The Abbé Henri Breuil and Prehistoric Archaeology

BY PHILIP E. L. SMITH

It would not be wholly accurate to suggest that the death of the Abbé Henri Breuil on August 14, 1961 in his 85th year marks the end of an era in prehistoric studies; Breuil's contributions were so important, even in his last years, that his influence will continue far into the future. But the atmosphere will not be the same with the removal of this towering and colourful figure who dominated his field for well over fifty years. More than any other individual of this century, he made French (and to a great extent, European and African) Palaeolithic archaeology what it has become today. At his death a Parisian journal referred to him as the "père spirituel de la préhistoire", and few of his colleagues would disagree with this description though many would elevate him much further in the scientific hierarchy to Primate rank. He was almost the last of that generation of French scholars which included such men as Marcellin Boule, Emile Cartailhac, Denis Peyrony, Joseph Déchelette, Victor Commont and the Bouyssonie brothers, who in the years between the beginning of this century and the outbreak of World War I created in France what was truly a *belle époque* in the field of prehistory and especially of Palaeolithic archaeology.

Henri-Edouard-Prosper Breuil was born in 1877 in the *département* of Manche, the son of a magistrate, and was educated at Senlis and later at the Grand Séminaire d'Issy-les-Moulineaux where his interest in prehistoric archaeology was excited by one of his science teachers, the Abbé Jean Guibert. He was ordained to the priesthood in 1900 but never held a parochial appointment; his abilities were recognized early by his superiors and he was given permission to devote himself exclusively to the new science of prehistory. He repeatedly declined elevations in the Church hierarchy, but wore clerical costume on most occasions when it

was feasible. His first professional position was as Privat-Docent (later *Professeur extraordinaire*) of prehistory and ethnography at the University of Fribourg in Switzerland, from 1905 to 1910. In the latter year the famous Institut de Paléontologie Humaine was set up in Paris by Prince Albert I of Monaco, and Breuil began his long association with it as Professor of Prehistoric Ethnography. The years before the Great War of 1914 were spent mainly in Spain studying cave art, and during the War he served there in the French Intelligence Service investigating German agents and their plans against Allied shipping. In 1927 ha gave a course at the Institut d'Ethnographie at the Sorbonne, and in 1929 was elected to the Collège de France, from which he retired in 1947. He became a Membre de l'Institut, the first prehistorian to do so, when he was elected to the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres in 1938. He was made Commandeur de la Légion d'Honneur in 1958 in a public ceremony in Paris which was broadcast over the national radio.

This brief outline gives a poor indication of the fullness and richness of Breuil's life and his contributions to prehistory. Over the sixty years of his career he travelled widely around the world, published enormously (he is credited with over 800 publications, including over thirty major volumes),[1] engaged in many controversies and pumped his own enthusiasm and imagination into nearly every aspect of Palaeolithic research. Although he did his first major work in the Bronze Age of northern France, he was soon attracted into the early Stone Age periods, especially through his friendship with the brothers Jean and Amédée Bouyssonie, his fellow students at the Seminary (who later became famous for their discovery of the Neanderthal skeleton of La Chapelle-aux-Saints in Corrèze), and also by his association with Edouard Piette and Emile Cartailhac in the south of France and the Pyrénées. It was through Piette that he became interested in cave art. At the end of the 19th century, when the controversy over the authenticity of cave paintings broke

[1] A complete listing of his publications up to 1957, with his decorations and honours and a short biography, are given in a volume presented to him by his colleagues, "Hommage à l'abbé Henri Breuil pour son quatre-vingtième anniversaire. Sa vie. Son œuvre. Bibliographie de ses travaux". (Paris, 1957).

out again, Breuil was already a rising young prehistorian, and his rôle in establishing the status of this art was a vital one. Altamira, discovered in 1879, had been dismissed by almost all scholars as fraudulent, and when in 1895 Rivière dicovered the engravings in the cave of La Mouthe (Dordogne) they were greeted with the same scepticism. But Breuil was willing to consider them as genuinely prehistoric, and his discovery with Denis Peyrony of the magnificent painted and engraved caves of Font-de-Gaume and Les Combarelles near Les Eyzies (Dordogne) during a single week in Septembre, 1901, brought the matter to the critical point. The climax came in the next year when Breuil went to Spain to examine Altamira with Emile Cartailhac who had rejected the art there years before. After a long and careful study they concluded that the famous paintings on the ceiling were of genuinely Palaeolithic age; Cartailhac wrote his historic capitulation "Mea culpa d'un sceptique" and Palaeolithic wall art came into its own with Breuil, still only in his middle twenties, as its leading champion and student.

