

# Tautavel

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by George Rohrer

A 3.40 franc stamp recently issued by the French post office portrays an important anthropological find and commemorates a significant occasion. The release that recognized the Tautavel Man was timed for the opening of the modern new museum of prehistory in Tautavel. FDCs were obtainable on June 20 and 21, 1992 from a special office set up in that small community about forty kilometers north of the border with the Spanish province of Catalonia. The stamps were available to the public on June 22 [Scott No. 2296].

The discovery of the *Homme de Tautavel* and the exploration that preceded it were a part of the article "The First Settlers in France" in the winter 1983 *OWA* [Volume VII, Number 1, Whole Number 25].

We offer a brief summary.

In the limestone cliffs near Tautavel, a cave known as the *Caune de l'Arago* overlooks the broad landscape covered with vineyards. In 1964 there was found in the cave, evidence of life from 350,000 years before the present (B.P.). The distinguished prehistorian Henry de Lumley was called to the site and put in charge of the excavation. Between 1967 and 1971, the searchers unearthed many ancient animal bones. Human remains also appeared — teeth, jawbones, a hipbone and a foot bone. On July 22, 1971 came the exciting discovery of a partial human skull. The cranium, designated "Arago XXI," consisted of a face, forehead, temple bones and an upper jaw with five teeth. Then in 1979, about three meters from where Arago XXI was picked up, a right parietal bone was found that fit the first part perfectly and is believed to be a part of the same skull.

Subsequent excavation has been productive. To date seventy bits of human remains have come to light. Among these are the lower jaw of a young adult, a part of a maxillary, human teeth, a hipbone (ilium), and pieces of femur and fibula. These fragments belonged to more than twenty individuals. No one disputes that we are dealing with *Homo erectus*.

This ancestor possessed a low cranial vault, a receding forehead, strong brows over deep-set eye orbits, a massive protruding jaw and powerful muscle attachment arcs. The date is now set at 450,000 years B.P.

Still undetermined are the shape of the nose and lips, the nature of the hair on the head and body, the skin texture and color and the clothes. We do know that *H. erectus* had a powerful physique and was an excellent hunter. A study of the bones revealed that his height was about five feet five.

The range of *Homo erectus* was not limited to France or even to the European continent. Numerous names were attached before it was recognized that many of the species were related and could be classified as *H. erectus*. We list those already portrayed on stamps.

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In 1891 the Dutchman Dubois discovered bits of human fossil in Java. It was originally named *Pithecanthropus erectus*. The simpler taxon, *Homo erectus*, is now accepted. The “Java Man” is pictured on Indonesia Scott No. 1398 [250r August 31, 1989] and Cuba Scott No. 1212 [3c March 31, 1967].

In 1921 a miner came upon a fossil skull at Broken Hill, Zambia. Originally called “Rhodesian Man” from the name of the former colony, the specimen is recognized as another *H. erectus* and the age is established at 200,000 years. The cranium is shown on Zambia Scott No. 95 [9n February 1, 1973].

In 1927 Davidson Black discovered “Peking Man” in China. The official name, *Sinanthropus pekinensis*, has been modernized to *H. erectus*. This species is portrayed on Cuba Scott No. 1213 [4c March 31, 1967] and China Scott No. 2346 [20f August 2, 1991].

In 1960 people from the village of Petralona, in northeastern Greece, found in a nearby cave a skull that has been identified as *Homo erectus*. It is a modified version and has some features resembling *Homo sapiens*. The age is believed to be 200,000 years. Greece Scott No. 1421 [50d March 15, 1982].

In 1976 Richard Leakey discovered pieces of skull in Kenya that he recognized as *Homo erectus*. The age was estimated between 1.5 and 1.8 million years, placing the species earlier than previously believed. Early *Homo erectus* would thus have been a contemporary of *Australopithecus*. The find was acknowledged by Kenya in 1983 Scott No. 213 [2sh January 16, 1982].

The original museum in Tautavel, shown in the cancellation, was inaugurated in July 1973. It exhibited specimens found in the *Caune de l’Arago* and vicinity. Of course the featured exhibit was Arago XXI. As discoveries multiplied and the hosts of visitors increased, the museum facilities became inadequate.

The new museum, whose inauguration in June 1992 coincided with the release of the stamp, is much larger. Dioramas present scenes of prehistoric life. Large stocks of videos area available. Visitors see demonstrations of biological and cultural evolution. Twenty thousand drawers provide for storage of specimens in ideal conditions. Laboratories are equipped to study fossil people, their tools and their environment. Other laboratories have specialties that may seem to some, as to this observer, a bit rarified – fossil vertebrates and invertebrates, sedimentology, micromorphology, polynology (spores and pollen grains), and paleomagnetism. The *Musée de Préhistoire de Tautavel* is now the largest and most modern museum of prehistory in the world.

Raymond Moretti, who designed the Tautavel stamp, became interested in prehistoric people when remains of a 380,000 year old culture were found on the beach, Terra Amata, at Nice in 1966. Five years later, in 1971, when Tautavel Man was brought to light, Moretti developed a fascination for Arago XXI that has never diminished.

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The artist produced the poster for the ninth Congress of the Union of Prehistoric and Protohistoric Sciences at Nice in 1976. The skull, face view, on a blue background provided the logo for the congress and was the figure on the hand cancellation used by the Nice post office at the time.

The skull likewise appears on the Tautavel Museum's return address.

Moretti used the Tautavel skull as the design for the central feature in the 1981 poster for the *Musée de l'Homme* in Paris. Some liberties were taken in the reconstruction of the back of the head.

Moretti made a poster in French and Catalán for the Tautavel Museum. He also created a statue of the *Homme de Tautavel* now in the patio of the museum. A copy has been installed near the Museum of Archaeology in Barcelona.

The first day cover contains the picture of a deer in autumn, bugling at the Tautavel dawn. The time mentioned is 550,000 years B.P., one hundred thousand years before the hunters occupied the *Caune de l'Arago*.

The contribution of *Homo erectus* is most significant. These people may be credited with building at Terra Amata, the first permanent shelters known. Discoveries in China indicate the use of fire. There must have been fires in the hearths of the huts at Terra Amata, but it is not known whether any cooking was done. It is clear that there were organized encampments at the *Caune de l'Arago* near Tautavel.

Biface tools were being produced for the first time. This advance made possible an improvement in hunting skills.

Recent *Homo erectus* discoveries are reported by an American-Chinese team operating in Hubei province in China. Two skulls were found in the excavations in 1989-90. The fossils, estimated at 350,000 years B.P., have some of the features of *Homo sapiens*.

Some anthropologists contend that *Homo erectus* evolved in Asia and emigrated from that continent rather than from Africa. There is no consensus on this issue. The story is far from complete, but with each discovery the pattern becomes a bit clearer.

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