

## The Women of Brassempouy: A Century of Research and Interpretation

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*The discovery of female figurines at Brassempouy in the 1890's would launch more than a century of debate and interpretation concerning Paleolithic representations of women. The figurines emerged from the ground into a colonial intellectual and socio-political context nearly obsessed with matters of race. This early racial interpretive frame would only be replaced in the mid 20th century, when prehistorians turned to questions such as fertility and womanhood.*

*The first figurines were discovered in 1892 under rather tortured circumstances in which their very ownership was the subject of a heated dispute between Edouard Piette and Emile Cartailhac. Their toxic relationship would lead Piette, in his subsequent excavations, to be extremely precise about issues of stratigraphic and spatial provenience. Piette's publications and archives enabled Henri Delporte to confirm the Gravettian attribution of the figurines and have allowed the present author to create a map of their spatial distribution within the site.*

*Technological and microscopic analysis of the Brassempouy figurines resolves some lingering questions about the sex of certain of the figurines and suggests an original context of figurine fabrication and the abandonment of unsuccessful sculpting attempts.*

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**KEY WORDS:** Brassempouy; grotte du Pape; Venus figurines; female statuettes.

### INTRODUCTION

Paleolithic images of women are among the most fertile sources of debate in all of archaeology. At the same time, they remain one of the most poorly known, with few specialists having actually studied large numbers of them first hand. The consequence has been that they have frequently been the subject of generalizing stereotypes (Nelson, 1990) that have not taken into consideration

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their morphological variation, the technology underlying their production and the archaeological contexts in which they are found. There has also been a very real lack of consideration of the original intellectual and historical contexts that result in today's spontaneous use of terms such as venus, goddess and fertility figure. In reality, these latter interpretations (disguised as descriptive terms) are of recent manufacture (White, 2003b). As we shall see below, at the time of their first discovery in the late 19th century, the question of their racial origin dominated discourse about them.

Especially since World War II, a diversity of interpretive frames has been applied to Paleolithic female images (Delporte, 1993b; White, 1995) with the focus shifting to their status as women. First phrased in terms of fertility, reproduction and religious power (for example, Gimbutas, 1989), interpretive emphasis has more recently tilted to questions of gynecology and obstetrics (Duhard, 1993a, 1993b), womens' status, roles and sexual division of labor (Soffer *et al.*, 2000), different facets of womanhood (Rice, 1981) and even women as sexual objects (Guthrie, 1979). There has also been a newfound emphasis on representational techniques (Gvozdover, 1989; White, 1997a, 1997b; Roussot, 1995) and viewing perspectives (McDermott, 1996). Here, I leave aside many of these more recent developments. Instead, I seek to illuminate our understanding by focusing on the figures from Brassempouy, the first assemblage of Gravettian (ca. 28–22,000 BP) female figurines to be published, exploring various aspects of their discovery, interpretation and the intellectual context into which they emerged from the sediments of SW France.

The sculpted figure known as *La Dame à la capuche*, from the *grotte du Pape* at Brassempouy in the southwest corner of France, is one of the most frequently reproduced and widely appreciated objects in the entire archaeological record. Photographic images of this tiny sculpture of a human head have appeared in generations of American college textbooks and have adorned the covers of countless compendia of prehistoric art. Surprisingly, only a hard core of prehistoric art specialists is aware of the circumstances of her discovery and of the fact that she was accompanied by several other sculpted human images. The ultimate goal of this paper is to provide a better contextualization of the *Dame à la capuche* and her sisters in historical, stratigraphic, technological and social terms.

Specifically, I seek to

1. Describe the stage-setting events in French prehistory that preceded the discoveries by Edouard Piette of female images at Brassempouy
2. Outline the tortured history surrounding the excavations at Brassempouy that led to the discovery of the figurines,<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Tomaskova (2003) has underscored the impact of such local histories on modern archaeological understanding.

3. Discuss the archaeological and stratigraphic context in which they were found, using both published accounts and previously unpublished archival sources,
4. Present and evaluate some of the interpretive highlights of their early career as archaeological icons, notably their insertion into scientific and popular ideologies linking race and evolution,
5. Describe and illustrate my own technological and microscopic analysis of the *Dame à la capuche* and the other Brassempouy figurines, the results of which, even through the fog of 115 years, suggest a context of figurine fabrication and the abandonment of unsuccessful sculpting attempts.

### PREAMBLE TO THE BRASSEMPOUY DISCOVERIES

The first Upper Paleolithic representation of a woman was discovered in about 1864 by the Marquis de Vibraye at Laugerie-Basse (Dordogne), in the immediate aftermath of the pioneering excavations by Lartet and Christy at this site and others in and around Les Eyzies-de-Tayac. This 7.7 cm tall sculpture in ivory (Fig. 1) was named *La Vénus impudique* (the immodest Venus) by its discoverer and is also sometimes referred to as the *Vénus de Vibraye*. The term *Vénus* was almost certainly applied in evocation of classical antiquity and in recognition of her graceful form. She is headless, footless, armless and breastless. Her legs are separated each from the other, and she has a strongly incised vaginal opening. She is most often interpreted as a pre-pubescent girl. Her attribution to the Magdalenian is certain, as this is the only Paleolithic culture present in the Laugerie-Basse sequence.

Yet another Magdalenian female representation (Fig. 1) was discovered a few years later<sup>3</sup> at Laugerie-Basse by the abbé Landesque. It was stunningly different from the *Vénus impudique* in that the woman in question, almost certainly a pregnant adult, was part of a complex composition engraved on a palmate fragment of antler. She is positioned beneath and behind the rear quarters of a male reindeer and is engraved using the same false-relief technique as the latter. Apparently, her head has been lost to prehistoric breakage of the support piece. Her feet resemble the hoofs of the associated reindeer and her arms are upraised in front of her missing face. Her abdomen is clearly pregnant and covered with hundreds of small tool incisions evoking body hair or clothing. Her wrists show engraved cuffs or bracelets and the base of her missing neck shows a collar or necklace.

The absence of the word *Vénus* from published descriptions of this object can perhaps be understood by the fact that her physical form does not correspond to the canons of classical antiquity, ever moreso because she is engraved rather than sculpted in the round. Most relevant for the current discussion is that she was

<sup>3</sup>In the intervening years, another sculpted figure, much more abstract, was discovered by Dupont (in 1867) at Trou-Magrite in Belgium.



**Fig. 1.** Left: “La Vénus impudique,” (the immodest venus) Magdalenian, Laugerie-Basse, Dordogne. Right: “La Femme au renne, Magdalenian, Laugerie-Basse, Dordogne (Photos, R. White).



**Fig. 2.** Edouard Piette (b. March 11, 1827, d. June 5, 1906) at about the time of his excavations at Brassempouy (Phototype Berthaud).

purchased from Landesque by the renowned French prehistorian, Edouard Piette (Fig. 2), who labelled her *La Femme au renne* (the woman with reindeer). Prior to his death in 1906, Piette would donate her to the *musée des Antiquités nationales* at Saint Germain-en-Laye (Reinach, 1906).

At the time of Edouard Piette's excavations at Brassempouy, the only other published human figures from the Upper Paleolithic were engraved male images

of Magdalenian age: *L'Homme au bâton sur l'épaule*, found by Lartet and Christy at La Madeleine (Dordogne), and *L'Homme et l'aurochs*, discovered by Massenat at Laugerie-Basse (Dordogne).

Finally, in 1883 and again in 1892–95, several discoveries were made of female figurines at the sites of *Barme Grande* and the *Grotte du Prince*, at Grimaldi on the Franco-Italian frontier. Although most of these discoveries occurred prior to Piette's excavations at Brassempouy from 1894 to 1897, they were kept a closely guarded secret for commercial and legal reasons (Bisson and White, 1996; White and Bisson, 1998). The Grimaldi figurines first became known to Piette in the spring of 1896 (Piette to Reinach, April 5, 1896 – MAN archive no. 129; Piette to Reinach, June 12, 1896; MAN archive no. 133) prior to the controversial 1898 publication of one of these objects (Reinach, 1898), acquired by Reinach on behalf of the musée des Antiquités nationales at Saint Germain-en-Laye (Piette, 1902).

In sum, Piette seems not to have been aware of the existence of the Grimaldi figures until 1896, well after the discovery of all but one of the female figurines at Brassempouy in 1892 and 1894. Piette would subsequently purchase, sometime between 1898 and 1902, seven of the Grimaldi female figurines from their excavator, Louis Alexandre Jullien. These would play a rôle in Piette's struggle to interpret Upper Paleolithic images of women. Most importantly for our purposes, Piette would name and describe these figurines in detail, providing clues about his conceptual and theoretical frame of mind. Moreover, his correspondence with representatives of the St. Germain museum yields precious insights into the deeply-entrenched, ideological underpinnings of his interpretations.

At the close of the 19th century, following his excavations at Brassempouy to be discussed below, Edouard Piette owned, literally, almost all of the Upper Paleolithic female figures known to prehistoric science (Piette, 1907). Piette's influential approach to figurine nomenclature, as well as his detailed reading of the figurines, took place against a backdrop of questions concerning the African origins of Upper Paleolithic peoples or, more correctly, the primitive status of modern Africans.

Apart from occasional comments about attractive contours, the status of the figurines as women was largely irrelevant to his interpretive priorities. Piette actually states that the only reason that he focused on descriptions of women in his racial analyses was, "because I have never seen a male statuette from these periods (Piette, 1894a, pp. 21–22)." At a time when French physical anthropology and prehistory were dominated by the racial preoccupations of Paul Broca and René Verneau, sculpted representations of humans constituted precious evidence of ancient European populations (see also Lalanne, 1913) and links with Africa.

Moreover, by the late 19th century new chronostratigraphic and culture-geographic understandings had developed in the works of Lartet and Christy (1875), Gabriel de Mortillet (1821–1898) and Piette himself. This was a very different intellectual climate from that of the early 1860's when classical Venuses



and art-for-art's-sake could be placed hand in glove in the near total absence of archaeo-stratigraphic knowledge and non-Western ethnographic analogies pertinent to questions of art and representation. We shall see below that an additional factor was the turn-of-the-century resurrection and appropriation of all things African in the French scientific, artistic and popular imagination.

It will not be my goal here to summarize the interpretive frameworks that developed in the second half of the 20th century, but rather to underline the dominance of race in Piette's view of things. This emphasis on race prior to World War I has been largely ignored in most historical overviews. Even Delporte (1993b), whose chronicle of interpretations is otherwise rather comprehensive, spends barely a paragraph on readings of the figurines that focus on race. By lumping racial interpretations within the broader class of "realistic" readings of the figurines, he misses an opportunity to explore the socio-political and historical underpinnings of this phenomenon. After all, realistic readings need not have induced race. They could just as easily have focused on reproductive or sexual anatomy; these latter preoccupations, however, would arrive on the scene decades after Piette's death in 1906.

