

Report of new archaeological investigations at Ain Hanach, Algeria

By Mohamed SAÏYOUNI (1),
Abdelhakim DERROUJ (2),
Mohamed MESSOUG (3)

INTRODUCTION

The Ain Hanach site was discovered in 1977 by the French paleontologist Pierre Brochet in the context of the archaeological survey of the region. The site is located in the north-western part of the Algerian coast, about 10 km from the town of Ain Hanach. The site is situated on a hillside overlooking the sea. The site is characterized by the presence of a large number of archaeological remains, including pottery, stone tools, and human remains. The site is considered to be of great importance for the study of the prehistoric period in Algeria.

The first archaeological investigations at Ain Hanach were carried out by the French paleontologist Pierre Brochet in 1977. He discovered the site while conducting a survey of the region. The site was then excavated by the French archaeological team led by Brochet. The excavations revealed a large number of archaeological remains, including pottery, stone tools, and human remains. The site is considered to be of great importance for the study of the prehistoric period in Algeria.

The present report is based on the results of the archaeological investigations carried out at Ain Hanach in 1977. The report is divided into two main parts: a description of the site and its surroundings, and a study of the archaeological remains found at the site. The first part of the report describes the site's location, its topography, and its surroundings. The second part of the report describes the archaeological remains found at the site, including pottery, stone tools, and human remains.

The results of the archaeological investigations at Ain Hanach show that the site is of great importance for the study of the prehistoric period in Algeria. The site is characterized by the presence of a large number of archaeological remains, including pottery, stone tools, and human remains. The site is considered to be of great importance for the study of the prehistoric period in Algeria.

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By Mohamed SAHNOUNI (*),
Abdelkader DERRADJI (**),
Mohamed MEDIG (**)

INTRODUCTION

The Ain Hanech site was discovered in 1947 by the French paleontologist Camille Arambourg in the course of his paleontological survey of the region around the town of Setif in northeastern Algeria. This site yielded an Upper Villafranchian fauna (= Lower Pleistocene) associated with artifacts of a Mode I (Oldowan-like) technology. Estimate of the age here have ranged from 1.0 to 1.2 million years ago, based upon faunal correlations with East Africa (Coppens, 1972).

The fauna included elephants (*E. moghrebiensis*), equid (*E. asinus tabeti*), bovids (*Bos bubaloides*, *Numidocapra crassicornis*, *Gazela pomeli* etc.), hippo (*H. amphibus*), rhino (*Ceratotherium simum mauritanicum*) etc. (Arambourg, 1970 and 1979). The artifacts consisted primarily of polyhedrons flaked, but not battered subspheroids, and spheroids similar to some known at Olduvai Gorge (Upper Bed I/Lower Bed II) (Sahnouni, 1987, and 1992). This was the first time that an early Pleistocene fauna was found associated with Lower Paleolithic artifacts in North Africa.

However, this site was excavated with paleontological rather than archaeological questions in mind, and without systematic excavation techniques and forms of documentation. Therefore several questions still remain unresolved surrounding this site such as:

- 1) Accurate stratigraphic information and the dating of the sediments and associated materials ;

(*) Director of the research Project 1601/05/92 (Institut d'Archéologie).

(**) Members of the research Project.

2) The nature of the association between the fossil fauna and the stone artifacts ; and

3) The vertical and horizontal spatial distribution of the archaeological materials, and whether behavioral or geological agencies are primarily responsible for their patterning.

New archaeological investigations have begun at this Lower Palaeolithic site in an attempt to answer these unresolved questions. During the past summer (July and August 1992), a season of field work was initiated to survey and map the Ain Hanech area, to study the stratigraphy and collect samples for sedimentological and paleomagnetic analysis, to conduct an exploratory test excavation near Arambourg's original trench.

The specific objectives of this study are: 1) to determine the stratigraphic sequence at the primary archaeological/paleontological locality and correlate them with other localities found within one kilometer of the vicinity ; 2) to ascertain the precise stratigraphic provenience of the Palaeolithic artifactual level(s) and their relationships with the Early Pleistocene fauna previously retrieved from the site ; and 3) to establish the geochronological context of the artifacts and bones ; and 4) to explore the possible behavioral implications of the site and assess the site formation processes responsible for the deposit ; 5) to identify new localities with archaeological and/or paleontological potential in the immediate vicinity ; and 6) to help establish a firmer chronology for the site.

