

Archeology in the Fontainebleau Forest

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If you examine closely an archeological map showing all artifacts remaining from the ancient times in the South of the Seine-et-Marne department, you will see an « archeological hole » in the Fontainebleau Forest area.

The dryness of the soil and the overall lack of water were in fact responsible for the very poor settlement rates of prehistorian and later humans in that area. Actually the late king Saint Louis (Louis the 9th), when speaking about this wood, said « my dear deserts ». Only some places nearby the Seine river, the Loing river and the water sources of the Ru de Changis were inhabited. About the small hunting pavilion situated nearby the Fountain Belle Eau (or Belleau or Bliaud ?) we know nothing but that it was one of the ancient sites of settlement ; and that it gave birth to the future castle and later palace with the town around.

However, the people dwelling around frequently traveled through this area ; they left us many objects and traces on the stones proving their presence and showing that the forest (which was then called « Sylva Biera », i.e. « wood of Bière ») was not devoid of humans.

PALEOLITHIC ERA (before 10,000 B.C.)

Silex fragments and cut stones typical of the mousterian age with traces of cutting of the « Levallois » type have been found during a pedologic search in 1974 near the big cross of the Grand Veneur. Another fragment of the same type has been found at the Long Rocher site (figure 1). Those two artifacts are dated from the middle Paleolithic, i.e. more than 40,000 years B.C.



Figure 1 Silex stone fragment from the Long Rocher, typical of the « Levallois » cutting technique, mousterian age, 40,000 yrs B.C. – Museum of Prehistory, Nemours, 77 (MPN)

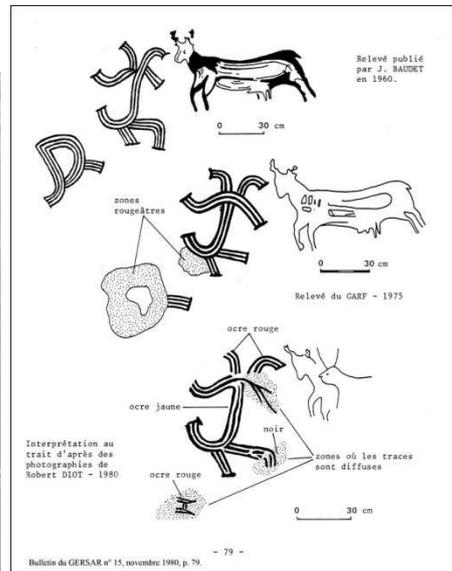
Other founded artifacts give evidence of the paleolithic human presence in the Forest : a rubbing site on a sandstone at the Cassepot site, a big piercing site on a stone found at the Parc aux Bœufs, another rubbing stone with a denticulated and a silex blade fragment found at the Marion des Roches site, and some other fragments of silex cutting found by friends. Thus, prehistoric man was in fact wandering and working in the Forest , even if he did not dwelled in.

Two other sites have been discovered near Montigny-sur-Loing, thus near water ; they were dated from the superior Paleolithic period (35,000 to 10,000 years B.C.) : the Croc Marin cave and the Long Rocher site.

The vast cave of Croc Marin has been known since a long time but was searched for ancient artifacts in the XIX° century by Thomas de Marencourt. This gave abundant amounts of items from various eras, but it was sadly dispersed and it is now almost totally lost. The rare fragments we can study now are probably to be dated from the Magdalenian period. This cave has been largely destroyed by the quarrymen at the end of the XIX° century ; this left only a part of the surplombing sandstone where paintings are to be seen : some digital tracings and a cervid drawing. Those have been much blackened by the biwak fires of campers. Those paintings are of the same age as those of Lascaux, and are the sole known to exist in the whole Ile-de-France region.



Figures 2 and 3 : Grotte du Croc Marin. Left, postcard from the beginning of the XX^e century. The state of the cave is comparable today. Right, fragments of silex cut to form blades and rubbing tools ; and a tool made with animal bone (coll. MPN).



Figures 4 and 5 : Grotte du Croc Marin. Left, state of the paintings in 1980 showing digital tracings and horns of the deer-like animals ; also the anterior legs and the back. Right, hand drawings of the paintings in 1960, 1975 and 1980

A second magdalenian site has been found at the Long Rocher site in 1870 by E. Doigneau and C. Durand. They searched it thoroughly and found essentially silex blades (fig. 6). This site was difficult to search because of fire remains. Among the 400 to 500 silex stones found there, neither silex waste fragments nor percutors were found. Only rare nucleus were found. Thus, it is assumed that the silex stones did not have been cut on this site, but brought there and thrown, perhaps as gifts or offers. In this site too, the archeological material was sadly dispersed in various collections.