Perhaps it is the one subject for which he was, and will remain, best known, for his active interest in prehistoric art, in Africa as well as in Europe and from the Palaeolithic to the Bronze Age, continued right up to his death. His famous classificatory and evolutionary scheme for French and Spanish art styles, which he amended over the years as new discoveries were made, has long been the framework on which most other scholars have built. It will probably be modified in the future, for it contains some serious inconsistencies which Breuil himself recognized and against which many of his contemporaries have protested vigourously especially in recent years. Most Spanish prehistorians, for instance, reject his Palaeolithic dating of much of the art of Mediterranean Spain, and the significance he attributed to such elements as *perspective tordue* is certainly exaggerated. However, it is safe to predict that Breuil's cyclical developmental scheme for Upper Palaeolithic art in France and Spain will never be totally relegated to the position of a historical curiosity. In 1940 he was one of the first on the scene after the sensational discovery of Lascaux Cave in Dorgogne, and his study and dating of certain of the paintings is still a matter of controversy.

His analysis of South African rock art leaves many prehistorians unhappy about his historical conclusions, although Breuil had spent much time in the field there making first-hand studies. Near the end of his life, in 1956, he became involved in *l'affaire Rouffignac* and vigourously upheld the authenticity of the paintings in spite of the publicly expressed doubts of many of his colleagues; indeed, it was the weight of Breuil's opinion, more than anything else, that swung the balance in this notorious controversy which for some weeks in the summer of 1956 raged in the newspapers, professional circles and scholarly reviews of France and is still not completely extinguished. Breuil was an excellent draughtsman and copyist, and his reproductions of cave art are often masterpieces. He once calculated that he had spent the equivalent of two full years of his life underground studying and copying the engravings and paintings of the caves, often in very uncomfortable conditions. His great publications (sometimes in collaboration with Peyrony, Capitan, Obermaier and others) on such sites as Font-de-Gaume, les Combarelles, Altamira, Les Trois Frères and many other Spanish and French caves will always be precious classics. His great series of volumes on South African art was still appearing at the time of his death, financed by the Gulbenkian Foundation. He even wrote and illustrated a charming picture book on prehistoric man for children, in English.

Breuil's main archaeological work in the years before the first World War had been in the typology and stratigraphy of the Upper Palaeolithic industries and in the associated cave art. His part in the famous *bataille Aurignacienne* in the years between 1905 and 1908 was a very decisive one when he joined with Cartailhac and Peyrony in proving beyond question that the Aurignacian (including what is now called Perigordian or Gravettian) which had been suppressed by Gabriel de Mortillet decades before, did in fact occur before the Solutrean. Even after a lapse of over half a century, Breuil's spirited onslaughts on the obstinate and even fraudulent claims of the "Old Guard" make fascinating reading. They certainly made him a renowned figure in European prehistory. Breuil's work of this period culminated in the classic paper he delivered at Geneva in 1912 to the *Congrès International d'Anthropologie et d'Archéologie Préhistoriques,* "Les sub-

divisions du Paléolithique supérieur et leur signification", which is one of the great milestones in prehistoric studies. For years it was a kind of Bible for European prehistorians; it was re-published without basic change in 1937 and, although much of it is no longer valid in detail, its general outlines still make it necessary reading for all students of the European Upper Palaeolithic.

After the War Breuil's attention turned more and more to the problems of Middle Pleistocene geology and Lower Palaeolithic archeology in France and England, taking up the work interrupted by Commont's death during the War. Breuil took an opposite position to those geologists and prehistorians who favoured a short chronology for the Pleistocene and the Palaeolithic. His work on the river terraces and loess land of northern France and England, his classification of the Abbevillian (the name he gave to the former Chellean) and Acheulian industries, his setting up of the Levalloisian sequences and his recognition of the significance of the Clactonian and Tayacian industries, were contributions which were regarded as fundamental for years. His famous concept of the parallel phyla of flake and core industries has persisted in some minds and text-books long after Breuil himself abandoned the idea as being inconsistent with the field data. Indeed, it is only since the second World War that the work of a younger generation has succeeded in modifying or replacing some of Breuil's hypotheses. The Abbé fought vigourously against some of these new interpretations, but his attitude was never as unreasonable as those of certain of his disciples. During the last War he pursued in Portugal and East Africa this interest in the Lower Palaeolithic industries and their possible correlations with ancient climates and sea levels.

