

Solutré Revisited

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The Old World Archaeological Study Unit (OWASU) Journal of October 1986 [OWA IX-3 (35) pp 37-43] included a story prompted by the appearance of the French stamp that honored Solutré in southeastern Burgundy. The 3.90 franc stamp (Scott No. 1951), issued a year earlier [September 28, 1985], depicts the Great Rock of Solutré, 500 meters high, that dominates the region.

Tradition has held that hunters 19,000 years ago drove herds of horses over the cliff to their death. No evidence was cited to support or to disprove the popular belief. While this aspect is dramatic, a more important factor is the position of the epoch in Upper Palaeolithic culture. The era, roughly 21,000 to 17,000 years B.P., is known as the "Solutrean Period."

The article in the October 1986 journal described in some detail several of the high relief figures in rock shelters that typify Solutrean art. The laurel leaf stone blade was likewise uniquely Solutrean.

The site was discovered in 1866 when a young topographer, Adrien Arcin, picked up a worked flint at the base of the rock. Fossil bones had already been observed. Sections of magma formed of hard, compact bone had been quarried and used as walls around areas of vineyards. Numerous flint tools, broken and whole, have been taken from the site.

The area at the base of the great rock has undergone extensive excavation since 1907 when the celebrated prehistorian, Abbé Breuil, proclaimed the importance of the site that now covers more than two acres. Many of the pieces found are now in British and American museums, and in the Museum of National Antiquities at Saint-Germain-en-Laye near Paris.

The small but excellent museum of prehistory at Solutré has been succeeded by the splendid new Musée Départemental de Préhistoire, inaugurated May 21, 1987. A rich treasure of excavated materials has been retained for the collection in the new museum. The administration section is flanked by three rooms with well organized displays of artifacts and dioramas pertaining to Solutrean life and culture.

Did the Stone Age hunters actually drive the horses from the top of the great rock? This writer was cautiously noncommittal on the subject in the article of October 1986. No longer. There is no reason to adhere to the long-held belief. Authorities now agree that it is at the archaeological dig at the side of the cliff that the hunters killed and butchered thousands of horses. This was done over many centuries, principally at the time of the migrations.

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An analogy has been made to the buffalo jumps of America's great Northwest Plains. It is recognized, however, that horses do not congregate like buffalo into large groups, and are not as easily stampeded. Furthermore, they are more agile than buffalo and are aggressive when threatened. The problem of driving a troop of horses more than a mile up the back slope to the cliff would have been tremendous and would have required a very large team.

Skeptics of the popular legend point out the complete absence of animal bones at the foot of the fall. The excavation site is 900 feet distant. Examination of the horses' teeth so far has revealed that the layer of cement formed in summer had begun to appear. This fact reinforces the theory that the animals were in the process of migrating to their summer grazing areas.

Doctor Philip Smith, the early authority on Solutrean culture, expressed doubts more than twenty years ago about the validity of the strongly entrenched belief.

There were incorporated in the structure of the new museum two especially attractive features. A flight of steps rises to a platform that overlooks the archaeological site. Elsewhere, a short passageway leads to a high window through which the visitor may enjoy a dramatic view of the great rock.

An attractive brochure promises more: -- "surrounded by spectacular scenery, the hillside vineyards of Pouilly-Fuissé and the rock of Solutré, the museum dominates a sweeping panorama which stretches down the Saône Valley to the Alps."

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