## EXCAVATION OF THE GROTTÉ DU PAPE, BRASSEMPOUY

### The AFAS Excavation of 1892 and the "Theft" of *La Poire*

The cave known as the *grotte du Pape* is located in the Chalosse region of the French department of Landes. It was discovered in 1880 during road-building operations on the property of the Comte de Poudenx who sponsored the first excavations in 1880 by P.-E. Dubalen, a pharmacist in the nearby village of St.-Sever, and later, curator of the regional museum in Mont de Marsan. Piette first visited the site in 1881 (Piette, 1894a, p. 12) on the invitation of P.-E. Dubalen and Joseph de la Porterie, a relative of the site's owner. At Piette's instigation (Piette, 1894a, p. 12), Dubalen (1881) published the first report on the site, consisting almost exclusively of Magdalenian materials from the upper levels of the *grotte du Pape*.

Then after several years of abandonment, excavations were resumed from 1891 to 1892 by Joseph de la Porterie and A.-L. Dufour. Descending into what we now know to be Solutrean and Gravettian layers exposed by Dubalen's removal of Magdalenian deposits, de la Porterie and Dufour would observe the importance of ivory objects. This would lead Piette to distinguish this "*Eburnéenne*" industry from the overlying "*Tarandienne*" industry where reindeer antler dominated (Piette, 1894a). In the winter of 1891–92, de la Porterie and Piette agreed to continue the work in collaboration.

Their plans were temporarily suspended when Piette made a decision that he would bitterly regret. On March 13, 1892, Dr. Emile Magitot, the head of the

physical anthropology section of the *Association française pour l'avancement de la science*, wrote to Piette asking whether he knew of a prehistoric site that could serve for an excursion by members of the Pau congress of the AFAS in September, 1892. Against his better instincts (Piette, 1894a, pp. 14–15), Piette informed him that Brassempouy, where de la Porterie had been excavating for two years, fit the bill. Piette then asked de la Porterie and the Comte de Poudenx to temporarily cede control of the site to the AFAS for their excursion, scheduled for September 19, 1892 (Piette, 1895a, p. 133). It was understood that after the excavations by the AFAS, de la Porterie would resume his excavations in collaboration with Piette.

On September 10, 1892, Piette returned to Brassempouy for the first time since 1881 (Piette, 1892, p. 274). Piette, de la Porterie, the AFAS's Magitot, Emile Cartailhac (the preeminent French prehistorian from Toulouse), and a local workman, met at Brassempouy, spending an hour or two excavating in *l'Avenue* (Cartailhac, 1892; Piette, 1892). There they collected numerous objects, observing a Solutrean layer, the exact nature and stratigraphic position of which they hoped would be resolved during the AFAS excursion. They were invited to dine at the Comte de Poudenx's residence that evening. At the request of de la Porterie, the count gave his approval not only for excavations during the September 19 excursion, but also for preparatory work including tree removal (Piette, 1892, p. 275).

Piette's plan was to have his trusted de la Porterie supervise the preparatory work. However, as he had other obligations during this period, Dubalen was assigned to help him (Magitot, 1892). In reality, de la Porterie would not join him on site until the very morning of the excursion on September 19 (Piette, 1892, p. 275; Dubalen, 1893a). Things would quickly go from bad to worse.

Twelve workmen were employed to prepare the site for the excursion. They arrived on the morning of September 15 and, astonishingly, worked unsupervised for nearly two days before Dubalen would finally arrive on the scene the afternoon of September 16. By then, the damage had been done. After all, these were untrained agricultural workers whose only instructions were to clear the site. This they accomplished with great enthusiasm, by turning the soil with standard agricultural picks. Objects found during these preparations were set aside in a nearby house to be shown to the members of the AFAS excursion. So disturbed were the previously exposed archaeological layers that no stratigraphic analysis was possible when the excursionists arrived to make matters worse in what Henri Delporte (1993b, p. 21) would describe as one of the greatest looting episodes in the history of Prehistory.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup>As tragic as it was from a modern perspective, such uncontrolled digging in the context of congress excursions was standard fare right up to World War II when the law of 1941 imposed greater controls on the excavation process. For example, no less eminent an organization than the *Société Préhistorique Française* undertook precisely the same kind of sanctioned pillaging in an excursion to the abri des Merveilles (Dordogne) during its Périgueux congress in 1934 (Guichard, 1935).



According to Piette (1892, 1893, 1895a, 1895b), upon arrival on-site, each of the forty participants chose a sector and, with improvised tools or with picks and digging tools brought for the purpose, went to work with the implicit understanding that most discovered objects would remain the property of the finder. The preparatory work was badly done and the AFAS excursionists arrived to find the Solutrean exposures covered with backdirt, rendering any serious stratigraphic work impossible (Piette, 1895a, p. 134). When the excursionists went to work, no stratigraphic control was exercised. Although chaotic digging took place inside and outside the *grotte du Pape*, the excavations focused on a sagittal trench running outward from the cave opening, in what is generally known as “*l’Avenue*” or sometimes “*l’Allée*.”

In a brief note published shortly after the excursion, Cartailhac (1892) states that, once assembled on-site, de la Porterie and Dubalen provided a history of excavations to the members of the excursion.

Soon after, they invaded the trenches. [ ] . . . everyone hastened to dig up the talus, working on his own behalf. They spoke little, each casting a furtive and jealous glance at their neighbor, who was suspected of having a better spot. The bags filled up.

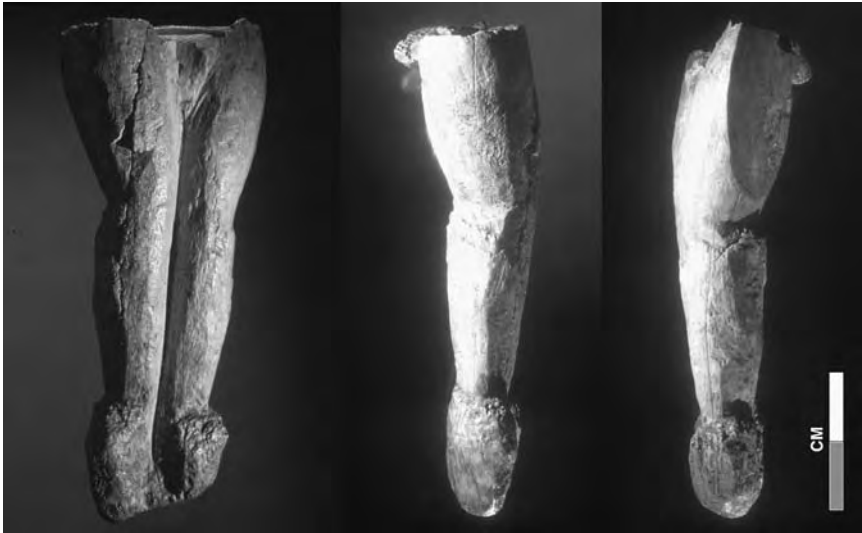
In the course of this “excavation” three sculpted ivory objects were found and surrendered to the AFAS representative, the physical anthropologist Emile Magitot:

1. The lower portion of an anthropomorphic figure (Fig. 3) subsequently named *l’Ebauche* (the rough-out) by Piette, due to its apparent unfinished nature;
2. A small, heavily worked fragment of ivory (Fig. 4), almost certainly a figurine fragment;
3. A *bouchon à outre* (skin-bag plug) (Fig. 5-2).

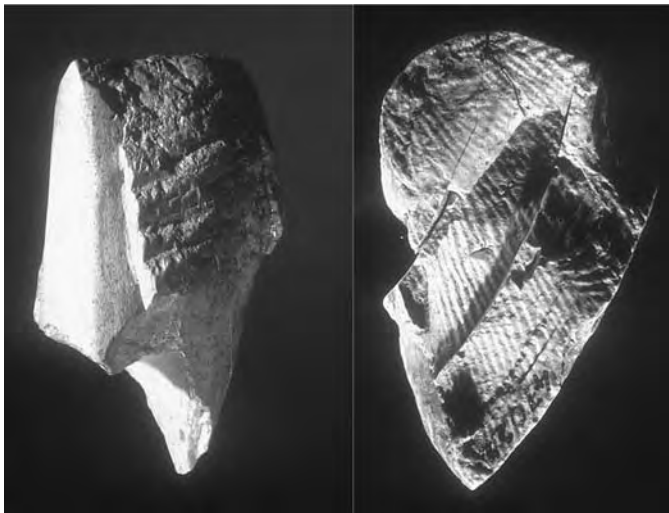
Given the anarchical nature of the AFAS excavation, it is entirely probable that other important objects were never surrendered by the excavators.<sup>5</sup>

Piette was present during this debacle and, in spite of the poor conditions of discovery, he was able to interrogate Dubalen as to the find locations of important objects found during the preparations and on the day of the excursion. As a result, we know (Piette, 1895a, p. 148) that *L’Ebauche* was found by the AFAS workmen in the right-hand side of the cave (when facing out from the entrance). As for *Le Fragment*, we know only that it was left on site by the AFAS diggers and later recovered by the site’s owner, the Comte de Poudenx.

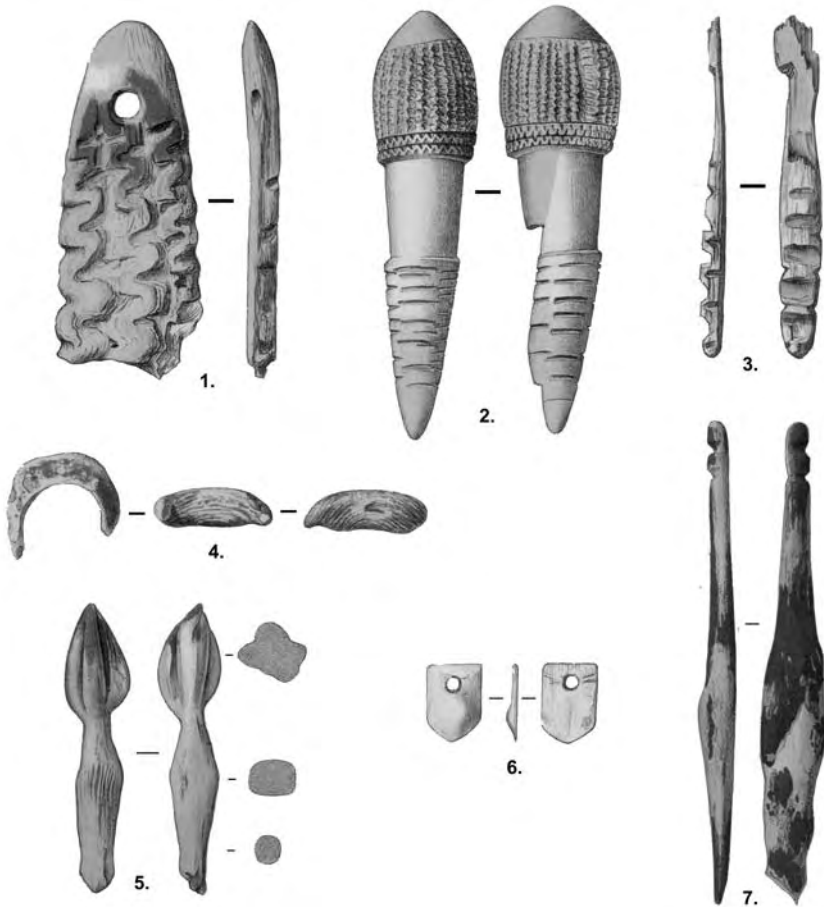
<sup>5</sup>Not a single figurine is attributed with certainty to the AFAS trench in *l’Avenue*, although it remains possible that *le Fragment* was derived therefrom. Either none were found there, or those that were uncovered were never surrendered to the AFAS representatives.



