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THE LOWER PALAEOLITHIC DWELLING STRUCTURE AT PŘEZLETICE AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE

ABSTRACT — The dwelling structure discovered at Přezletice Lower Palaeolithic site (Cromerian Interglacial, c. 0.7 million years B.P.) stood originally in an open site where it was sheltered from the north by a phthanite cliff which delimited a relatively small area on the bank of a sheet of water in the Elbe river system. This structure can be classified as a surface shelter with a probably vaulted roof, fixed in a foundation bank of local stones and earth (external dimensions about 4×3 m), opened to the narrow space between the shelter and the cliff face; a simple fireplace was made in this space, and the activity of the inhabitants was concentrated round this fireplace (the shelter seems to have served only as a sleeping place). This dwelling structure was most probably used during winter. From the age assigned to the archaeological stratum, it can be claimed that the structure found at Přezletice is the oldest known man-made dwelling in Europe; the same can be said of the fireplace connected with it.

KEY WORDS: Lower Palaeolithic — Přezletice — Dwelling structure — Fireplace.

The advancement of modern investigations into Palaeolithic settlements is manifested mainly in a rapid increase of knowledge of dwelling structures as the most important features found in such settlements. A qualitative forward step was made around 1960 when the presence of artificial structures was evidenced in Middle (Molodova I, 1959) and Lower (Olduvai DK 1A, 1962) Palaeolithic settlements. The early age of the discoveries in African localities has not yet been surpassed in other continents. In Europe, a number of important discoveries has been made since that time; nevertheless, their age does not exceed roughly the level of the Holstein interglacial (Bilzingsleben, Nice/Terra Amata, the Normandy coastal localities — Fermanville/Port Pignot, St. Germain-des-Vaux/La Roche Gélétan). An exception is provided by the French locality Soleihac, dating

from early Mindel, but here the situation is unclear to the extent that the character of the structure or structures that probably existed here cannot be closer determined.

In such circumstances, the observation made during investigations into a Lower Palaeolithic settlement from the Cromerian interglacial (G/M) at Přezletice near Prague (conducted by Dr. J. Fridrich, CSc., of the Archaeological Institute, C.A.S., in Prague since 1967) is certainly interesting. In that locality which, at the time of the settlement, was a rather narrow stripe between the shore of a major sheet of water and a probably steep phthanite cliff several metres high, a roughly oval ground plan was discovered, delimited by a more or less continuous ring of bigger and smaller phthanite rocks of local origin. The outer dimensions of this ground plan are approximately 3×4 m, the inner area is roughly 3×1.5 —2 m and is practically free of finds. The circumference — remains of a loamy and stony foundation bank — is interrupted on the S side by a gap

This paper was presented at the symposium on the earliest architecture held in Brno, Anthropos Institute on November, 11, 1986.

which most probably arose by secondary solifluction down a gentle slope. The opposite gap on the N side against the cliff face is less distinct. The position of the fireplace, which is situated about 1 m north of this gap — between the ground plan and the cliff — and surrounded by a distinct accumulation of finds (about a fourth part of the entire stony artifacts and faunal remains from this horizon) supports the assumption that here it is necessary to look for the entrance to the interior of the delimited area. No fireplace was found within the circumference of the stony bank.

In general, the interpretation of remains of Lower and Middle Palaeolithic settlement features meets with difficulties arising, on the one hand, from statistically negligible number of comparative archaeological material and its diverse quality or "readability" and, on the other, from the limited importance of ethnographic observations made in settlements of primitive hunter-gatherer groups of the present world: the significance of this major interpretation tool decreases with increasing time distance, especially beyond the limits of the present anthropological type; ethnography does not provide equivalents of Lower Palaeolithic human groups with their mental possibilities and technical skill. It is, however, certain that any real interpretation of intentional structures would be impossible without using ethnographic parallels, however remote they may be, and thus it cannot be abandoned. In the case of a simple hunter-gatherer dwelling, the general practical properties of which may have become established very early and for long, we are entitled to consider, at least in a general way, both Upper Palaeolithic and ethnographic analogies, of course respecting the principles regulating the use of such analogies.

Present knowledge indicates that Přezletice belongs to the period in which the use of fire, concentration of the finds and construction of artificial, closed dwelling structures can be considered. A comparison with features considered as dwellings in Lower Palaeolithic settlements, with those of the Middle and Upper Palaeolithic and with the admissible ethnographic analogies opens the interpretation that the situation discovered at Přezletice represents a closed dwelling structure with a roof based on a foundation bank of an oval ground plan.