In 1929 Breuil went to South Africa for the first time, at the invitation of the South African Government, and he became a close personal friend of General Jan Smuts who took a keen interest in prehistory, especially in its philosophical implications. After the outbreak of the second World War Smuts, then Prime Minister of his country, arranged to have Breuil transported from Portugal, where he was then lecturing, by a neutral ship to South Africa. From 1942 to 1945 Breuil journeyed over all the Union as well as in Southern Rhodesia and the Portuguese

territories, studying the aboriginal and prehistoric rock paintings and industries. He returned to South Africa several times after the War to carry on his field work. As in Spain, his interpretations of the art were often in conflict with those of the local professionals. In particular his belief that the famous rock painting in Basutoland called "the White Lady of Brandberg" was due to Bronze Age influence from Crete on the Africans is not shared by most African scholars.

Breuil studied archaeological collections avidly and travelled widely over the world to do so, in Asia as well as in Africa and Europe. In the early 1920's he went to Central and Eastern Europe and published an important synthesis of the Palaeolithic industries there, but he never followed up this work. He also worked briefly in Ethiopia. Somaliland and Palestine, and in the 1920's visited China where he discovered the evidence for the use of fire in the Choukoutien Sinanthropus culture and championed the controversial bone and antler artifacts of the industry.

Intellectually and temperamentally, Breuil's leanings seem to have been always in the direction of the humanities and natural history; it is significant that among his first publications were some on entomology and botany, and he kept up an interest in these subjects all his life. One might hazard a guess that in other circumstances his work might have paralleled Kroeber's in American anthropology. He paid little attention to modern ethnography per se (except insofar as it threw light on the behaviour of prehistoric man), to fossils or to linguistics. Like most French scholars, he was influenced little if at all by the doctrines of the contemporary *kulturkreis* school in Vienna, though he occasionally contributed to *Anthropos*. Nor was he much interested in New World archaeology (whose time-depth was considered insignificant during most of Breuil's lifetime, it must be remembered), and his influence on New World archaeology or archaeologists could be described as negligible. As an ardent evolutionist he was deeply concerned in the issues arising from the conflicting claims of science and religion; this may sound somewhat old-fashioned now, but we must recall the atmosphere when Breuil began his career. With his close friend Pierre Teilhard de Chardin he did much to form the official attitude of the Roman

Catholic church towards prehistory in general and to the origin and antiquity of man in particular. There was a philosophical side to Breuil's character, concerned especially with the impact of prehistoric discoveries on social thought, which is not generally recognized, for his views were usually published elsewhere than in the journals prehistorians ordinarily read; some of it is seen in his correspondence with Teilhard de Chardin. He was also a skilful writer in certain topics peripheral to prehistory; a selection of passages published in 1920 from a diary he had kept in Spain before the first World War reveals simultaneously the esthetic side of Breuil's temperament in his descriptions of the Spanish countryside, and his keen sympathy with the isolated peasants and herders of the mountains where he worked.[1]

His personality seemed an amalgam of many elements. He was strong-willed, hot tempered and often impatient and domineering in his personal relationships. He was combative, and engaged in many celebrated professional battles, making some enemies in the process. Yet at the same time he was capable of great spontaneous generosity and kindness, and respected foes who fought as vigourously as he did. His gusto for good cuisine and good wines, and his amazingly retentive memory, were as renowned as the crabbed handwriting which made his letters almost indecipherable. His intellectual energy was stupendous, for any one of the many branches of prehistory he dominated would have provided a lifetime of work for an ordinary man; indeed, the time seems past, in this as in other branches of anthropology, when one man could combine in himself nearly the totality of the field. Physically, too, he was strong and active, and even in his eighties was still scrambling about in the mud of caves and quarries to examine new discoveries. He was not greatly interested in field excavation as such, and he undertook relatively little of it considering his enormous output of publications. He preferred to synthesize and correlate, and in this respect he resembled Childe and Kroeber who also were not particularly enthusiastic excavators. But it should not be thought that he was not a field worker, for he excelled in exploring little-known

[1] Camille PITOLLET. L'abbé Henri Breuil et son Journal d'Espagne. *Hispania,* vol. 3, no. 3-4, 1920, pp. 232-243.

regions, both in Europe and in Africa, and in discovering new sites, paintings, engravings or geological exposures. Breuil's handling of archaeological data impresses one as being subjective, even impressionistic, and he seems to have been uninterested in statistical methods of analysis.

