

# THE MANY FACES OF THE GRAVETTIAN

## **Abstract**

*The Gravettian phenomenon (ca 34,000 to 24,000 years ago) is a complex biocultural adaptation to cold and arid glacial conditions, evidence of the remarkable adaptive flexibility of anatomically modern humans. The Gravettian is spread across Europe from Portugal to the Urals. Why does the Gravettian matter? With the focus on the 'origins' of modern humans, we have almost forgotten the evolutionary patterns in later Homo sapiens. The many faces of the Gravettian form a rich source of information on modern human evolution and the social and cultural adaptations developed during the Upper Paleolithic of Europe. The session aims to address this issue and discuss current research in terms of:*

*1 theoretical frameworks*

*2 proxies for behavioural variability*

*3 fieldwork circumstances (especially sampling strategies and scientific methods)*

## **Explanation**

What do we mean by the “many faces” of the Gravettian?

Regional diversity in (lithic) tools seems to be one of the hallmarks of the Gravettian, when compared to the relative uniformity of the Early and Late Aurignacian. Font Robert points, Noaillian, Rayssian, Late Gravettian, Pavlovian, Willendorf-Kostienkian, Sagvarian, Kašovian, Epigravettian are just a few of the labels used to try and categorise this diversity in Europe. The “many faces” refer to the mosaic character of the Gravettian.

A better understanding of this regional diversity comes with another sense of “many faces”, namely the exploration of the full spectrum of behaviors and activities, cultural remains and material signatures. Since the 1990s, lithic analysis has moved beyond form, faunal analysis has moved beyond species determination, site analysis has moved beyond age and cultural attribution: the integration of all data is used to reconstruct the full range of activities and practices leading to the archaeological record and brings the Gravettian mosaic to full scope.

We feel that the study of the Gravettian phenomenon can be brought further by explorations in three aspects of current research: theoretical frameworks, behavioral variability, and the fieldwork situation. The three aspects are explained further.

### *Ad 1 theoretical frameworks*

Research into the Gravettian could perhaps be organized on a scale from a prominent role for climatic and environmental factors to a decisive role for sociocultural factors.

In our view, at least three issues seem to be necessary for all theoretical frameworks:

- 1 High-resolution chronologies of Gravettian sites for better understanding of patterns of occupation in time and in space;
- 2 Local environmental records that registered the impact of global climate change with which humans interacted on or near the archaeological site. How are different quaternary datasets (such as mollusks, microfauna, large mammals, pollen or isotopic signatures) related and combined with archaeology?
- 3 Methods of describing and analysing cultural change and variability. What kinds of artefacts reflect cultural identities or site-functional differences, depositional processes (e.g. curation, transport, resharpening, recycling and retooling) and seasonal signatures? What does change in material culture mean: adaptation, subsistence change, change of style, change of people?

#### *Ad 2 proxies for behavioral variability*

We have now detailed knowledge of diversity of lithic production systems in the Gravettian. Elaborate analytical tools, in particular developments of the *chaîne opératoire* approach, allow for more accurate observations of how raw materials are transformed into tools and how these are used to perform the tasks at hand. However, it seems that interpretive models of what this diversity means in terms of human behavior, culture or activities are lacking behind: what does it mean to find Noaillian burins or different types of microgravettes in terms of human behavior? Are these “neutral” cultural choices or do they signal adaptive shifts in technological systems? Does traceology unlock the various uses for typologically different tools?

#### *Ad 3 fieldwork circumstances*

Regional differences in research history and intensity make it difficult to compare regional datasets that document the “many faces” of the Gravettian. The differences are in the intensity of the research, in preservation conditions, the environmental data, consequently the chronological resolution of the record, and in the use of terminology, interdisciplinary connections and research frameworks.

At the same time, key-sites have remained the focus of long-term research, usually because they have high densities of archaeological materials, cover long sequences or large areas, and have complex records with features, art and burials. They dominate the narratives, image and reputation of the Gravettian. But what do the key-sites register of hunter-gatherer societies that are mobile, split up in smaller groups, exploit different resources and landscapes according to seasonal patterns? What are the biases introduced by a focus on such sites?

In terms of regional organization of research, we are confronted with widely different issues that are at stake and subsequently different research questions and priorities. For little-researched regions such as Bohemia or Hungary, basic survey and excavation work combined with the establishment of chronologies are important, but for key-sites such as the Dolni Vestonice-Pavlov cluster, Abri Pataud or Willendorf targeted sampling for specific research issues is perhaps most interesting.

For interregional comparisons in terms of human population history (demography), more balanced and comparable datasets are needed.

### **Why does the Gravettian matter?**

Human evolution did not stop with the arrival of the first *Homo sapiens* in Europe. Instead, humans adapted to a wide variety of social and natural environments. The Gravettian, or should we say Middle Upper Paleolithic, is testimony of this diversity, but it is rarely considered in any depth in recent considerations of human origins and human evolution. Why? What is the relation to the “big issues” in paleoanthropology? Did nothing happen after the (Proto-)Aurignacian or IUP ‘origins’ of anatomically modern humans in Europe? What does the Gravettian tell us about the ‘big story of human evolution’?

### **The EAA-session in Plzen**

We would like to invite papers that discuss recent research into the Gravettian focusing on at least one of our three themes. Our intention is to produce of book about this theme including the contributions to the session.

### **Session organizers**

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