This is a surface structure, comparable with the known Lower and Middle Palaeolithic dwellings (except for unclear or questionable situations). The surface character and the way in which it has been founded determine its type. It should be noted that the diversity of types is rather great even in periods prior to the Upper Palaeolithic. In the case of the Přezletice structure there is no need to consider it as a screen. The ground plan is closed and, moreover, its position excludes its interpretation as a lean-to although the existence of such a type is suggested, e.g., by a rather similar situation at the partly protected settlement at Fermanville. In the Lower Palaeolithic of Europe, tent-like, closed surface dwellings are the most frequent. The thoroughly constructed foundation bank at Přezletice suggests that the object can be classified as a firm surface hut. The solid foundation, construc-

tion, closure and isolation of such dwellings indicates that they may have mainly been inhabited in winter under relatively adverse climatic conditions. That is why a major development of such dwellings is observed in the Upper Palaeolithic. However, the type occurs even earlier; it can be assumed to have occurred at Bilzingsleben, in the Normandy localities or, somewhat later, at Bečov where the foundation of the construction clearly belongs to this group. It is certainly not accidental that the above constructions form the northernmost limit of the hitherto known dwellings of the Lower and Middle Palaeolithic.

Prolonged seasonal use of the dwelling structure at Přezletice is indicated, on the one hand, by the firm foundation mentioned above, which would be useless and too laborious for short-time use (even if assuming that at least the biggest rock of the foundation bank could have been found in situ and used as part of the foundation) and, on the other, by the considerable number of finds in close proximity of the ground plan (over 300 stone artifacts and almost 1 000 fragments of animal bones). The use as a winter dwelling is the most probable. This is seemingly complicated by the situation of the fireplace outside the dwelling. One may assume, however, that the rather small inner space was used for sleeping (as evidenced even by the absolute sterility of the interior in contrast to the rich finds outside, particularly on the N side around the fireplace). In such case, placing the fireplace inside the small space would be unsuitable. A similar ratio of inside/outside finds was ascertained in the dwellings at Bilzingsleben, this analogy being the most evident. The assumed winter use of the dwelling is not refuted by the fact that all working activities took place outside it, considering the character of the Cromerian climate and the circumstance that the small space, heated by the fireplace, open towards the south and sheltered by both the cliff and the dwelling, created its own favourable microclimate.

An interior fireplace is not typical of Lower and Middle Palaeolithic dwellings. In some localities no fireplaces occur in connection with dwellings (e.g., Ariendorf, Soleihac, Latamné, Rheindahlen 2, practically all African localities); in others the fireplace is also situated outside the dwelling, either near its entrance (as at Přezletice) or at some other place outside (Bilzingsleben, Fermanville, Rheindahlen 1, St. Germain-des-Vaux). In this point the situation at Přezletice is not beyond the current knowledge, the same as regards the form of the fireplace which is simply built on the ground without any further adaptations.

In a period when the relatively favourable climate together with man's low technological level and, certainly higher power of resistance (lower pretentiousness) did not create conditions for more intensive building activities, one must assume that most thoroughly founded (and hence archaeologically documented) dwelling structures served for winter use. The dimensions of their ground plans are generally somewhat smaller than those of the Upper Palaeolithic ones: all metric data on the hitherto known Lower and Middle Palaeolithic objects indicate an oval ground plan 4.5×3.5 m in average dimensions; cases

admitting classification as firm surface dwellings, only 3.5×3 m. The dimensions of the stone structure at Přezletice correspond almost exactly with this average size.

The entrance to such habitation is usually on the S to E side, provided that its orientation can be ascertained at all. In this point, the object at Přezletice is anomalous but the northern entrance is justified, considering the situation of the fireplace and the working space sheltered by the cliff; here, too, the entrance is oriented towards the warmest and most sheltered side.

Considering the old age of the locality at Přezletice, special emphasis should be placed on the presence of a fireplace. A fireplace evidences an advanced stage of development from a temporary, camp site to a true, organised settlement in which the fireplace is the central point, no less important than the dwelling structure itself. With the knowledge of human settlements with evident organisation of the dwelling space dating from over 1.5 million years ago, one must assume, for the same period, beginning knowledge of fire although the earliest dated evidence of fire is exceptional and problematic and, moreover, the evidence is never associated with a dwelling structure. In Europe (omitting in this case the problematic finding at Šandalja), priority has been postulated for the Escale Cave (France), with a palaeomagnetic dating from 0.7 million years ago and certainly without any dwelling structure.

All the above field observations and primary archaeological analogies enable us to conclude that the dwelling structure discovered in the Lower Palaeolithic locality at Přezletice (Cromerian, about 700 000 years ago) can be classified in the type group of firm surface huts, with a probably vaulted roof, made of thick branches or thin poles, supported by a foundation bank of big rocks of local origin, supplemented by smaller stones and earth. The dwelling stood in an open (or partly sheltered) settlement protected from the N by a phthanite cliff which delimited a rather small space between its foot and the

shore of a water sheet connected with the river bed of the early Elbe River. This delimitation caused that the entrance to the dwelling was not oriented towards the river (towards the south) but towards the space between the shelter and the cliff where a simple fireplace was situated, providing an activity centre of the inhabitants. The dwelling structure was apparently used as a sleeping place and hence its floor lacked any finds whatever. Together with the fireplace and the working place (accumulation of finds) it formed a dwelling complex serving as a base camp for seasonal (apparently winter) stay of a small hunter-gatherer group.

From the age of the layer of this site one may conclude that the finding at Přezletice is the oldest hitherto known human dwelling structure in Europe; the same is true of the fireplace associated with it.

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