SURVEY AND MAPPING

An area with a radius of 1 km around the Ain Hanech site has been systematically surveyed and mapped. A quantity of surface fragmented animal bones and stone artifacts from major surface have been plotted, documented, and then collected. It was clear that the original Ain Hanech site in the study area, still had one of the densest concentrations of surface stone artifacts and fossil bones.

The stone artifacts found during this survey included specimens characteristic of both mode I technology (Oldowan) and mode II technology (Acheulean). They include unifacial and bifacial choppers, polyhedrons, subspheroids, flakes, and bifaces, bifacial trimming flakes, and very large flakes. Faunal remains included fragmented bone and isolated teeth. Stone artifacts and bones were retrieved primarily in four main localities:

El-Kherba, Ain Boucherit, Ain Hanech, and El-Beida. The highest density occurred within Ain Hanech area.

Besides the Mode I and II industries, it is worthwhile to note that in the course of the survey two Upper Pleistocene archaeological sites were discovered. The first is located south Ain Hanech site at the Djenane Douadi locality. Here a well preserved part of a deer antler was associated with flint blade artifacts (Mode IV technology). The second represents a Capsian site situated east Ain Hanech, where Mode IV and V technologies (blades and microlith), bone points, mammal bone, and engraved limestone slabs were found.

Based on this survey, the surface archaeological materials were delineated and mapped, and several localities of dense concentration were selected for stratigraphic and archaeological test trenches (fig. 1) including:

- 1) Three geological trenches were dug with mechanical equipment borrowed from local authorities (P1, P2, and P4),
- 2) two thick natural geological sections were cleaned for detailed stratigraphic information (S1 and P4),
- 3) two test trenches were dug for delineation of the archaeological occurrences (P6 and P7), and
- 4) one major horizontal archaeological excavation was conducted in the Ain Hanech area.

P1, P2, P3, P6, and P7 are situated on the east side of the Ain Boucherit stream, as P5 is the test excavation adjacent to Arambourg's trench. P4 and S1 located in the west side of the stream.

In addition to the stratigraphic information, these test trenches yield fossil animal bones and/or stone artifacts *in situ*. Stone artifacts were recovered in test trenches P1, P6. The test trench P7 has yielded elephant bones and one limestone flake (fig. 2). The cleaned sections (P4 and S1) contained fossil animal bones in two distinctive clay horizons; but no artifacts were recovered. The lower clay stratum in these sections may be correlated with the fauna level at the Ain Boucherit locality (Lower Villafranchian), while the upper clay horizon may correspond to the Ain Hanech faunal level. Stone artifacts recovered in the test trenches are mode I type technology (Oldowan) including core/tools and flakes with no evidence of Acheulean bifaces or biface trimming flake.

T. Trench.	P1	P2	P3	P4	P6	P7	S1
F. Bones	/	/	2 horns fragments	2	33 teeth other	elph. bones + phaco.	several bones + tooth +
tooth	horn						
S. Artif.	3	/	/	/	9	1	/

Table 1 : Fossil bones and stone artifacts found *in situ* in the different test trenches.

The survey and mapping investigations allowed: 1) delineation of the spatial density of archaeological materials in the Ain Hanech area; 2) selection of several localities for stratigraphic and archaeological test trenches; and 3) construction of preliminary stratigraphic and archaeological correlations.

STRATIGRAPHY

Basin deposits occur in pockets throughout the Eastern Algerian high plateau (fig. 3). They consist of a very thick sequence of sediments sometimes reaching a depth of 250 meters (Savornin, 1920). Their ages range from the Upper Miocene to Upper Pleistocene. Archaeological and paleontological sites such as Ain Boucherit, Ain Hanech, Ain Jourdel, and Mansourah dated to Late Pliocene and Early Pleistocene, are contained within these deposits.

The Ain Hanech site was formed within the fluvio-lacustrine deposits of the Beni Fouada basin located to the northeast of the town of Setif. These deposits are characterized by localized conglomerates, layers of red clay with pebbles, and layers of very fine gray clays. Deposition of this sedimentary sequence appears to have started in the Upper Miocene and continued through the Pliocene and Pleistocene periods (Savornin, 1920). The fauna recovered in the immediate vicinity of Ain Hanech, first by A. Pomel (at both Ain Boucherit and Ain Hanech), has been dated to the Plio-Pleistocene period (Arambourg, 1947).

