

Terra Amata

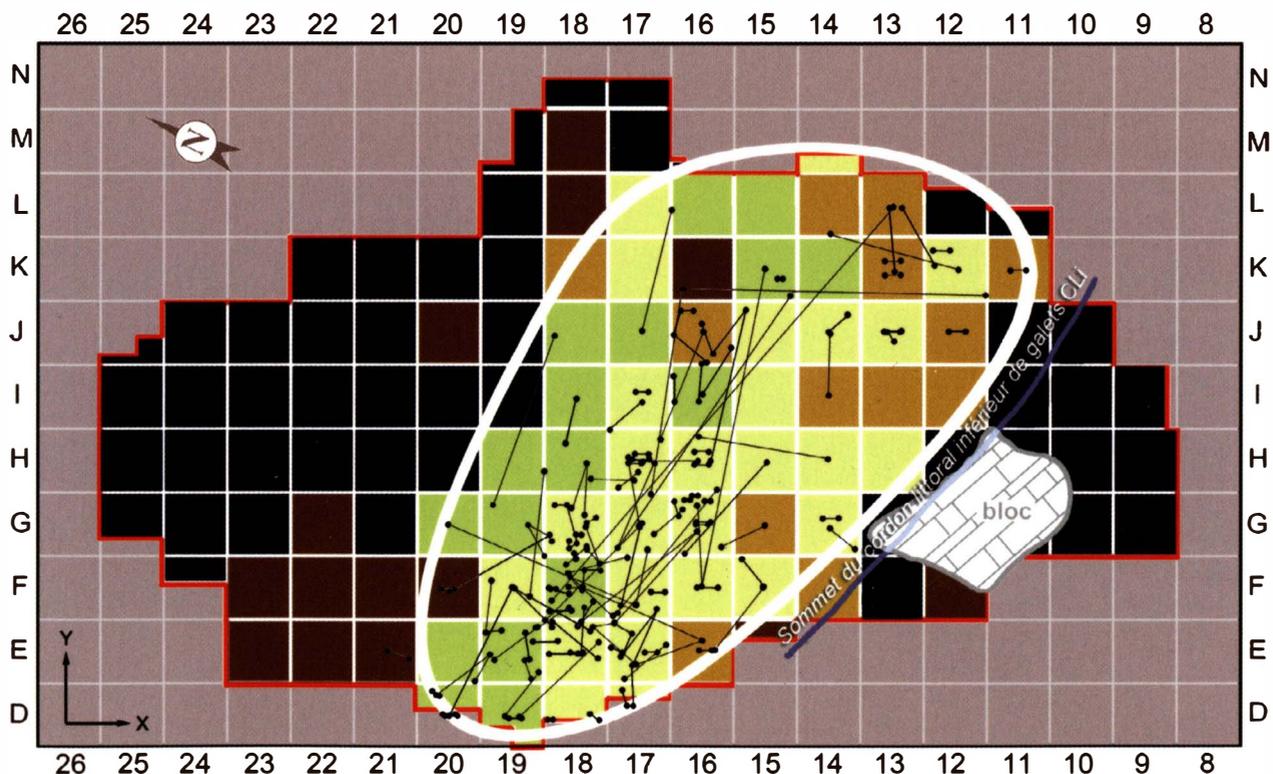
Nice, Alpes-Maritimes, France

TOME III

Individualisation des unités archéostratigraphiques et
description des sols d'occupation acheuléens

NRS EDITIONS

Sous la direction de Henry de Lumley



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Appendice II

TERRA AMATA: ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH INTO THE ROOTS OF CULTURAL CONVENTION

par
Jürgen RICHTER^a

Terra Amata is one of the most important Middle Pleistocene sites in Europe documenting the behavioral and cultural remnants and the natural context at the time of *Homo erectus* or late *Homo heidelbergensis*. Prehistoric humans repeatedly occupied the site around 400,000 - 380,000 years ago. In layer DA4, they even left their footprint behind!

At this time, one of the most prominent interglacials of the ice age came to an end which has been correlated to marine isotope stages 11 to early stage 10. The MIS 11 (namely the MIS 11c) climatic phase has recently been identified as the last one of two so-called "Super Interglacials" (MIS 31 and MIS 11c) with average temperatures never reached again (Melles *et al.* 2012). It is well possible that the extraordinarily favorable climate of the time caused human populations to grow and to reach a new demographic level connected with expanding habitats. Terra Amata must have offered particularly attractive conditions for prehistoric humans who re-occupied the site no less than 26 times!

Construction work having endangered the site, a 1966 rescue excavation (see vol. I, 30 - 33) produced a wealth of information now scientifically exploited and analyzed for more than five decades. For the time, the Terra Amata rescue excavation was leading in terms of modernity of documentation and conservation techniques and, necessarily, in terms of professional planning the excavation works which had to be completed in only 159 days! In fact the documentation methods were so precise that they were apt to satisfy all later analytical demands. Thus, the archaeological sequence could now be tested by data processing and computerized spatial and stratigraphic analysis constituting one essential part of the present volume.

The first part of the volume contains chapter 23 which is devoted to the problem of separation of the stratigraphic units. The chapter displays artefact distributions vertically mapped and the results of refitting of stone artefacts in terms of stratigraphic units. The whole methodological approach meets the

postulate of J.Hahn (Hahn 1988, 48-59 and 82-84) who proposed to treat lithological stratigraphy of sediments (GH, i.e. Geological Horizon) separately from the archaeological stratigraphy (AH, i.e. Archaeological Horizon) the latter to be proven by strictly independent methodology. This has been fully achieved here and can serve as a future model for a large number of sites still waiting for to be stratigraphically tested or re-evaluated.

Mappings and refittings of artefacts at Terra Amata show clearly that redeposition and postsedimentary disturbances played only a minor role in the site formation process. The velocity of the sedimentation on the one hand and the intensity of human occupation on the other hand caused a high stratigraphic resolution at the site. The density of artefact distribution reflects the intensity of human activity and the number of active humans on a given occupation surface. Of course, it is important to estimate how long the surface was exposed before the next sedimentation phase covered the anthropogenic remnants. A number of surfaces has delivered only small artefact scatters, thus indicating extremely short occupation or very rapid sedimentation. Others display larger artefact scatters, and the palimpsest character of some of the occupational surfaces has been proven by the authors. This will certainly play a role when the archaeological interpretation is to be presented in the next couple of volumes. The dense artefact scatters on some of the site's surfaces had repeatedly been discussed as the remnants of artificial shelters or huts, and this hypothesis has now gained new relevance and deserves further testing, against the background of the positive result of the stratigraphic analysis.

Chapter 24 delivers the data relevant for detection of possible settlement structures. Every single occupation surface is presented here with its specific artefact distribution and with a map of refitted artefacts. It is particularly interesting to compare artefact distributions before, during and after the period of marine transgression and to see the artefact scatters in

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relation to the fireplaces. The technological and typological features connected with these distributions will become visible when volume IV will have been published.

Browsing the weighty volume we see a movie playing that tells us a story in 26 episodes. People come and go having successfully hunted elephant or deer, occasionally thar, aurochs, boar and rhino. Some activities like fire making were carried out only occasionally, and other activities were more frequently repeated. “It is time to reveal humans as the beings who result from repetition” (Sloterdijk 2013, 4). The long sequence of occupations is unique in providing abundant information about behavioral repetition in Middle Pleistocene human groups. The long sequence uncovered at the Terra Amata site promises deep insights about the roots of cultural convention.

Références bibliographiques :

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