
Left behind or venerated ancestors ? New data on the mortuary practices of the last hunter-gatherers in Belgium

Clémence Glas^{*1,2,3}, Caroline Polet^{†4}, and Nicolas Cauwe^{‡5}

¹Institut d'Art et d'Archéologie – Université Paris 1 - Panthéon-Sorbonne – 3 rue Michelet, 75006, Paris, France

²UMR 7041, ArScAn, équipe Ethnologie préhistorique – Maison René Ginouvès – France

³Cedarc - Musée du Malgré-Tout – 28 rue de la gare, 5670 Viroinval, Belgique

⁴Institut royal des Sciences naturelles de Belgique – 29 rue Vautier, 1000 Bruxelles, Belgique

⁵Musées royaux d'Art et d'Histoire (MRAH) – 10, parc du Cinquantenaire, Belgique

Résumé

Until recently, the mortuary practices of the last hunter-gatherers in Belgium have been mostly described as successive deposits of fresh human cadavers in sepulchral caves. These bodies, dated to the Early Mesolithic, were then only disturbed by taphonomic processes. The scattered human remains discovered in the Autours rock-shelter (Province of Namur, Belgium) allow questioning this apparent homogeneity.

The site, excavated in 1992-1993, delivered two deposits of human remains dating from the Early Mesolithic: on the one hand, an assemblage of several hundreds of disconnected-dispersed bones of several adults and children (AA2; 9090 +/- 140 BP, OxA-5838) and on the other hand, an individual burial (AA3; 9500 +/- 75 BP, OxA-4917). Early anthropological studies demonstrated that AA2 was a collective burial recovering the remains of at least six juveniles and six adults (one of whom was cremated), while AA3 was an individual primary burial of an elderly female. However, the constant renewal of knowledge of Mesolithic mortuary practices through an increasing number of discoveries now makes it possible to question some of these interpretations. A recent revival of the Autours rock-shelter collection has been realized. In addition to the "classical" archaeo-anthropological analyses (calculation of MNI, estimation of age at death and sex determination), less common protocols such as the study of the fragmentation of long bones, the analysis of the osseous surface modifications and an examination of the spatial distribution of the remains in order to determine the form of the initial deposit have been made. The results demonstrated that the human remains of AA2 would rather be the residual bones left after a selection which occurred after the decomposition of fresh human cadavers successively or simultaneously deposited in the cave, and combined with a particular deposit of cremated human remains. These manipulations happened several hundreds years after the deposit in the primary burial (AA3) of the elderly female suffering from hyperparathyroidism and partially covered by ocher.

The mortuary practices implemented at the Autours rock-shelter thus correspond to a complex mortuary "chaîne opératoire" still unheard in Belgium and place the site in the continuity of the huge diversity of Mesolithic mortuary practices in Europe.

*Intervenant

†Auteur correspondant: cpolet@naturalsciences.be

‡Auteur correspondant: n.cauwe@kmg-mrah.be

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