As Arambourg had been primarily interested in the evolutionary sequence of fossil mammals, he had provided very schematic stratigraphic information of the Ain Boucherit/Ain Hanech sequence. Consequently, several important questions still surround these deposits: 1) the precise

stratigraphic relationship between the two major localities identified: (Ain Boucherit and Ain Hanech); 2) the nature of the association between the fossil animal bones and the stone artifacts found at the Ain Hanech site; and 3) the stratigraphic position of mode II (Acheulean) technological occurrences in this region and their relationship with the cruder Mode I archaeological materials excavated from Ain Hanech.

During the field work season we undertook at Ain Hanech this past summer (July and August 1992), an important part of the work was devoted to studying the stratigraphy in order to shed light on the above questions. The stratigraphic study was not restricted to the Ain Hanech site itself; but it was extended to include the overall sequence of deposits within the local sedimentary basin. The excavation of seven test trenches and the cleaning of two natural stratigraphic sections within a radius of one km around the Ain Hanech site revealed a succession of alternation of fluvial and lacustrine deposits. Based upon the Ain Boucherit section (S1) and its correlation with the trenches, the following stratigraphic sequence can be outlined: (fig. 4).

- (1) At the base of the exposed section, a 1 meter thick conglomerate with a silty clay matrix. Pebbles are large in the bottom and become smaller towards the top of this stratum.
- (2) A thick (3.30m), fine grained, and banded clay, which contains sand lenses towards its base and becomes very compact in its upper levels.
- (3) A thin (0.20m) gravel layer.
- (4) A reddish-brown, compact clay (1.40m).
- (5) A conglomerate composed of small pebbles in a red sandy matrix.
- (6) A 0.60m thick layer of gray clay containing some sands and pebbles.
- (7) A conglomerate consisting of small pebbles in a coarse sandy matrix.

Between the 2 conglomerate formations (7) and (16) occur alternating deposits of gray and brown clay. They are in order:

- (8) A very fine gray clay with some small pebbles, natural fragments of flint, invertebrate organisms (i.e. mollusc), and fossil mammal bones including within original Ain Boucherit mammalian layer.

- (9) A very thick (4.25 m), fine brown clay.
- (10) A fine gray clay.
- (11) A banded brown clay.
- (12) A thin gray clay layer.
- (13) A banded, mottled brown clay.
- (14) Another gray clay, 2m thick, compact in its lower part becoming banded near the top. We have provisionally correlated this stratigraphic layer with the archaeological horizon at the Ain Hanech site on the other side of the stream ; no artifacts have yet been found in this gray clay in the Ain Boucherit locality.
- (15) A thick (3.20m) green sandy clay layer.

The deposition of layer (16), a conglomerate, initiates another sequence of alternating finer and coarser deposits :

- (17) A brown clay followed by a conglomerate (18), a sandy clay layer (19), and another conglomerate (20).
- (21) A thick layer (2 m) of brown silty clay representing a soil horizon with calcareous nodules.
- (22) A calcrete formation capping the entire stratigraphic sequence.

Provisional stratigraphic correlations suggest that the gray clay layer (14), presents in the Ain Boucherit section, could correspond to the Ain Hanech archaeological gray clay based on: 1) the distinctive sediments in color, size and grain ; 2) the stratigraphic position over a large area ; 3) it does not repeat itself. The layers (16) to (22) are absent in the Ain Hanech site. The absence of these deposits could be due to the erosion of these sediments during the Pleistocene or afterwards. It might also explain the absence of stratigraphic context for the mode II technology artifacts in the local site area. In fact, several bifaces and flakes picked up from the surface bear calcrete concretions. They probably belong to either the locally eroded strata underneath the calcrete formation or to the calcrete itself. It might be possible to look for deposits with bifaces *in situ* in these calcareous strata which are still present at the east, west, and south of the Ain Hanech area. If this tentative stratigraphic correlation proves to be

justified, it appears that the gray clay (14) occurs on both sides of the stream, the stratified archaeological occurrences with mode I technology are present only on the east side where Arambourg dug (fig. 5).

Several samples have been collected along the cleaned natural geologic section (the Ain Boucherit side), and at the Ain Hanech site for paleomagnetic study and clay analysis. Both analyses are currently being processed at the University of Utah by Dr. F. Brown (for paleomagnetism) and at Indiana University (Geological Sciences) for clay analysis.