Figure 6 : Different silex blades found at the Godet du Long Rocher ; some are retouched (coll. MPN)

So, the Magdalenian hunters, when they joined the Seine river camps, were probably hunting through the Fontainebleau Forest and camped temporarily in the South of this forest. Their season camping sites, discovered and thoroughly searched at the Pincevent site (10 km more East) since 1964, show evidence that they hunted reindeers migrating there.

Last, a fine graving dated from the superior Paleolithic era has been discovered in 1980 in the Trois Pignons area by a member of the GERSAR. It shows a particularly well-drawn horse (figure 7). The fragility and the rareness of that graving, which is unique in the whole Ile-de-France region forbids us to localize it precisely. It is reminiscent of the Lascaux drawings.

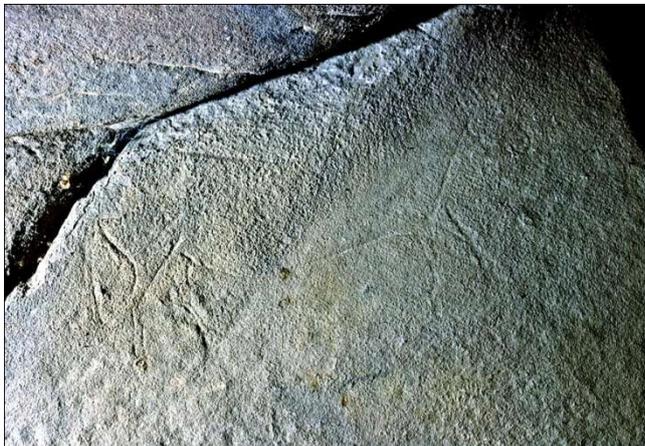


Figure 7 : Trois Pignons area, fine naturalistic picture of a horse (engraving in sandstone)

MESOLITHIC ERA (10,000 to 4,000 B.C.)

The last hunters-gatherers of the Mesolithic era (which were to be later replaced by agricultural cattle-tenders at the Neolithic era) hunted cervid animals, rabbits, birds, and fished. Indeed the glaciation had ended, thus the reindeers had disappeared. For hunting, they produced small tools in silex which they fitted at the extremities of arrows or harpoons. These small sharp tools were called microliths. Some microlith sites have been found in the South of the Seine-et-Marne department (Buthiers, Larchant, Nemours, Sceaux-en-Gâtinais) , but also in the Fontainebleau Forest (Croc-Marin cave, Long Rocher, and above all the Point de Vue of the Camp de Chailly).

The microliths are often found in or near cavities digged in sandstone and showing engraving(Figures 8 and 9). Some of the sandstone rocks around the Camp de Chailly show such structures. This proximity makes us to think that some of those engravings could be of the same age, i.e. 6,000 to 10,000 years B.C. This has been proved in a search at the Painting Cave near Larchant, where such an engraved block was found in a closed mesolithic environment. Those engravings show characteristically parallel or converging grooves, and sometimes schematic cervid animals.

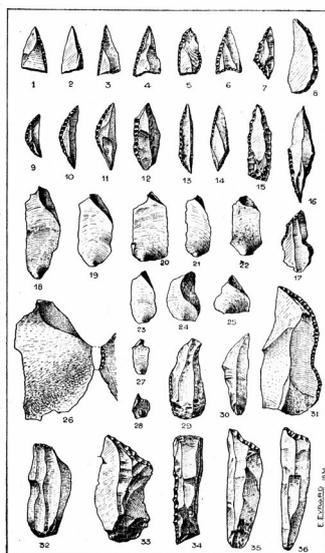


Figure 8 (left) : Point de vue du Camp de Chailly, microliths, micropiercers, and rubbing tools (BSPF 1934). Figure 9 (right) : Poit de vue du Camp de Chailly, engravings

However, it has to be said that the number of engraved caves in the South of the Ile-de-France region amounts more than 1100 from Nemours to Rambouillet. Among them, 67 are located in the domanial Fontainebleau Forest, around 100 in the Trois Pignons domanial Forest, and 105 in the domanial Forest of the Commaderie around the town of Larchant. Each age period following the former has left traces i.e. drawings and engravings of different nature ; generally schematic, symbolic ; then alphabetic after the XVIII° century. This tends to obscure the interpretation and datation of the old ones. See for example the figures 10 and 11.