**Fig. 3.** The figurine fragment known as *L'Ebauche*, (the rough-out), found during the *AFAS* excursion of September 19, 1892 (Photo, R. White).



**Fig. 4.** *Le Fragment*, an unnamed, sculpted fragment of mammoth-ivory found during the *AFAS* excursion of September 19, 1892. It was left on site and later recovered by the site's owner, the Comte de Poudenx (Photo, R. White).



**Fig. 5.** Well known ivory objects from the *grotte du Pape* not discussed in detail here. 1, 3 and 6: Ivory pendants, almost certainly Gravettian, from de la Porterie’s 1891–92 excavations; 2: A so-called *bouchon à outre* in ivory, discovered during the AFAS excursion to Brassempouy on September 19, 1892; 4: The fragment of ivory ring found during preparations for the excursion. 7: So-called *navette* in ivory, recovered from the Magdalenian layer inside the *Grande Galérie*. (adapted from Piette, 1907).

According to Piette, the members of the AFAS excursion were unaware of dramatic events that had occurred on the evening before their arrival (Piette with Bertrand, 31 July, 1894, MAN archive no. 144):

Regrettable things happened during the Pau congress. On the eve of the visit to Brassempouy by members of the congress, Monsieur Trutat, accompanied by Monsieur X, came to the site where he found Monsieur Dubalen in charge of the association’s excavations. They went together to the house where artifacts from the site were stored and took them, dividing them up between them. Besides the steatopygous statuette which is now in the hands of Monsieur

Cartailhac, there was probably another, as well as some beautiful ivory sculptures. They took everything, both fauna and worked objects. They knew full well, but seemed not to care, that the next day their colleagues who had come from afar to visit the site, would be deprived of the means to appreciate it. They also knew that what they had taken belonged to others but committed the theft without batting an eye. Monsieur Trutat<sup>6</sup> is guilty of theft and Monsieur Dubalen of complicity and abuse of trust. Here are two rascals worthy of punishment. These wretches prevented the association from understanding the nature of the site and its contents. [...] The existence of the steatopygous race would have been recognized a full two years ago and, had they not been pilfered, the beautiful and interesting sculptures associated with the statuettes would have been published and admired by the public.<sup>7</sup>

Cartailhac's (1892) version was quite different from that of Piette concerning the artifacts from Dubalen's preparatory excavations. While Piette had said they were set aside for the appreciation of excursion members, Cartailhac claims that they were piled on tables on the site, and simply given to the AFAS diggers in a kind of free-for-all:

The objects from recent excavations, with the exception of a few pieces that were justifiably held back, were given to the participants. In less time than you can say it, large piles of bones and flint disappeared.

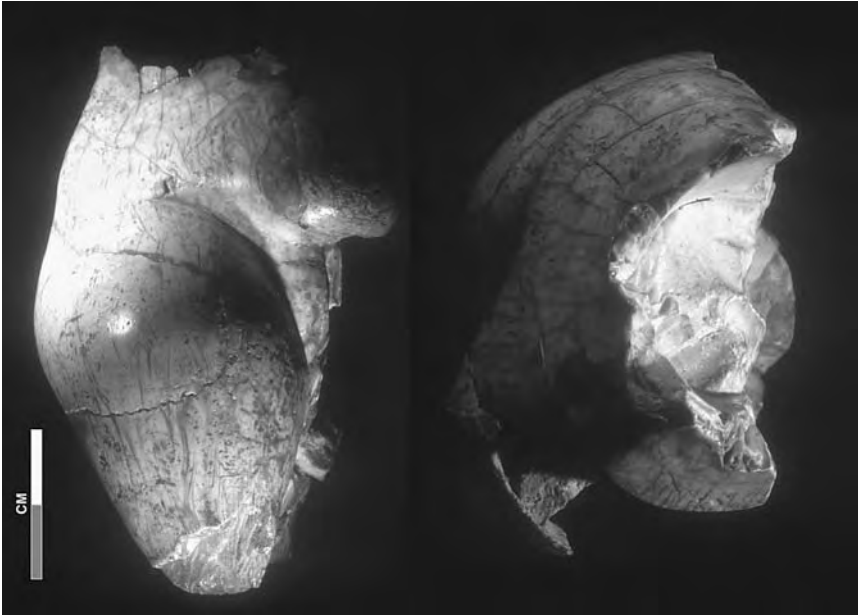
But the sun began to set and it was nearly time to leave. Before doing so, we did justice to the buffet which had so usefully taken the place of the fossils on the tables, and erudite discussions were rekindled with enthusiasm.

In sum, as if things were not bad enough, important objects belonging to the Comte de Poudenx had been stolen (according to Piette) and confided to Cartailhac of Toulouse. The latter retained these objects for more than two years (Regnault, 1895), even presenting *La Poire* before the *British Association for the Advancement of Science* (Cartailhac, 1894). He then anonymously published *La Poire* (Anonymous, 1894) according to the terms of a compromise struck with Piette (Piette to Reinach, July 27, 1894, MAN archive no. 145). It remained Piette's position, long after the "stolen" figurine had been returned, that Cartailhac still had in his possession important ivory objects from *la grotte du Pape*. These would only be returned to their owner,<sup>8</sup> the Comte de Poudenx, in 1895 (by which time Piette had negotiated the purchase of all of the statuettes from the latter). Among these was an ivory ring (Fig. 5-4) and the figurine (Fig. 6) known as *La Poire* (the Pear), given this name from the inception, by the workmen who found it, due to the shape of its enormous thighs.

<sup>6</sup>Eugène Trutat (1840–1910) was not an ordinary thief (Cartailhac, 1910). Indeed, he was a renowned photographer and geologist who, having been named Head Curator at the Muséum d'Histoire naturelle de Toulouse in 1866, was Emile Cartailhac's boss!

<sup>7</sup>For reasons of space, I have not reproduced the original French quotations. Readers who wish to obtain them are invited to request them from the author.

<sup>8</sup>The nature of the agreement with the Comte de Poudenx is unclear. If it was a lease, then the objects according to common practice at the time, probably belonged to the AFAS.



**Fig. 6.** Profile and top views of the mammoth-ivory figurine fragment known as *La Poire* (the pear), the only Brassempouy figurine that Piette labelled a Venus: *La Vénus de Brassempouy*. This name was almost certainly a reference to Sartje Baartman, the so-called Hottentot Venus (compare with Fig. 17). The prominent *mons venus* is visible in profile at left. Found during preparatory digging in the days immediately preceding the AFAS excursion of 1892, the damage wrought by Dubalen’s excavators is evident at right. (Photos, R. White).

Dubalen (1893a, b) provides yet a third account<sup>9</sup> of how *La Poire* ended up in Cartailhac’s hands. According to him, this statuette was found at about the time that the members of the excursion arrived on site on September 19. Dubalen showed it to several persons present, including Piette, but retained possession of it. He then mailed it to Magitot early the next morning. By implication, Magitot passed it on to Trutat and Cartailhac.

Unfortunately, in Dubalen’s absence, the “stolen” figurine had been badly shattered by the excavation tool of one of his workmen at the moment of its discovery. According to Emile Cartailhac (1894) and Adrien de Mortillet (1894, 1895), Dubalen succeeded in collecting several fragments and gave them to “one of his AFAS colleagues” who refitted them to reveal the form of a woman. In spite of the damage done to it (Fig. 6), it remains the subject of scientific curiosity and speculation. From Piette’s interrogation of Dubalen, we do know (1895, p. 143)

<sup>9</sup>Yann Potin, the leading expert on the history of the Brassempouy excavations, provides a detailed account of Piette’s accusations of theft, which, through the use of a pseudonym, targeted Magitot, Dubalen and Cartailhac (Potin, 2001, [in press](#)).

that *La Poire* was found in the right-hand (when looking outward) side of the cave near its eastern wall; in other words, in proximity to *L'Ebauche*.

For Piette, the excursion had the undesirable consequence of focusing attention on the richness of the *grotte du Pape* deposits. The day after the excursion, Cartailhac would propose to the Pau congress that he be given the remaining funds to continue excavations in the site, a direct challenge to Piette and de la Porterie which Piette justifiably read as hostility on the part of Southern French prehistorians toward the research activities of a northerner (Piette, 1894a; Reinach, 1896; Potin, 2001, *in press*). As if this were not bad enough, the site was partially looted by clandestine excavators in the days following the Pau congress.

### Piette and de la Porterie's Stratigraphic Excavations

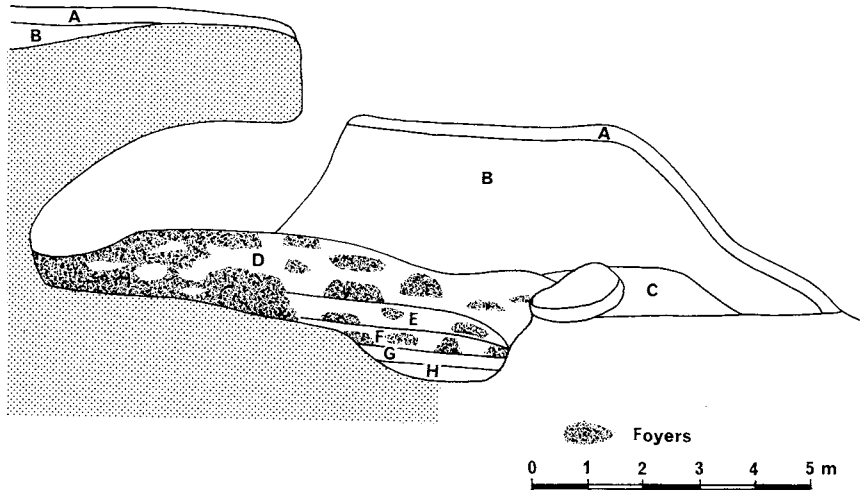
In the wake of the sanctioned pillaging of 1892, Piette and de la Porterie would win out over Cartailhac for the Comte de Poudenx's permission to continue excavations (Piette, 1894a,b,c,d,e; Piette and de la Porterie, 1894a,b). Their controlled excavations lasted for four seasons from 1894 to 1897 (Carrère, 2002). After cleaning up the mess left by the 1892 excursion and subsequent looting, they enlarged the trench in front of the *grotte du Pape* and rendered a series of stratigraphic profiles. For our purposes,<sup>10</sup> it is sufficient to present the sagittal profile (Fig. 7) of the *grotte du Pape* published by Piette in 1895. All available indications are that all the female figurines are from level E, attributed in today's terms to a Gravettian with Noailles burins (Delporte, 1993b).

