso 2009, 2012; Pesesse 2013), or at a less global level of classification for the Belloisian (Valentin 2008; Naudinot 2013 among others). The possibility of calling into question this taxonomic level is thus relatively independent of the chronological periods considered and the type of documentation. It is also part of different intellectual traditions, although the limits of these are not clear (Clark 2002). Some of them call into question preconceptions and the operability of classifications, whereas others question them in hindsight, as in the scope of this publication. Considering the vast quantity of available information, we will only broach this question through the prism of the lithic technical system. The interpretations of these objects highlight the diversity of the criteria used to designate the Gravettian, without having to include other categories of objects.

A historiographical heritage governed the attribution of sites to the Gravettian and the basis of these attributions is thus different depending on the region, the authors and the nature of the archaeological records (De la Peña Alonso 2012). The study of the evolution of lithic objects presents an opportunity to reassess the basis of these attributions. It is therefore reasonable to ask whether it is still appropriate to ascribe all of these assemblages to the Gravettian. In this paper, we question the validity of this term for addressing the evolution of lithic technical systems from complexes in Western Europe and particularly in France, where there are abundant sites and widespread diversity (Fig. 1). We present the marked diversity of technical systems in complexes ascribed to the Gravettian. It is important to recall the artificial nature of this taxonomical framework, and thus to focus on defining the inferred correlations between these complexes.

Indeed, studies of the Gravettian have systematically been faced with the same problem as significant differences between the assemblages were recognized very early on. How was it possible to assess and explain this diversity? Replies to this question have varied widely. One of the responses to this problem is the Perigordian model (Peyrony 1933, 1936, 1946). Generally speaking, in different European regions, assemblages were ascribed to the Gravettian because

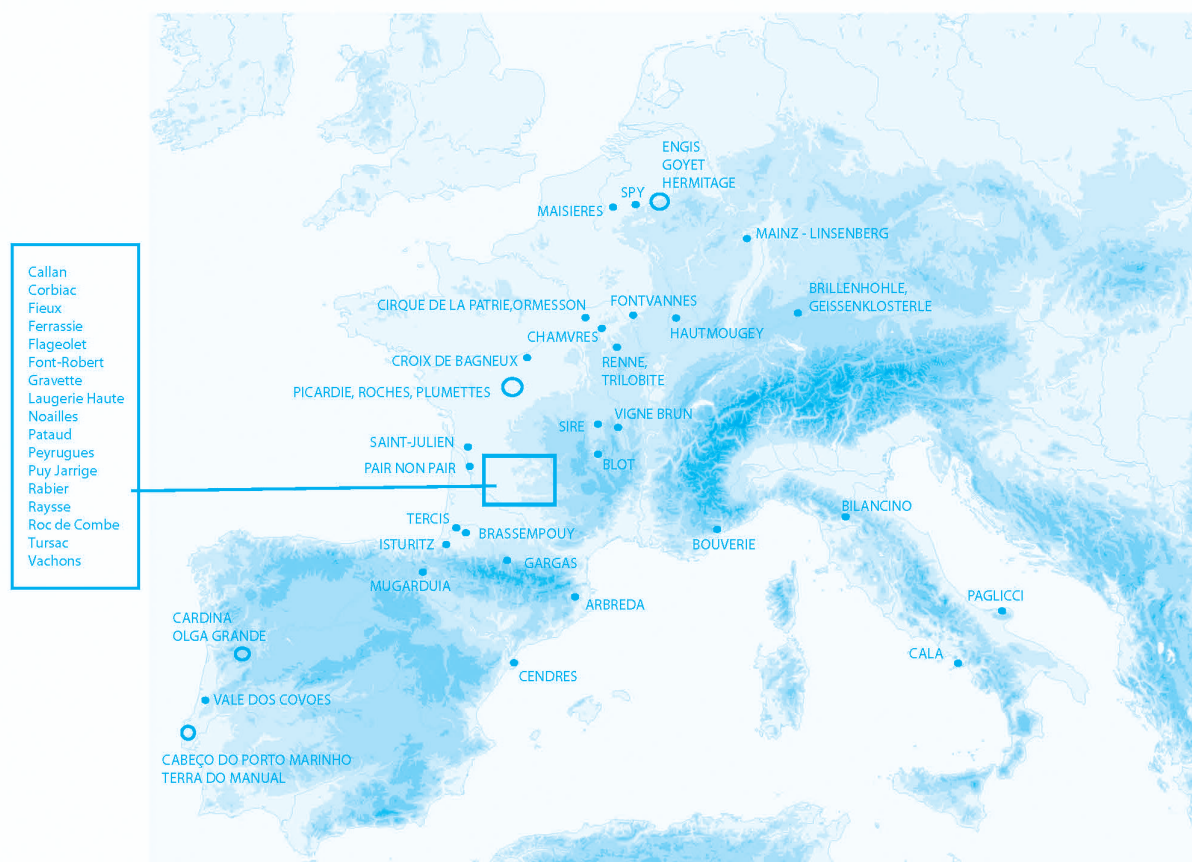


Fig. 1. Sites mentioned.

Abb. 1. Im Text erwähnte Fundplätze.