Figure 10 (left) : Roche aux Sabots, grids and grooves Figure 11 (right) : Rocher de Cornebiche, deep parallel grooves and a round one (rouelle = small wheel)

We can cite in the domanial Forest of Fontainebleau many engraved caves : Mont Aiveu, Béorlots, Touche aux Mulets, Rocher de Milly, Franchard, Mont Ussy,. In the domanial Forest of the Trois Pignons, the main are at the Roche aux Sabots, Grande Montagne, Cul de Chien, Ségognole and Mont Pivot. In the Larchant area, we can cite Roche au Diable, Roches de la Justice, Dame Jouanne and Maunoury.

MONTMORENCIAN ERA (6,000 to 4,000 B.C.)

Archeologists have been puzzled by the discovery of tools made of very hard sandstone in some areas of Ile-de-France region, notably near Montmorency. Those tools are coarse, often prismatic and longs, never polished. They could have been used for bark cleaning or wood rubbing. One such item has been found in La Vignette, in the South of the Fontainebleau Forest. It has not been possible to link it with a precise civilization. It is supposed that it could be dated around the end of the Mesolithic or the beginning of the Neolithic era (figure 12).



Figure 12 : La Vignette, prismatic long tools of unknown identification (coll. MPN)

NEOLITHIC ERA (4,000 to 1800 B.C.)

The first agricultural men tended their cattle on the rich nearby plateaux and used the water of the rivers around the Forest but they went sometimes in the Forest. We have evidence of it by some founds such as lithic material : polished axe fragments for example. See in figure 13 the talus of a small axe found near Fontainebleau. Figure 14 shows a polishing stone.



Figure 13 (left) : Les Huit Routes, Fontainebleau Forest, Silex stone belonging to a small axe. Figure 14 (right) : Bois de la Claie, polishing sandstone



Figure 15 : Trois Pignons, engravings of a Mother Goddess

BRONZE AGE (1800 to 1000 B.C.)

Bronze artifacts have been found in the Fontainebleau Forest : R. Lhoste discovered an arrowhead in bronze near the Solle horserace course, with very elaborated silex arrowheads, evocating the transition age where the bronze had not replaced completely the silex. It is a good evidence that man hunted in the Forest at that time.

At the Marion des Roches, near the Loing River, A. Vallot discovered in the late XIX^e century some knife blades and furniture items of bronze associated with pottery fragments with excised sculpted motives on them characteristic of the Haguenau style (Haguenau is a small town in Alsace). This was found in the remains of a dwelling equipped with sandstone paving and has been dated from the middle of the Bronze Age, i.e. about 1400 years B.C. (figures 16 and 17). They can be seen in the Museum of Nemours.

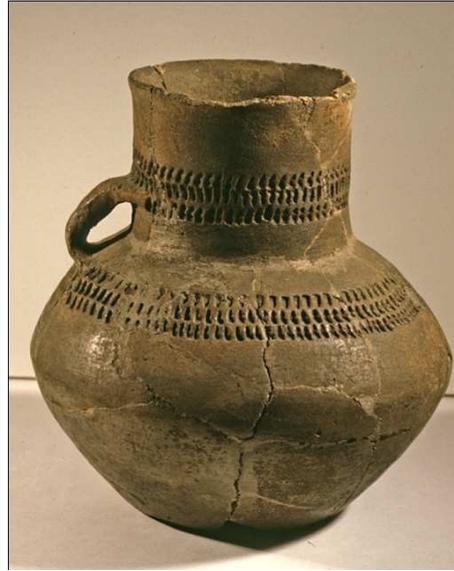


Figure 16 (left) : Marion des Roches, knife blades, axe, brace and big spindle of bronze (coll MPN) Figure 17 (right) : Marion des Roches, pottery incised with a characteristic Haguenau- type pattern (coll. MPN)

The Bronze Age is also characterized by special engravings in the caves, with symbols like the star and the rouelle (a wheel-like round groove), probably linked with solar cults. Some spear-like motives found in the Ochidées cave (figure 18) at the touche aux Mulets site could be dated from the same age.



Figure 18 : Orchidées Cave, Touche aux Mulets site, spear-like engravings form the Bronze Age

STEEL AGE (1000 to 50 B.C.)