It is noteworthy that, during the 1896 season, Piette and de la Porterie excavated part of the *Galérie du Puits*, the chamber to the right as one enters the *grotte du Pape* (Figs. 8 and 20). Here, they found a lower layer on bedrock, which seems to equate to the "statuette layer" (E) in *l'Avenue*, containing large quantities of completely disaggregated ivory but no figurines.

Also in 1896, they penetrated into the left gallery of the *grotte du Pape*, known as the *Grande Galérie*. In a very humid area at a point about 12 m from the entry, they observed a sequence of three stratigraphic levels, the lowest being on bedrock, sometimes in hollows in the bedrock itself. This lower layer contained huge quantities of ivory, which Piette argued had been accumulated and stored in the cave by the prehistoric occupants. This mass of ivory was so humid as to be in a near liquid state (the consistency of runny brie cheese according to Piette). In this lower layer was found the last of Piette's figurines from Brassempouy: *Le Torse*. In reading Piette and de la Porterie's account (1897, p. 168) of the state of preservation of this figurine, the reader will comprehend the strange, almost

<sup>10</sup>During the four years of excavation, they also explored the interior of the *grotte du Pape* (Solutrean, Magdalenian), extending their excavations deep into the *Grande Galérie* (a deep bifurcation of the *grotte du Pape*) in 1896; and they excavated the frontal portions of the *grotte des Hyènes* (Aurignacian) further along the hillside.





**Fig. 7.** Piette’s (1895) sagittal profile along “the Avenue.” A: Humic layer, B: Yellow silt (2 to 2.5 m thick), which Piette saw as a continuation of the Magdalenian layers inside the cave, C: Yellow blocky layer (90 cm thick) containing Solutrean pieces; restricted to the zone distal to the “avenue.”, D,E,F (taken together, from 1 to 2.5 m thick) : Yellow clay containing a series of layers attributed at the time to the Magdalenian, the Solutrean and the Mousterian, G: Sterile clay (25 cm thick), H: Sterile gravels (30 cm thick).

liquified appearance of the piece (Figs. 14 and 15). The question is also raised as to whether the concentration of figurines in *L’Avenue* might be in part due to preservation factors.

It was a pale chamois color when lifted out of the silt and, completely saturated, it was sticky to the touch. In drying out, it turned white and developed grey patches and black stains. It took two months for it to lose its tackiness.

Although Piette’s excavations were not up to modern standards, they were a model of stratigraphic control in the late 19th century. In particular, Piette was very attentive to the context in which the 1894–97 figurines were found and was extremely concerned to make observations related to the possible intrusion of the figurines, either by stratigraphic mixture or by trickery. His concern to allay all possible suspicion that the figurines were of recent manufacture derived from two factors.

First, both Piette and Reinach had noted the striking resemblance of certain of the Brassempouy pieces to Egyptian “dolls,” raising for them the possibility of recent intrusions.

Second, sculpted representations of “steatopygous” women were heretofore unknown and claims for their existence needed to be stratigraphically unassailable. Piette would only learn of the existence of the Grimaldi figurines in the late spring of 1896 (Piette to Reinach, 5 April and 12 June, 1896, Piette archive MAN, nos.

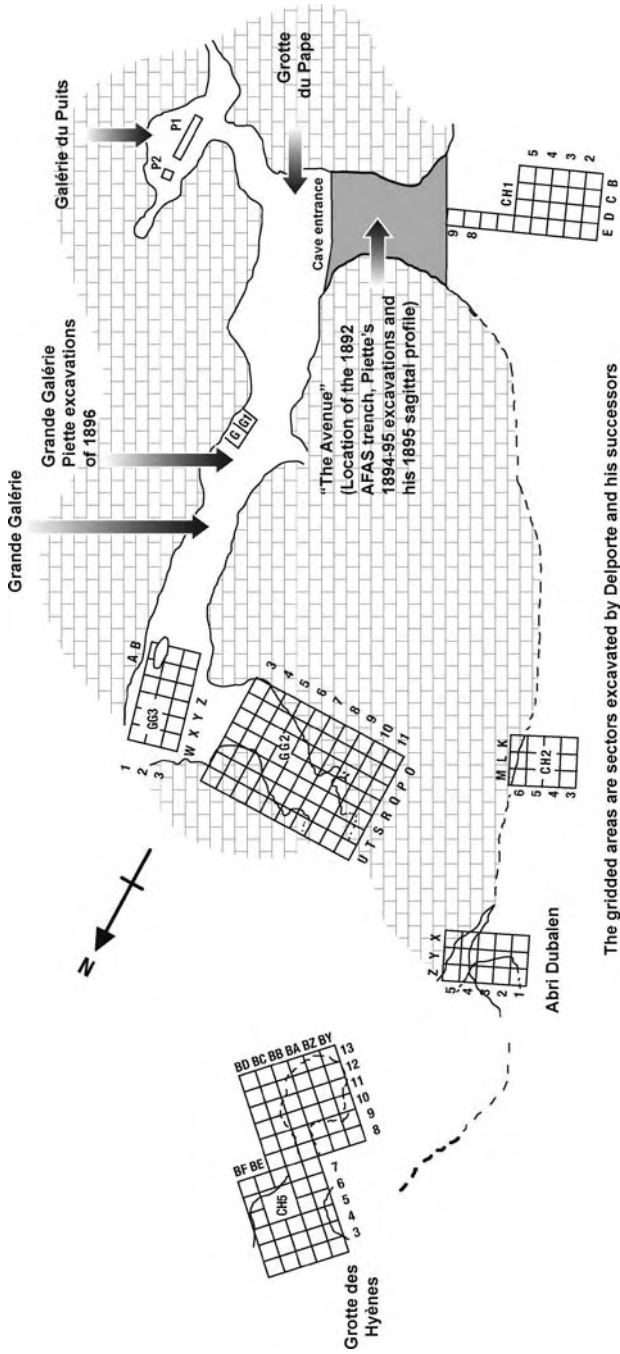


Fig. 8. The site of Brassempouy with the different sectors that have been excavated to date (adapted from Delporte, 1993b).



**Fig. 9.** Front and rear views of the ivory figurine fragment that Piette found in 1894 and named *Le Manche de poignard* (the dagger handle). He was particularly struck by the flaring hips that he interpreted as showing *gibbosités graisseuses* (fatty protuberances) (Photos, R. White).

129 and 133), at the beginning of the third year of his excavations at Brassempouy and after his excavations had already yielded at least five figurines.

### **The Excavations and Observations of Henri Delporte, 1981–2000**

When Henri Delporte resumed the excavations of the *grotte du Pape* in 1981, he was able to clarify the stratigraphic situation (Figs. 7 and 8), both on-site and by studying Piette's, Dubalen's and de la Porterie's collections. Briefly, he reconstructed the cultural stratigraphy as follows from bottom to top:

*base of level F*: archaic Mousterian, heavily patinated.

*within level F*: Early Aurignacian with carinate scrapers and typical bone and antler industry

*level E and the lower portion of level D*: Gravettian (Upper Périgordian) with numerous burins and Gravette points. No trace whatsoever of Aurignacian materials.

*upper portion of level D*: Protomagdalenian (terminal Gravettian) with blades up to 30 cm long

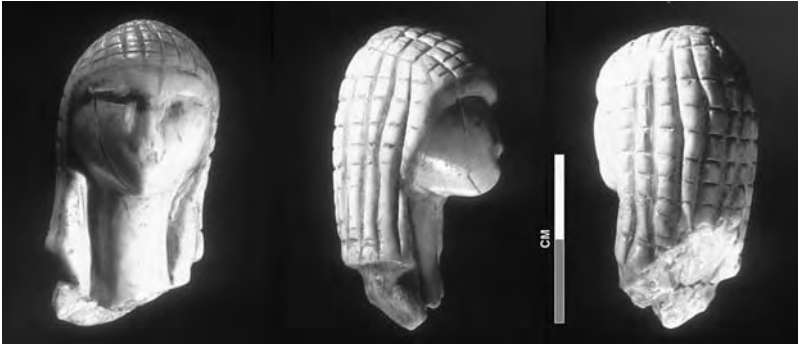


**Fig. 10.** Three views of the ivory figurine that Piette named *La Fillette* (the young girl). It was found by Piette's collaborator Mascaraux during the 1894 excavations. (Photos, R. White).

*level C*: a series of Solutrean occupations, with Middle Solutrean (laurel-leaf points on the bottom) overlain by Upper Solutrean (shouldered points)  
*levels A and B*: Middle Magdalenian (without harpoons) with forked base points and several animal engravings on bone fragments.

One should not underestimate the difficulty of Delporte's task. Piette seems to have kept stratigraphically distinct assemblages separate at the time of excavation. However, in his struggle to come to terms with assemblage differences and existing archaeological systematics, Piette apparently undertook considerable mixing and matching in the years following (Delporte, 1980).

It is noteworthy that Upper Paleolithic systematics in the 1890's were dominated by the ideas of Gabriel de Mortillet (1883), who had replaced Lartet's 1860's, faunal-based scheme with one based on typological evolution of lithic



**Fig. 11.** Three views of the ivory figurine that Piette found in 1894 and named *La Dame à la capuche* ou *La Figurine à la capuche* (the hooded woman or the hooded figurine). Although the object was found before his very eyes, and he cleaned the sediment off her himself, Piette was troubled by her resemblance to Egyptian dolls (Photos, R. White).



**Fig. 12.** Front and rear views of the ivory figurine fragment that Piette found in 1894 and named *La Figurine à la ceinture* (the belted figurine). Piette struggled with the similarities to Egyptian dolls and with her sexual attribution (Photos, R. White).

