

Solutré

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by George Rohrer

The herd of horses, terrified by the shouts of the hunters, stampeded to the edge of the cliff and fell to their destruction.

The scene is easily envisioned by people who hold to the generally accepted belief that the precipice was a hunt site. Interest is directed to the area by the appearance of the French stamp honoring Solutré in southeastern Burgundy.

The great Rock of Solutré that dominates the region is shown on the 3.90 franc issue of September 28, 1985 [Scott No. 1951]. This mighty rock has been likened to an enormous sphinx and to the prow of a giant battleship.

The altitude at the top level of the three-sided cliff is approximately five hundred meters. The vertical fall from the summit to the ledge below varies from thirty to forty meters. From here the slope extends laterally toward the village of Solutré and to the vineyards in the long valley.

There is evidence of Mousterian (Neanderthal) and very early Upper Palaeolithic habitation, but it is during Perigordian and especially Solutrean times that the region offers in the greatest interest.

Excavation in the magma at the bottom of the slope has exposed myriads of stone tools and the bones of many thousands of horses. A smaller quantity of reindeer bones has also appeared in this "horse cemetery" (cimetière de chevaux).

It has been assumed that during a part of the Perigordian period between 25,000 and 21,000 years Before the Present (B.P.), hunters drove herds of game from the top of the rock to their destruction below. This effective method of securing meat before the invention of the bow and arrow seems cruel and wasteful, but it was not a sport. Some of the upper layers of bone have been identified with the early Solutrean period.

The animals leaping over the precipice would have landed on the ledge partway down the face of the cliff and not on the slope where the bones are found. This has led some students to the conviction that the area was not a jump site, but only a butchering location.

These two views do not appear to this observer to be incompatible. There would have been great advantage in clearing away the dead and maimed animals after their fall, and dragging them to a separate butchering site. There is no hard evidence to support or disprove the traditional belief.

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Busloads of tourists from other parts of France invade the five villages of the valley below the great rock expressly to sample the excellent Pouilly-Fuissé wine. One distributor featured a view of the rock on the label of one of his vintages.

The small wild horses of the region appear to be the same breed as those painted on the walls of the caves of Niaux in the Pyrenees (Toulouse cancel) and Rouffignac in the Dordogne (Rouffignac cancel). The present day interest in breeding the species is indicated by postage stamps showing the type known as the Przewalski horse (Mongolia Scott No. C15 [May 10, 1972, 4t] and Poland Scott No. 2301 [November 10, 1978, 50g]). The discovery and cultivation of this horse is discussed in the Spring 1982 issue of the OWA Journal, VI, 2, 22 – page 24.

The “Laurel Leaf”

The designation “Solutrean” was given to the short period that extended from about 21,000 to 17,000 years B.P. Stone blades of a particular shape and quality were found principally at Solutré. The bi-faced laurel leaf (feuille de laurier and the later willow leaf (feuille de saule) are unique in their styles. After the blade was skillfully formed it was retouched to achieve a product of even greater delicacy. Some of the laurel leaves were refined to such slenderness that they must have served only for ceremonial or display purposes.

Solutrean Art

Solutrean artists did not create fine wall painting like those done before or after, nor splendid carved figurines like those of the late Magdalenean period. Instead, their artists bequeathed a wealth of bas-relief figures. The most celebrated of these are the fallen blocks from the friezes on cliffs at Roc de Sers and the Fourneau du Diable.

The best preserved section of the sculpture at the rock shelter of the Roc de Sers near Angouleme in the Charente is a pair of ibexes facing one another in combat. The fallen block in the shelter called Fourneau du Diable at Bourdeille in the Dordogne Valley represents two wild cows, or aurochs. They are in especially high relief, one behind the other in perspective. Each of these four figures is slightly less than two feet in length.

Both fallen segments are in the Musée des Antiquités Nationales at Saint-Germain-en-Laye near Paris (France Scott No. 1187 [June 17, 1967, 70c]).

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