Due to the poor conservation of steel artifacts, very few remains of the ages of Halstatt (Celtic) and La Tène (Gallic) have been found in the Fontainebleau Forest. Only one cave in the Gorges d' Apremont site, spotted in 1963 by J. Maillet, contained some gallo-roman pottery fragments, numerous pottery fragments from the La Tène age together with chestnuts shells and burned oak seeds,. This gives precious indications about the eating habits at that time. Deeper, some pottery fragments were probably from the Halstatt age.

In some sandstone caves, the engravings are probably from the Gallic age, since they contain symbolic motives resembling those of the money coins of that age (see figures 19 and 20).



Figure 19 : Dame Jouanne cave near Larchant, engraving showing a lozange with diagonals. Figure 20 : Gallic money coin showing a similar lozange with diagonals (in Marie Koenig)

GALLO-ROMANS (50 B.C. to 600)

One site near the great Croix du Grand Veneur has been discovered and searched in 1940 by P. Doignon and his friends. They called it the Menpehous site. It was a rectangular stone structure remaining from a house. They found there only a bit of a door and some money coins whose pattern was characteristic of the Neerva and Caraculla ages. This house should have been built near an important road at the gallo-roman age.

Another well-known site, the Bois Gauthier on a hill over the Seine river was searched by the Groupe Archéologique de la Région de Fontainebleau between 1961 and 1978. This very rich site whose remains can be seen today included some houses and a temple. Numerous engraved ceramic fragments, some items and alimentary remains were found there (figures 21, 22, 23). But the main discovery there was that of the paintings remains (fresques) running on the walls of the temple. Other remains of that age include some money coins found at the Forts de Marlotte (figure 24)



Figure 21 (left): Le Bois Gauthier, fragment of an engraved pottery. (coll. MPN) Figure 22 (middle) : Le Bois Gauthier, fibule elements. (coll. MPN) Figure 23 (right) : Le Bois Gauthier, vase (coll. MPN)



Figure 24 : Les Forts de Marlotte, roman money coin found in the Forest (coll. C. Peccoud)

MIDDLE AGE (600 to 1500)

The Fontainebleau Forest was devoid of inhabitants except some ermits whose remains have disappeared, until the XII^e century ; then were erected some buildings for ermits. Among them the most popular was Franchard, near a fountain with bad water in the middle of the Forest. It was a small covent with strong walls including a chapel dedicated to Notre-Dame (the Virgin Mary), some buildings and perhaps a cloyster. Destroyed during the XIV^e it was rebuilt during the XV^e century. The only remains today are a part of the chapel, with a huge wall with big pillars maintaining it (figure 25).



Figure 25 : Franchard, remains of the ermitage chapel (walls West and South)

Another remain lies on top of the Saint-Louis hill near Bois-le-Roi. There is a cave and some walls in opus spicatum (figure 26) remaining from an ermitage donated by Louis IX after a problem in a hunt. Being lost alone in the Forest, the king went there and arriving on top he blew his horn to call his hunting servants. Instead of them the legend says that a troop of robbers came and endangered the king which was at the last moment rescued by his co-hunters



Figure 26, Butte Saint-Louis : entering the cave of the ermitage

Some areas in the trois Pignons or in the Coquibus exhibit stone structures forming nets suggesting walls or enclosures. Attributed by some people to prehistoric people, they have been recently been redated as medieval and characteristic of cattle or vineyard enclosures. There

people have frequently recovered pottery fragments remaining probably from the trying of vine agriculture. On the poor sand and stone soil it was difficult and some bettering of the soil was attempted by bringing there litter from the cattle.



Figure 27 (left) : Vallon des Ancêtres (Coquibus), remains of an enclosure Figure 28 (right) : Vallon des Ancêtres (Coquibus) , pottery
CONTEMPORARY AGE (1550 to 2018)

The Forest went through numerous mutations : it was a royal hunting domain since the medieval age, so it was planted with oaks and delineated by a line of milestones. Wood roads were traced including the Route Ronde, and the development of the hunt by rifles led to the building of enclosed « parquets » with wells and walls.

When the people learned to write, the engravings on the caves and stones became less figurative and numerous inscriptions became dated. Those are rarely older than the XVIII^e century. Quarrymen builded houses and left huge amounts of sandstone remains (écales) around the quarries.

The XIX^e century was the beginning of the tourism, and then came the car and the train which have brought in the Forest huge amounts of people including graffiti-makers or event sculptors (figure 29).



Figure 29 : Rocher Fourceau, contemporary sculpture