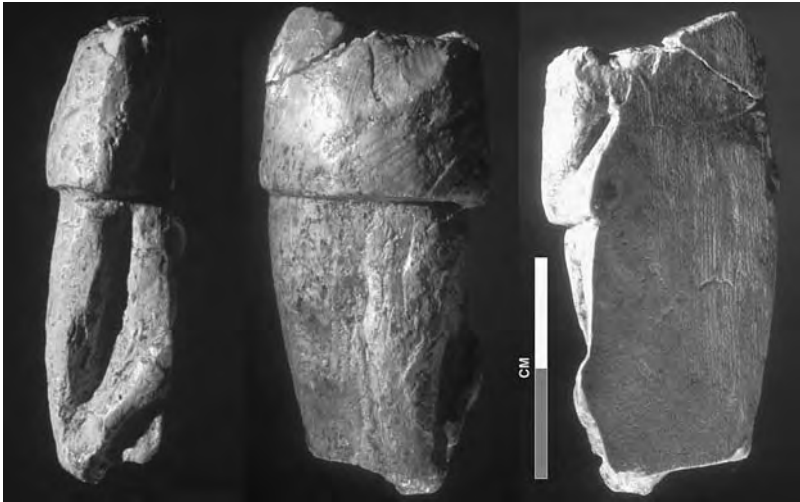


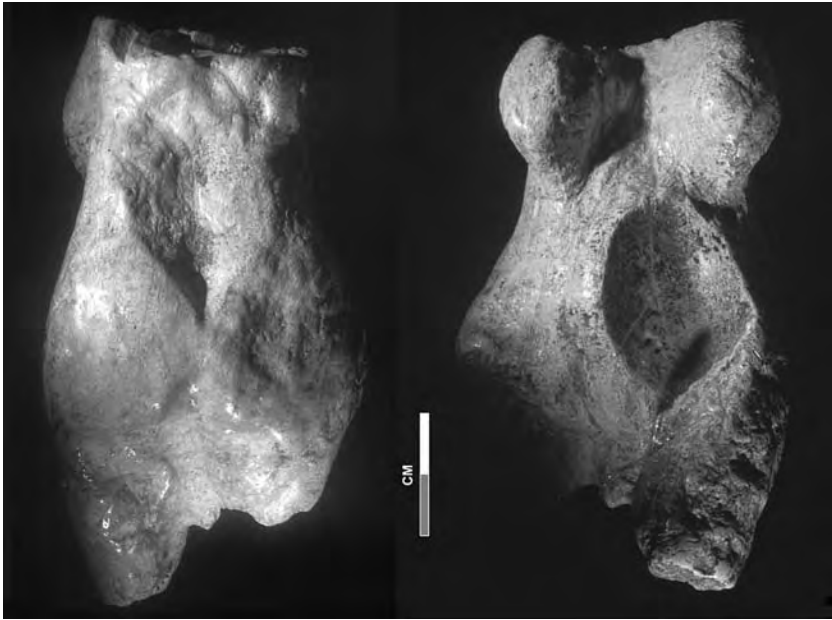
Fig. 13. Three views of the ivory figurine fragment that Piette found in 1894 and named *La Figurine à la pèlerine* (the caped figurine). (Photos, R. White).

industries. De Mortillet's scheme identified the following industrial stages, from oldest to youngest: Acheulean, Mousterian, Solutrean, Magdalenian. It would not be until Breuil's (1912) revision that French prehistorians would insert the Aurignacian between de Mortillet's Mousterian and Solutrean; and even then, the Aurignacian was recognized as having three sub-stages (Lower, Middle and Upper), which years later would be given separate status as today's archaeological cultures: Châtelperronian, Aurignacian and Gravettian respectively.

It is not surprising then, that Piette, excavating in the de Mortilletian pre-Solutrean blindspot, struggled to come to terms with the contents of levels D through F. Following Dubalen's lead (Dubalen, 1893b), he attributed the contents of these levels to what he called the Eburnian (= ivory) industry, broadly a variant of de Mortillet's Solutrean but, understandably, he was making it up as he went along (Delporte, 1987, 1996).

Delporte has constructed a credible new synthesis of the site, based upon a re-analysis of Piette's collections (Delporte, 1968, 1980) and new excavations adjacent to Piette's trenches (Fig. 8). According to Delporte's reading, in modern terms, the objects described in the original publications indicate a Magdalenian (level A, B), Solutrean (level C) and Protomagdalenian (level D) presence underlain by a Gravettian (Level E) industry (Gravette points, Noailles burins, bone and ivory points) and an Aurignacian (level F) one (Carinate scrapers). According to Piette's observations during his 1894 excavations which, as we have seen, were based on close supervision of the excavations, all of the figurines were found in Gravettian level E.



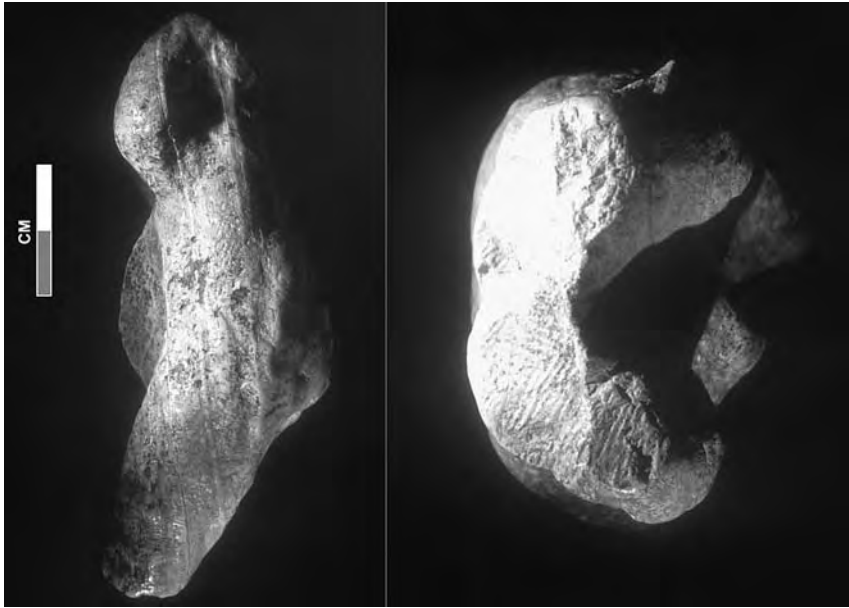


**Fig. 14.** Two views of *Le Torse*, discovered during the 1896 excavations in the frontal portion of the *Grande Galérie* (Photos, R. White).

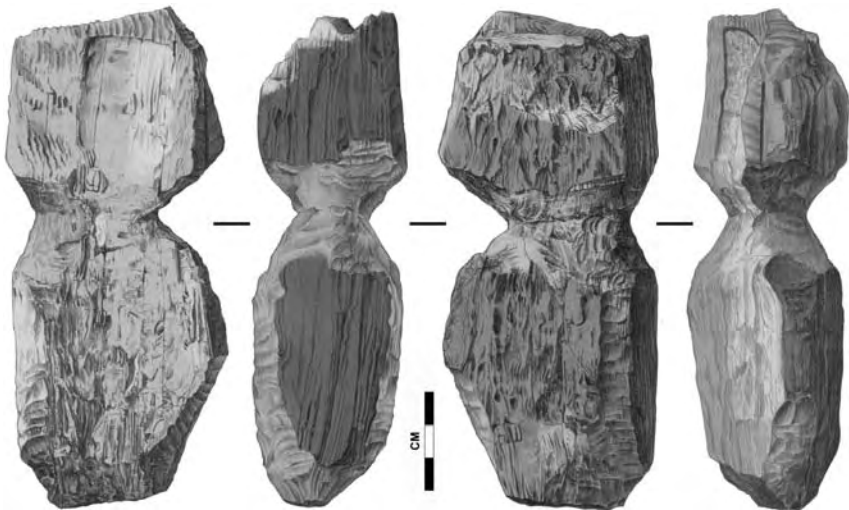
### STRATIGRAPHIC AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT OF THE FIGURINES ACCORDING TO PIETTE

Piette and de la Porterie’s 1894 excavations at the *grotte du Pape* focused on the intact zones bordering on the sagittal trench left by the 1892 excursion. According to Piette’s stratigraphy (Fig. 7), this trench ran from the cave entry outward to a point about 5–6 m from the overhang (Fig. 8), the sector known as *l’Avenue*. The statuette-bearing layer E was limited to that area of the Avenue bounded by limestone outcrops (Piette, 1895b).

The two figurines discovered by the AFAS workmen, *La Poire* and *L’Ebauche*, came from the right-hand side (as viewed facing outward from the entrance) of the cave itself. Cartailhac’s (1892, p. 298) observation on the heels of the AFAS debacle that, “the cave appears to be empty of deposits, but the talus extends out in front for a considerable distance” strongly implies that the cave entry proper had been emptied by the pre-1894 excavations. In any event, the cave itself did not yield female figurines to Piette and de la Porterie, with one exception, *Le Torse* (the torso), recovered in 1896 from the frontal portion of the *Grande Galérie* (Figs. 8 and 20). Apart from this piece, all of the figurines from Piette and de la Porterie’s excavation of the *grotte du Pape* are from *l’Avenue*, an area of roughly 5 m by 5 m.



**Fig. 15.** Profile and top views of *Le Torse* (the torso), showing the internal structure of mammoth-ivory (Photos, R. White).



**Fig. 16.** *L'Ebauche de Mascaraux*, an enigmatic, heavily worked, waisted ivory object from the 1894 excavation, found by Mascaraux, an occasional collaborator of Piette and de la Porterie. (adapted from Piette, 1907).

It is important to note that, according to Piette (Piette to Bertrand, August 21, 1894, MAN archive no. 141), the bottom of the *AFAS* trench adjacent to the find spots of his figurines, did not descend as far as Level E (that in which the 1894 sculptures were found). Therefore, it may be the case that, in parts of *l'Avenue*, the Gravettian, figurine-bearing, stratum escaped the ravages of the *AFAS* excursion.

In a letter to Saint Germain director Alexandre Bertrand at the end of the 1894 excavation, Piette provides (Piette to Bertrand, 31 July, 1894, MAN no. 144) an indication of the extent to which he personally supervised the *grotte du Pape* excavations:

If I haven't replied sooner to your benevolent letter, it is because I received it at Brassempouy where I was occupied by the excavations from 5 in the morning until 7 at night and because I could not leave my workmen even for an instant, as they were too inexperienced at this kind of work to be left without supervision even momentarily.

He then provides a revealing account of the 1894 results:

Our excavation was productive. Monsieur de la Porterie and I recovered more than 40 rhinoceros teeth, some mammoth teeth, some hyena mandibles, numerous awls and 5 human statuette fragments.

- 1<sup>0</sup> A dagger handle representing a woman of the steatopygous race
- 2<sup>0</sup> A very small figurine of a non steatopygous woman with long hair
- 3<sup>0</sup> A woman's head adorned with an Egyptian wig
- 4<sup>0</sup> A fragment of a figurine similar to Egyptian dolls, with footless legs ending in a point, and extremely short buttocks barely separated by a line. It is absolutely Egyptian, the only difference being that the author seems to have sought to represent a man
- 5<sup>0</sup> A fragment of statuette with a cape or sort of hooded shawl

### PIETTE'S CONCERNS ABOUT AUTHENTICITY

Piette continues in the above letter by raising the issue of authenticity; the similarities to Egyptian figurines were troubling to him.

