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II. Discourse on the History of Archaeology

L'Abbé Henri Breuil: Archaeologist

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In his otherwise excellent book, *A History of Archaeological Thought*, Trigger (1989:156) makes only one passing reference in a half-sentence to the central figure in the development of Paleolithic prehistory in the first half of the 20th century -- and manages to get his name wrong, confusing Henri Breuil with his long-time, close colleague, Hugo Obermaier. Thirty years after his death, Breuil's role in the history of Old World prehistory required more serious consideration. He was a seminal figure not only in rock art studies, but also in the archaeology of at least France, Spain, England, Portugal, South Africa, and China. Before I had read Trigger's work or Sackett's (1991) critique of my supposed misinterpretation of Breuil's theoretical stance (e.g., Straus 1986, 1987), I had presented a review of Breuil's contributions in the 1991 Annual Snead-Wertheim Lecture in Anthropology and History at the University of New Mexico (Straus n.d.). The following is a brief summary of some of my conclusions.

My main thesis is that Breuil, while fundamentally concerned with establishing prehistoric sequence in both Paleolithic archaeology and cave art, was, in terms of explanation, a theoretical eclectic. Born in 1877 and died in 1961 (see obituary by Vaufrey (1962); biography by Brodrick (1963), Breuil knew and was influenced by 19th century founders of prehistory in France (G.d'Ault de Mesnil, E. Piette, G. de Mortillet, E. Cartailhac) and lived to see (yet essentially ignore) early application of radiocarbon dating to the Upper Paleolithic. Breuil's vast corpus of writings of accumulated ideas derived from unilineal evolutionism and degenerationism; the theories of invasion and diffusion, but also convergence; hunting magic, shamanistic, religious and psychological explanations for Stone Age art (Breuil 1912 [1937], 1925, 1926, 1952, 1954; Breuil and Obermaier 1935; Breuil and Lantier 1959; Alcalde de Río, Breuil and Sierra 1912; Bégouën and Breuil 1958). Breuil rarely discarded a theory, but he did add to his stock of accommodative notions over the course of his long career.

Breuil made liberal, uncritical, *ad hoc* use of ethnographic analogies, based on the underlying notion of "cultural survivals" (Eskimos and Australian aborigines were favorites), and his interpretations of both prehistoric technology and art were guided by a firm belief in the doctrine of cultural progress. While believing in and being fundamentally concerned with documenting *in situ* cultural (i.e. artistic and technological) developments within individual cultural "traditions" (e.g., Levalloisian, Mousterian, Aurignacian, Solutrean, Magdalenian), after World War I (during which Breuil was a agent of French Naval Intelligence in Spain (Brodrick 1963:86-7), he became increasingly impressed with the idea that Western Europe in particular had suffered wave after wave of "influences" or even "invasions" from the East. These, he thought, could explain the supposedly major intercultural shifts in prehistory, such as the "appearance" of Solutrean foliate points (an idea bolstered by his tour of sites and museums throughout Central Europe [Breuil 1923, 1924]).

What is clear about Breuil is that he was not himself a theoretician. In fact, he rarely cited others who were, although it is apparent that in cave art studies he relied heavily on the theories of S. Reinach and G. Luquet, while the ideas of non-Darwinian evolutionism (see Dunnell 1980), degenerationism, "invasionism" and convergence in archaeology were simply common and unquestioned throughout the discipline. However, Breuil's dogmatic, authoritarian personality and his undisputed position in the field (established at a very early age and reinforced by the hierarchical nature of the French academic establishment, where he reigned as a founding Professor of the Institut de Paléontologie Humaine from 1910, Professor in the Collège de France from 1929, and Member of the Institut de France from 1938) meant that whatever theoretical positions he adopted, he made his own and professed as doctrinal ~~true~~ (Ucko and Rosenfeld 1967:129).

Breuil's overriding concern with relative chronology is completely understandable in the context of his times and the state of prehistory at the dawn of his career in 1900. What I and others have called the "phylogenetic paradigm" arose from the natural tendency to equate stratigraphic and temporal sequence with succession, either based on the "logical", assumed progress of technology and the other human arts or on the periodic arrival of new influences or of new peoples on the West European scene. Lacking chronometric dating methods for either archaeology or rock art, Breuil was obliged to make use not only of stratigraphic relationships within individual sites, but also (more tenuously) cross-dating among sites on the basis of perceived technical or stylistic similarities in artifacts and images. While his use of stratigraphy was fundamentally sound (at least in theory), indisputable cases of complete terrace or rockshelter sequences or of archaeological deposits overlying works of art were scarce, especially in Breuil's day: hence his need to rely on assumptions based on the notion of progress. Breuil's underlying viewpoint in assessing the relative age of artifacts or art was the same: simple and "crude" = older; elaborate and more perfect = younger. He applied canons of aesthetics in both of his realms of research, tempered only by occasional recourse to the idea of cultural degeneration (e.g., to "explain" the Asturian [Breuil 1954]).

Tools are seen as evolving, as they are placed in temporal sequence (Breuil 1912: figures). People are generally seen as simply the makers of those all-important tools or as their "carriers". In fairness, however, it should be noted that Breuil (1954; Breuil and Lantier 1959) was aware of the roles of lithic raw material variability and of technological convergence on the production of tools. Any pretence of "paleoethnographic" description or functional explication in Breuil's *oeuvre* relied simply on the *ex cathedra* postulation of ethnographic analogies or "common-sense" interpretations. Breuil's basic concern,

however, was to document and try to "explain" the origins and development of cultural traditions, including their artistic manifestations.

The equation of tools with peoples, pervasive in Breuil's writings, is most clear in the development of his notion of parallel Lower Paleolithic phyla (e.g. Breuil 1932; Breuil and Kelley 1954), as well as in his frequent references to Solutrean and Magdalenian "tribes" and their movements (e.g., Breuil 1912 [1937]; Breuil and Lantier 1959). The association of different "litho-cultures" with different "races" of hominids is frequently alluded to in the works of Breuil (and his contemporaries such as Obermaier [e.g., 1924]). Such putative associations are often sufficient as "explanations" for the archaeological record of technological variability. The ultimate goal is the historiography of fictive peoples: de Mortillet's cultures reified.

One final observation about Breuil concerns the fact that by age thirty he had destroyed and displaced the reigning chronological subdivision scheme of the Upper Paleolithic (and with it the reputations of its inventor [G. de Mortillet], his son and numerous followers). In the famous "Aurignacian Battle" (see Smith 1966; Delporte 1989; Rigaud 1989) Breuil relied on the systematic comparison of a few correct stratigraphies (and on demonstration of the falsification of others by Mortillet supporters) to establish the normative cultural sequence for the period between 35-10,000 BP, that is still essentially in use today in Western Europe. In a series of tightly argued articles (Breuil 1905, 1906, 1907, 1909), he mustered what for the time were quite solid facts to place it between the Mousterian and the Solutrean. With his work, codified in his synthetic 1912 tour de force, Breuil laid the foundation for the modern French school of prehistoric research based on comparative stratigraphy and typology: the tradition perfected by F. Bordes and De. de Sonneville-Bordes. Once Breuil had established his *modus operandi* and fundamental conclusions, they were not to change substantially for the rest of his long career; they even now indelibly influence Paleolithic prehistory. Yet they had been fruits of the late 19th century.

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