In conclusion, the study of the stratigraphy of the basin in which the Palaeolithic site of Ain Hanech occurs indicates an alternation between lacustrine and fluvio-lacustrine deposits. A calcrete formation caps the entire stratigraphic sequence. The Lower Pleistocene archaeological materials are found within lake margin deposits suggesting that the Ain Hanech site was formed near an ancient lake with small stream draining into it. The Achelean materials post date the Oldowan ones, and so far are not found *in situ* within stratigraphic context because of the local erosion.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATION

A limited archaeological excavation was carried out next to Arambourg's trench (fig. 6), exposing fresh archaeological remains within a very fine and compact gray clay layer (fig. 7). This suggests a relatively low energy deposits. In an excavation of 20 m², a total of 115 archaeological items were recovered in this clay horizon indicating a relatively low density spatial distribution of prehistoric materials.

The stone artifacts include not only polyhedral cores similar to those previously recovered by Arambourg ; but also flakes and fragments (not collected by Arambourg because of his excavation technique) (fig. 8). A total of 36 stone artifacts were recovered including 14 polyhedral cores, 22 flakes and fragments, one of which is slightly retouched scraper like. The core-tools are characterized by a polyhedral shape and measuring an average of 87 x 75 x 65 cm. Technologically they are not extensively trimmed and bear distinctive primarily cortical striking platforms. Most of them have a distinctive edge characterized by a very obtuse angle, exceeding sometimes 110 degrees. The flakes are variable in dimensions and display a mostly cortical dorsal face and cortical striking platforms.

A total of 79 fossil animal bones was recovered in the test excavation, including 10 isolated teeth (4 of which are fragmented), 44 identifiable

elements, and 25 bone fragments. Small fragments less than 3 cm long are not included in these counts. Preliminary examination of the bones (basically teeth) shows that primarily equids and bovids are represented. In addition, the most exciting faunal remains revealed by this test excavation was the partial skeleton of a small bovid laying in articulated position and somewhat reflexed or "curled up", and associated with several stone artifacts (fig. 9, square J2). Bones of the animal include mainly axial elements such as the scapula, vertebrae, and pelvis. This find, in addition to the stratigraphic context, suggests a minimal disturbance of the site.

In terms of spatial distribution, the vertical dispersion of artifacts and bones combined with the stratigraphy show that the archaeological occurrences are concentrated in a single horizon, and might represent deposition on a contemporaneous land surface (fig. 10). The horizontal spatial pattern indicates a relatively low density distribution (an average of 5 items by square meter) (fig. 9). There is also a quantity of natural cobbles distributed across one side of the excavation ; but absent on the eastern side. The significance of the co-occurrence of the stone artifacts, animal bones (including the partial, articulated skeleton), and unmodified cobbles in low densities in a fine grained clay context will be investigated further next field season.

CONCLUSION

The field work undertaken at Ain Hanech over this past summer has produced the following results and preliminary conclusions:

- 1) Detailed stratigraphic sections of the site were drawn.
- 2) Samples of fine-grained sediments were taken for paleomagnetic analysis, which is currently being conducted by Dr. Frank Brown at the University of Utah.
- 3) Identification of the Lower Pleistocene archaeological occurrences were made, including a fine-grained clay horizon which extends laterally for hundreds of meters.
- 4) The mode II (Acheulean) technology artifacts do not appear to be associated with the Oldowan materials stratigraphically. They appear to represent a later phase of another hominid occupation that has eroded from a higher strata. Because of erosion near the Ain Hanech site it was not found in situ ; but probably can be found in context at the top of the Ain Boucherit section lateral to the Ain Hanech site.

5) The lower Pleistocene archaeological materials, including polyhedral cores, flakes, and fossil animal bones, occur *in situ* within a very fine gray clay deposit, suggesting relative low energy deposits. The artifacts uncovered *in situ* were in very good, fresh condition, and did not have the weathered, abraded appearance of some of this surface finds.

6) The Ain Hanech site is likely to be among North Africa's earliest evidence of hominid behavioral occupation patterns that will be studied including technological abilities, raw materials manufacture and transport, cognition, subsistence, and land use.

In sum, the 1922 field season has established the foundation for continued archaeological research at Ain Hanech. Next year we plan to expand the excavation adjacent to this year's dig to incorporate much a larger spatial area, and retrieve larger sample of stone artifacts and fossil mammalian bones. With further excavations, it is likely that hominid fossils of *Homo erectus* will be also be uncovered in the future.

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