Numbers 3 and 4, and perhaps number 5, are so Egyptian that we make them known only with the greatest reservation. It would not be the first time that someone buried objects of a different age in a prehistoric site in order that they be found by an excavator. There is no doubt in my mind that we observed no evidence of surface disturbance, and I am so experienced at excavating that I am sure I would have seen it if it existed. That said, my attention was not focused on this point, age is weakening my vision, even if I do not yet wear eyeglasses, even for reading; and the objects might have been buried for two years, which would have rendered almost invisible any traces. Consequently, we have felt obliged to be extremely careful about the authenticity of these statuettes, and wait to evaluate the significance of this discovery until it had been confirmed by other such finds.

As for numbers 1 and 2, they are obviously authentic. The existence of a steatopygous race and another race, living side by side, is confirmed. The results are already excellent. Finally, through a geological study of the site I was able to determine its age and characteristics.

The problem of authenticity was still bothering Piette a few days later (Piette to Bertrand, 4 August, 1894, MAN no. 143) when he evaluated the state of preservation of the ivory of the figurines against that of the ivory otherwise found in large quantities in the site. Within the site, he had observed different states of preservation according to the precise nature of the sediments in which it was found. The various states of preservation of the figurines matched nicely the different states of preservation of non figurine ivory<sup>11</sup> from the site:

At Brassempouy, we find ivory in three different states. The ivory in poorly developed fireplaces. It is blackish with a granular surface and delaminates easily, breaking into splinters; The ivory in ashy sediments. It is white but delaminates easily. Finally, there is the ivory found in ocre stained marlacious sediments. It is yellowish and quite compact, not subject to laminar separation. I recovered the steatopygous women from a fireplace; the head of Isis in ocre stained marlacious sediments; the other statuettes in ashy sediments. Consequently, the ivory of the head with the wig is less decomposed and less white than that of the other statuettes. But the figurine with pointed legs and short buttocks, which resembles an Egyptian doll and is even more Egyptian than the head with the wig, is in white, delaminating ivory like most of the mammoth ivories, and if she truly comes from the site so too does the head with the wig.

It is only out of prudence that I express some doubts, since I observed no sediment disturbance related to the introduction of the objects into the site. This discovery is so unanticipated and so unusual that we seek to confirm it.

I do not wish to focus on the issue of authenticity for, as we shall see below, there is little remaining doubt. Nonetheless, Piette's writings are very informative of his struggle as a scientist with the evaluation of a revolutionary and previously unobserved phenomenon. In some ways, it is equivalent to a physicist or a mathematician who, having made a revolutionary experimental observation, cannot believe his eyes; seeks to confirm, again and again, that there were no methodological or procedural flaws. In Piette's case, prudence and scepticism were undoubtedly intensified by the extraordinary events surrounding the *AFAS* excursion of 1892 and the toxic nature of his relationship with Cartailhac.

Weeks later, on August 21, 1894 (Piette to Bertrand, MAN Archive no. 141), Piette seems to have resolved with certainty the authenticity of at least two of the figurines, but was still troubled by those with Egyptian affinities. He shows us the classic problem of the archaeologist confronted by formal similarities across broad spans of space or time: independent invention? historical relationship? or stratigraphic intrusion?

I am pleased to send you the photographs of the statuettes that I found at Brassempouy. There is the trunk of a fat woman which had served as a dagger handle, and a small figurine carved in a stick of ivory, made with four strokes of a flint tool, both of which are certainly authentic.

<sup>11</sup>In his analysis, Piette seems unaware of the important structural differences within a single mammoth tusk.

There are two or perhaps three statuettes which are uncontestedly Egyptian in nature. One of them is the head of a woman of Mongoloid type, with an Egyptian wig. The other is the lower portion of a figurine wearing a belt without buckle and with footless legs that end in a point, like those of Egyptian dolls. Do these two latter figurines really come from the site or were they put there fraudulently? This latter hypothesis seems highly improbable. With regard to the wigged head, which was found in an ocre-stained marshy clay sediment, she has taken on a yellow hue from the surrounding sediment. There are African peoples who, after thousands of years, still wear the wigs used in the time of the Pharaohs. Why couldn't there have been other peoples who wore them thousands of years prior? The ivory of which it was created is better preserved than that of figurines found in ashy layers. This better state of preservation is due to the absence of ash.

Here is the entry I made in my notebook immediately after having washed this head, which was before my very eyes.

Head of statuette

at 2<sup>m</sup>40 from the cave entrance

at 2<sup>m</sup>80 from the ground surface

at 0<sup>m</sup>40 beneath a fireplace containing ivory lamina, flint instruments flaked by the same techniques as those from Solutré; adjacent to this head were aurochs, red deer, Canadian deer, reindeer.

The fireplace which was 0<sup>m</sup>40 above was intact; thus the head was not introduced into the site from above, penetrating through the sequence of layers that overlay it. But close by there was a trench dug by the workmen of the *AFAS*. Is it possible that the head was introduced laterally through the wall of the trench whose bottom was slightly above the statuette layer? This is highly improbable. It would require that those responsible were aware of the statuette layer. However, I don't think anyone was aware of it before the work of Monsieur de la Porterie and myself at the site.

The figurine resembling the bottom of an Egyptian doll due to its pointed legs, is a much more troubling case. Egypt is not the only country where footless figurines with pointed legs have been found, but the technique for making the rear-end is so odd that one is struck to find it identically on our figurine and on Egyptian dolls. The buttocks are very short, separated by a short, shallow line. This was done out of style and does not correspond to anatomical reality. But how is it possible that this way of doing things, this convention, could last thousands and thousands of years? It's hard to believe. And yet, this figurine was found in front of my eyes, and those of Monsieur de la Porterie, and those of Monsieur Mascarau. These latter have written to me that the layer was unquestionably intact and that my reservations should be set aside. And I too see the layer as intact. A limestone plaquette that covered the ashy sediment containing the figurine was removed with a pick at my request. And so, such is the novelty of such a discovery; the consequences are such that I cannot reveal it without expressing reservations; and I think it only prudent not to accept it in any definitive way until it has been confirmed by other such discoveries.

## THE FIGURINES THEMSELVES

The figurines from Brassempouy (Table I) can be considered in three subsets: 1) those found before and during the 1892 excursion in the entry of the *grotte du Pape* itself; 2) those found by Piette in his 1894 excavations (Figs. 9–13) in the

*Avenue* lateral to the *AFAS* trench, including an enigmatic ivory object (Fig. 16) from the 1894 excavation which was discovered in the *Avenue* by Mascaraux (Piette, 1907); 3) that found during Piette's 1896 excavations (Figs. 14 and 15) in the frontal portion of the *Grande Galérie*. I include one additional object from Piette's excavations, known as the *Ebauche de poupée* (Fig. 25), although it is without spatial or stratigraphic provenience and may not even be an anthropomorphic figure.

Finally, I exclude other poorly provenienced or doubtful objects including :

1. A strange bone object found by Delporte (Delporte, 1993a) in his excavations distal to the *Avenue*. He considered this piece to be a human representation in a bone cradle which he labelled accordingly *Le Berceau* (the cradle). However, close microscopic examination reveals it to be nothing more than a heavily carnivore-gnawed bone.
2. A spatulate object (Fig. 5-7) sometimes referred to as the *Navette*, which, according to Piette (1897) was recovered from a Magdalenian layer in the *Grande Galérie* in 1896.
3. Three unprovenienced ivory pendants (Fig. 5-1, 5-3, 5-6) and a sculpted "flower bud" (Fig. 5-5) recovered before 1892 by de la Porterie and Dufour.
4. An ivory "ring" found by the *AFAS* workmen in 1892 (Fig. 5-4).

### PIETTE'S IDEAS: THE PREEMINENCE OF RACE AND THE LINK WITH AFRICA

In none of Piette's ruminations on the figurines is there the slightest hint of interpretations related to fertility or any of the other preoccupations that were provoked by Paleolithic female figures in the latter half of the 20th century. Rather, he seems nearly obsessed by two questions: racial differences within the collection of figurines and the resemblance of some of them to African populations.

**Table I.** The Brassempouy Figurines Discussed and Illustrated Here

Object	Acquisition no	Maximum dimension	Year and excavator
L'Ebauche	MAN 47 022	7.3 cm	1892 ( <i>AFAS</i> )
La Poire	MAN 47 333	7.9 cm	1892 (Dubalen)
Le Fragment	MAN 56 424	c. 4.5 cm	1892 ( <i>AFAS</i> )
La Dame à la capuche	MAN 47 019	3.6 cm	1894 (Piette)
Le Manche de poignard	MAN 47 260	5.6 cm	1894 (Piette)
La Figurine à la ceinture	MAN 47 077	6.8 cm	1894 (Piette)
La Figurine à la pèlerine	MAN 47 136	4.5 cm	1894 (Piette)
La Fillette	MAN 47 335a	4.7 cm	1894 (Piette)
Le Torse	MAN 47 334	9.3 cm	1896 (Piette)
L'Ebauche de poupée	MAN 47 335b	4.6 cm	1894 ? (Piette)
L'Ebauche Mascaraux	MAN 56 424	16.0 cm	1894 (Piette)



In the introduction to his first publication (Piette, 1895a, pp. 129–130) of the Brassempouy figurines, Piette makes his position clear: they should be read literally as realistic depictions of human anatomy. It is worth keeping in mind that the text presented below was written before Piette was aware of the figurine sample from Grimaldi where, even more than at Brassempouy, African women would be implicated (White and Bisson, 1998; Bisson and White, 1996).

I am going to discuss with readers of *L'Anthropologie* the human races that lived in the south of France during the glyptic period. Physical anthropologists have long been concerned with them. They have studied with great knowledge and wisdom the rare bones found in archaeological layers preserved in caves. But their works, as good as they are, only give an idea of the skeleton; and skeletal reconstructions, even if meaningful to those knowledgeable few, are not entirely satisfying to those who have not made anatomy their specialty. The latter wish to know in great detail the contours of the flesh, of fibro-fatty deposits and the nature of the hair system. Osteology is powerless to show these things, and we would never have had knowledge of them if humans of the glyptic period had not practised the plastic arts and thereby represented themselves in engraving and sculpture. Their art was very faithful to nature. They were profound realists. They rendered forms and postures of animals with such truth that one immediately recognizes the species. We can therefore have faith in their statuettes. They are not works of imagination but rather copies of reality.

Roughly six months after the close of the 1894 excavations, Piette wrote a long and richly detailed letter to Salomon Reinach (Piette to Reinach, 11 January, 1895, MAN no. 135) in which he puzzled over the morphology of the Brassempouy figurines.