After World War I, and the intellectual set-backs it involved in France, it was in great part because of Breuil's tremendous energy and status that French prehistory remained as productive as it did. Many of the rich collections in the museums of Paris and elsewhere were secured through his efforts. Because of his great professional prestige and his high stature in the intellectual life of France, he was instrumental in interesting the public and political authorities and the universities in prehistoric research, in South Africa as well as in various European countries. His many decorations, degrees and memberships in scientific societies around the world give some indication of the honour in which he was held.

Many of Breuil's methods and interpretations have been severely criticized both within France and outside, and one even hears reproaches that his great influence was not always beneficient to the development of the subject of prehistory in his own country. Some of this criticism is probably true. The field of prehistory in France often strikes outsiders as a jungle of rivalries, and Breuil's attitudes were often partisan. Nevertheless, from another viewpoint Breuil represented, and helped to transmit, some of the best features of French prehistory: the emphasis on the capital importance of accurate stratigraphy and geological dating to situate the archaeological phenomena in time; the insistence of knowing artifacts by handling large numbers of them and even fabricating them; first-hand familiarity with the sites and collections themselves rather than simply with the publications; and an unwillingness to build up grandiose theoretical schemes unless backed by a solid core of data. It is good that, by and large, these traditions are still strong in the best prehistoric work being done in France today. His flexible and pragmatic attitude toward scientific reality is reflected in one of his official addresses to the *Société Préhistorique Française* of which he was Honourary President: "Il y a plusieurs aspects des choses, sou-

vent plusieurs interpretations possibles, et il est rare que dans le point de vue de chacun, une parcelle de vérité n'existe, qui n'ait échappé à quelqu'un d'autre. La Science est un phénomène collectif, où le concours de toutes les bonnes volontés est nécessaire."[1]

Breuil trained comparatively few students in the usual academic sense, partly of course because he was not attached formally to a university faculty for most of his career. However, he had — and has — many disciples, and those he helped tain include such foreigners as Burkitt and Garrod from England, Pei in China, Van Riet Lowe in South Africa, Field and Kelley from the U.S.A., in addition to many in France and other European countries. He was extraordinarily sympathetic to young beginners in prehistory when he knew they took their work seriously, and was generous with time and advice when sought out. I first met Breuil in 1957 when I was in France studying European prehistory. A friend introduced us in the gloomy Château at St. Germain-en Laye outside Paris which houses the Musée des Antiquités Nationales, where he was re-classifying some materials in the cases. It was a hot June day and Breuil was in his shirtsleeves and collarless. I was introduced as coming from Canada. "Ah yes, Canada. Very interesting," he remarked politely; then, with a mischievous twinkle he added, "You know, I have never been in Canada. But then, after all, you don't have any real prehistory over there!" I met him occasionally after that during excavations in Périgord, and in 1959, when I was working in Paris at the Institut de Paléontologie Humaine, he brusquely summoned me to his study to find out what I was up to; his long antennae, which missed little that was going on in the field of prehistory, had picked up echoes of the research I was doing, and although on the point of departure for Portugal he spent several hours pouring out his sixty years of experience with this particular problem while his secretary gesticulated frantically in the background that he would be late for an important meeting. Later, after I had left France, the delightfully blunt letters, peppered with anecdotal asides, which he wrote in response to the

[1] Quarante ans de Préhistoire. Discours de M. l'Abbé Breuil, Président sortant. *Bulletin de la Société préhistorique française,* vol. 34, no. 1, 1937, pp. 52-67.

questions I put to him reflected his characteristic willingness to share his vast knowledge with others.

It is strange to reflect that there will be no more of that stock, stooped figure with the familiar beret, cane and drooping cigarette, his eyes sparkling with sardonic pleasure or glaring with irritation. Breuil was one of those towering personalities whom one feels fortunate to have known, even if only slightly and at the end of his lifetime. Some day — perhaps after the famous Journals which he kept daily for over half a century are made available — a good biographer will show us the many facets of one of the most important and fascinating figures in this field of anthropology.

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