What troubles me is that there were two human races during the Eburnien, one with fatty protuberances, an enormous descending abdomen, ample thighs, prominent hips and, probably, buttocks that were correspondingly imposing. The enormous size of the abdomen was a result of concentrated fat deposits, held in place by fibrous tissue, which also accounts for the abundant hips and a sort of calf on the front of the thighs. This latter was not muscle. In this regard, there can be no doubt about the analogy with Bushman women. This race was also as hairy as Esau.

The other race was without body hair, had flat abdomens, somewhat slender thighs, and hips and buttocks lacking the fatty outgrowths. The artists who represented them exaggerated the abdominal flattening, the slenderness of the buttocks and the lack of projecting hips; and this could have been out of hatred for the other race which at that time must have been a conquered people. The sculptors who depicted the old fat-hipped race never failed to show the sexual organs even if they were not visible when the woman was standing. The authors of the images of women of the hairless race were careful to avoid this inaccuracy. They depicted them only with a *mons venus* which seems unduly swollen, but which they probably copied faithfully from nature. This is perhaps the expression of a sense of modesty which began to appear even though women did not yet wear the loin cloths as would the later Egyptians. This race, more civilized than the other, wore hooded shawls, capes, belts and styled hair. Nonetheless, this rudimentary clothing seems to have served only for decoration.

This said, I do not wish to characterize the hirsute race with the word *steatopygous*, because on my statuettes the rear portion of the bodies is broken. It was not me who invented this expression. It has been employed for a long time in anthropological science to refer to Bushman, Ouolov and Somali women.

I would gladly retain the term *Eburnian race* had there not been two races during the Eburnian period. The race with fatty protuberances is that of Chellean and Mousterian times rather than of Upper Paleolithic times [author's note: Piette coined the term glyptic period to refer to the art-bearing cultures of the Upper Paleolithic]; and the hairless race is probably the more recent of the two. For a long time, anthropologists have considered the Bushman race, to which the Quaternary race with fatty protuberances is so similar, to be the oldest known race; and Cuvier found similarities to apes. The discovery of Eburnian statuettes has just confirmed, in an unexpected way, the hypothesis of anthropologists. It must be admitted that in this regard they showed great genius. It is true that a statuette in horse-tooth that I found at Mas d'Azil has preserved for us the facial details of this ancient race; and the smoothly receding chin is identical to the jaw of La Naulette, which has always been viewed as one of the oldest human remains of the Quaternary period. At the same time, this jaw found in Belgium shows us how great was the geographic extent of this race for which today we know variants from the Somal, on the shores of the Red Sea, at the fringes of the empire of the Pharaohs and in the south of Southern Africa, near the Cape. In a publication that appeared a few months ago, a German author claimed that the Bushman race, born in Australia, expanded from there throughout the entire world in ancient times. I do not know on what he bases this idea. His thesis perhaps contains a lot of "eastern mirage." In any case, the linking of the La Naulette jaw with the Mas d'Azil statuette proves that the Quaternary race with fatty protuberances goes back to the most ancient appearance of humans in our regions.

You must by now understand my hesitation to apply the name Eburnian to this race; and if I gave them this name what would I call the hairless race, to whom the appellation might well have been better suited?

Here is why I proposed to you that we call one *steatopygous* and the other *asteatogenous*.

Finally, I quote Piette fifteen months later (Piette to Reinach, 5 April, 1896, MAN archive no. 129), after the excavations of *l'Avenue* had been completed during the 1895 season.

The statuettes have revealed to me the ancient existence of a fat race related to the Bushman race but nonetheless very different. At the same time, they have informed me about the rudimentary clothing sometimes worn by this race and about the hairstyles that they knew how to vary. The most remarkable kind of hair treatment was that similar to the Egyptian wig. You have indicated a way of arranging the hair at the nape of the neck, *resembling in a striking way, the hair arrangements on certain archaic Greek statues*. In your article on the Menton statuette<sup>12</sup> you have suggested that the end of Quaternary times was not as far removed as we had believed from the first centuries of Aegian civilization. You can be sure that this is perfectly true. (emphasis original).

When Piette and de la Porterie discovered *Le Torse* (Figs. 14 and 15) in the summer of 1896, she was easily integrated into Piette's racial explanation for figurine variation (Piette and de la Porterie, 1897, p. 168):

The woman represented does not belong to the same race as the *Vénus de Brassempouy (La Poire)*. She is much less fat; her thighs are slender; While voluminous, the abdomen is not enormous; the breasts are more pear-shaped than cylindrical. The hips are well developed but find their equivalent in ancient Greek statuettes. The fatty masses covering them and continuing onto the buttocks, are no more exaggerated than in some women today.

<sup>12</sup>Author's note: this is the yellow steatite statuette from Grimaldi, with a kind of "French braid," the publication of which would appear in 1898 (Reinach, 1898).



**SARTLEE, THE HOTTENTOT VENUS.**  
*NOW Exhibiting in London.*  
*Drawn from Life*

Fig. 17. Illustrated handbill of Sartje Baartman, the so-called Hottentot Venus, during her European tour of 1810–16. Upon her death in 1816, she would be dissected by Cuvier, who would subsequently publish a report on the anatomical basis of steatopygia in African women (Cuvier, 1817) (drawn by Frederick Christian Lewis, original in British Museum).



**Fig. 18.** Louis Mascré's 1914 realization in clay of prehistorian Aimé Rutot's vision of the *Femme à la corne* (Woman with the horn). The original, a bas-relief in limestone, was discovered in 1911 at Laussel in the Dordogne. An inscription at the base reads *Négroïde de Laussel, Dordogne* (Photo, anonymous).

If one thing is clear it is that Piette's first instinct as a scientist was to try to account for formal variation among the Brassempouy figurines. As early as 1894, he would even go so far as to interpret the *Femme au renne* from the Magdalenian of Laugerie-Basse as the result of a hybridization between the two races elaborated in such detail above (Piette, 1894a, p. 21). He dealt with figurine variation in the idiom of his day. His literal reading of the figurines as racial types (Piette, 1894b) would endure long after his death, and would subsequently be applied



**Fig. 19.** Part of the frieze sculpted by Constant Roux on the facade of the *Institut de Paléontologie Humaine* in Paris. Erected in 1923 under the supervision of the Abbé Breuil, it shows a San man sculpting the *Femme à la corne* from Laussel (Photo, courtesy M-A Dobres).

by Gaston Lalanne (1913) to the bas-reliefs from Laussel. By the time of World War I however, occasional skeptics would begin to emerge (Deonna, 1913) but competing interpretive frames (Saccasyn della Santa, 1947; White, 1995) would not take root until mid-century. Racial approaches, often making explicit reference to the long dead Sartje Baartman, would not be abandoned (cf. Verneau, 1916, 1924) until late in the inter-war period and this very problem of documenting and explaining figurine variation remains a subject of debate today (Duhard, 1993a, 1993b; Gvozdover, 1989; Rice, 1981).

### **PIETTE ACQUIRES THE GRIMALDI FIGURINES: NOMENCLATURE, ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION**

Piette was truly fascinated by the female figurines. In September, 1894, on the eve of a tour of the Pyrenees in search of new sites to excavate, he wrote to Reinach (Piette to Reinach, 11 September, 1894, MAN no. 138), “I hope that my new site will be one with statuettes.” This passion for the subject probably explains why, sometime in 1898, he pursued the acquisition of the the collection

of figurines from Grimaldi found by Louis-Alexandre Jullien at *Barme Grande* during excavations in 1883–85 and at the *grotte du Prince* in 1892–95.

Piette appears to have become aware of the *Barma Grande* and *Grotte du Prince* figurines in 1896, the year in which the first of these was acquired by Reinach for the *musée des Antiquités nationales* at Saint Germain-en-Laye. It is unclear at exactly what point Piette purchased part of Jullien's collection. We do know that by December 4, 1902, the newly acquired figurines were confided to Saint Germain technician Benoît Champion and to the young abbé Breuil in order that they be drawn. In 1903, Piette purchased another of the Grimaldi figurines from Jullien's son.

As early as 1896, Piette already knew of other Grimaldi figurines (Jullien to Piette, June 20, 1896, Archive Léon Pales; Pales, 1972), those that would ultimately be taken to Montréal, Canada by Jullien. In the early 1990's I indicated the existence of these additional figurines to Michael Bisson of McGill University. Consequently, he knew exactly what he was looking at when in 1993 they were shown to him for evaluation by a collector ignorant of their provenience.

Grimaldi is peripheral to the present paper, but Piette's description and nomenclature of these additional figurines continues his focus on racial types, African affiliations, as well as clothing and hair styles. For present purposes, a summary of the figurine names will suffice (For detailed descriptions, see White and Bisson, 1998).

*La Femme en stéatite jaune (the woman in yellow steatite)*

*La Tête négroïde (the negroid head)*

*Le Polichinelle (the jester)*

*Le Losenge (the losange)*

*L'Hermaphrodite (the hermaphrodite)*

*La Femme au goître (the woman with the goiter)*

*La Statuette inédite (the unpublished statuette)*

It is noteworthy that, at the time of Piette's death in 1906, no Paleolithic figurines found since the *Vénus impudique* had been referred to as Venuses, although on occasion Piette referred to *La Poire* from Brassempouy as *La Vénus de Brassempouy*. According to him, she was also the most "Bushman" of the figurines. As I have argued elsewhere (White, 2003b), Piette's use of the term Venus had nothing to do with the Marquis de Vibraye's classical use of the term 35 years earlier. Rather, it evoked the *Vénus hottentote*, ever-present in the French popular imagination and in physical anthropological circles. It was in fact the commemorations surrounding the 100th anniversary of her death (Verneau, 1916) and the African frenzy during the *belle époque*, that would spawn the subsequent application of the term *Venus* to the most robust of Paleolithic figurines.

Until well after World War I, race dominated figurine interpretation, with an accompanying focus on exotic aspects of female sexual anatomy. Issues of beauty



and fertility were rarely if ever raised. The African connection was not some kind of exaggerated ethnographic analogy. Early Europeans and early Africans were the same people, the same race. Figurines were portraiture, anatomically realistic and anthropologically correct as to body proportions. They almost certainly conditioned the expectations of physical anthropologists studying Paleolithic human skeletons. Verneau's (1924) interpretation of the Grimaldi skeletons as racially Negro has, and had, no osteological or morphological basis. He seems to have been fulfilling the racial prophecy of the figurines, which in turn reflected the deep-seated 19th century preoccupation with race in taxonomic practice (Lindfors, 1996).<sup>13</sup>

This would continue long after Piette's death. The Belgian prehistorian Rutot would commission the sculptor Louis Mascré to depict the women of Laussel, discovered in 1911. Under his supervision, the result would be *La Negroïde de Laussel* (Fig. 18). Likewise, the friezes on the façade of the *Institut de Paléontologie Humaine* in Paris, inaugurated in 1920, were achieved under the direct guidance of the abbé Breuil. They showed the sculptor of the *Femme à la corne* from Laussel as a San man (Fig. 19). She was Venus, but in the "Hottentot" sense of the term.

Certain women of Grimaldi and Laussel, represented as racially African, living alongside and dominated by the more slender, less hirsute, Cro-Magnons... this is a discourse deeply embedded in colonialist attitudes at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century. A view that saw the last of our primitive ancestors still in our midst was justification for domination, exploitation and subjugation (see Fauvelle-Aymar, 1999, 2002). In their discussion of Rutot and Mascré's models, Hauzeur and Mairesse (2003, p. 124) describe them as vehicles for colonialist ideology:

Under cover of scientific objectivity, Rutot and Mascré's view of human evolution reveals a certain number of ideological biases current at the beginning of the 20th century. One cannot help but be struck by the recurrent theme of hierarchical relationships between the different human groups represented; a hierarchy that seems to lead naturally to slavery.

The brutality and dominating spirit of human species was embodied in the process of population movements, always seen as invasions. This dynamic view of prehistory was in vogue at the beginning of the century and war-like invasions of people of a different race were willingly called in to play to explain cultural changes.

It is impossible not to see such conceptions in the light of the politically instable context on the eve of the First World War and the reasoning of the great colonial empires. The notion of a humanity composed of numerous races dominated scientific discourse. More or less primitive, these races adapted to the environment, fauna and flora, but could just as easily disappear due to climatic changes or invasions by other races; such as the recent extinction of the Tasmanians by Europeans. In the end, the absence of change or invasion explained the persistence up to the present of racial types considered to be primitive.

<sup>13</sup>To further explore this relationship between evolution, race, sex and the colonial context, the reader is referred to Wiss (1994), Brantlinger (1985), Comaroff (1989), Gilman (1985), Stepan (1982) and Stocking (1987).



It is interesting to see how the transfer of these deeply European questions of representation to the American context took a completely different turn. If it were possible for Europeans to imagine African ancestors, racist tendencies in the US prevented such a view. Citing the Rutot archives in Brussels, Hauzeur and Mairesse (2003) state that when the Rutot and Mascré modelled figures were acquired by the San Diego Museum, two of them were excluded from the purchase by Aleš Hrdlička because turn-of-the century white Americans would not accept blacks as ancestors. The *Négroïde de Laussel* and the *Négroïde de Menton*, the latter represented as the sculptor of the Venus of Willendorf, were excluded. This is reminiscent of Josephine Baker who, having found success in a 1920's Paris enthralled with representations of the African primitive, was forced to use the service elevator at the Plaza Hotel in New York upon her return to America. It probably served French colonial purposes to see African peoples as evolutionary holdovers, as much as it served American interests to see Africans as a non-ancestral side branch leading to a manifest destiny of extinction.

### **A NEW AND CLOSER LOOK AT THE BRASSEMPOUY PIECES: NEW METHODS APPLIED TO OLD QUESTIONS**

In the context of an ambitious study of European Gravettian female figurines, I was able to undertake a detailed archival, microscopic and technological examination of the Brassempouy figures. Here I provide a few of the results that resolve some of the old questions raised by Piette as well as some posed by modern researchers.

#### **The Spatial Distribution of the Brassempouy Figurines**

It is surprising to see published laments about the absence of spatial information concerning the Brassempouy figurines. In fact, Piette was quite detailed in this regard (Table II) allowing an approximate mapping of their relative and absolute locations (Fig. 20). Obviously, spatial data on artifacts from the *grotte du Pape* do not meet modern standards. It is nonetheless useful to have an idea of the relative positions of the figurines themselves and their spatial association, for example, with the fireplaces observed by Piette in level E.

#### **The Question of Authenticity**

Elsewhere, I have outlined the criteria that can be applied to evaluate the authenticity of poorly provenienced figurines (White, 2003a). The application of these criteria to the Brassempouy figurines, in combination with the detailed obser-

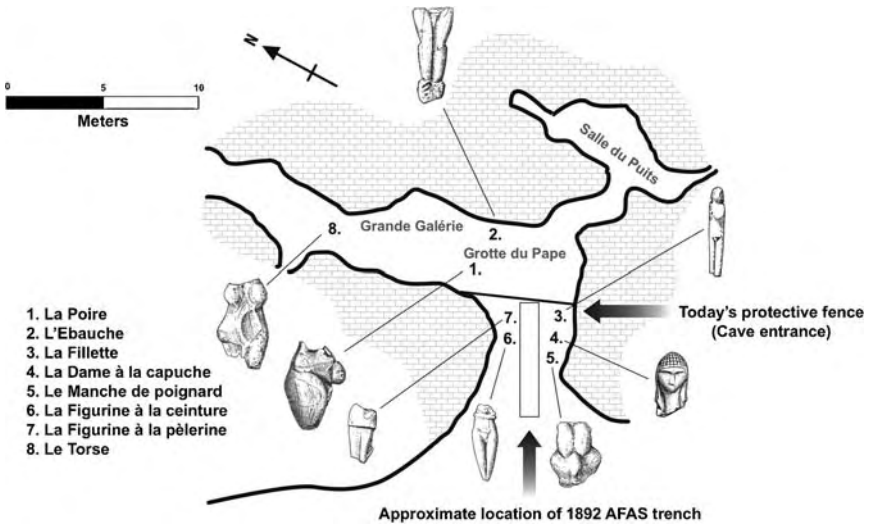
**Table II.** Locations of Brassempouy Figurines According to Published Descriptions by Piette (1895a, 1895b, 1907) and Piette and de la Porterie (1897)

Figurine	Location <sup>a</sup>
L'Ebauche	right-hand side of the cave
La Poire	right-hand side of the cave, near its eastern wall
Le Fragment	either in cave entry or in the AFAS trench in the Avenue
La Dame à la capuche	left-hand side of <i>L'Avenue</i> , 2m40 from the cave entry
Le Manche de poignard	left-hand side of <i>L'Avenue</i>
La Figurine à la ceinture	right-hand side of <i>L'Avenue</i> near the cave entrance
La Figurine à la pèlerine	right-hand side of <i>L'Avenue</i> , near the cave entrance
La Fillette	left-hand side of <i>L'Avenue</i> near the cave entrance
Le Torse	<i>Grande Galérie</i> , about 12 m from the entry
L'Ebauche de poupée	unknown
L'Ebauche Mascaraux	<i>l'Avenue</i>

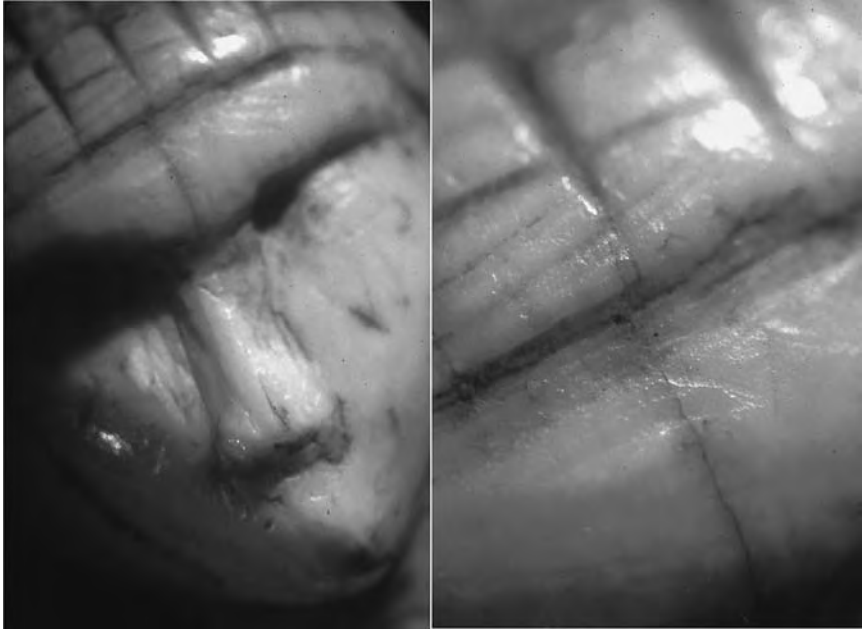
<sup>a</sup>Piette (1895b, p. 134) is very clear that right and left are to be read as if one were facing out from the cave entrance.

variations of Piette, leave almost no doubt about their Upper Paleolithic provenience. Among the observations in favor of authenticity are the following:

1. All figurines are in mammoth-ivory according to the World Wildlife Fund criteria (Espinoza and Mann, 1992).
2. All figurines bear significant stigmata of stone tools.



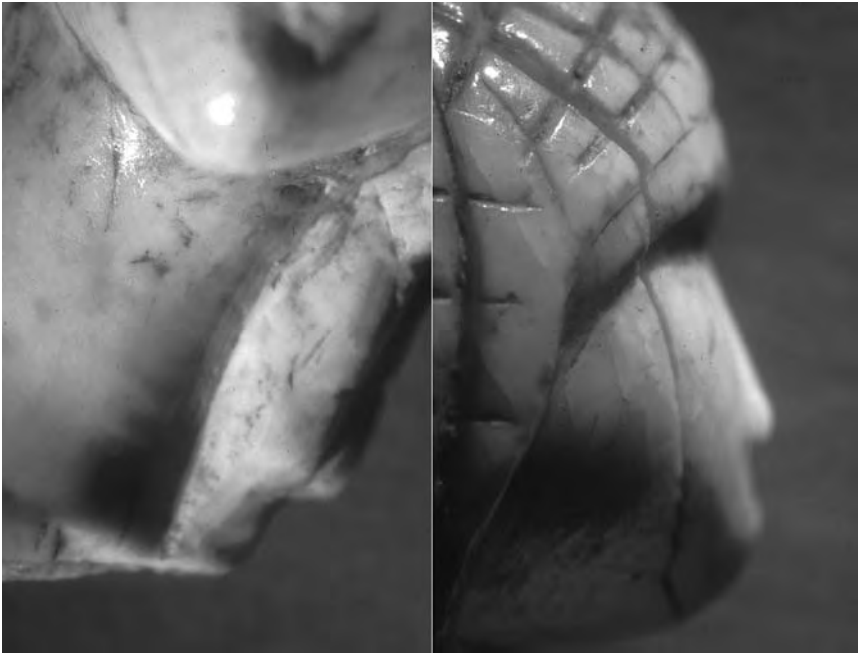
**Fig. 20.** The approximate find locations of the Brassempouy figurines after the indications given by Piette (1892, 1895a, 1895b, 1907) and Piette and de la Porterie (1894b, 1897, 1898).



**Fig. 21.** Left: The face of the *Dame à la capuche* illuminated to show tool-stigmata ( $6\times$ ). Right: detail of the center of the forehead with absolutely typical stone burin-tracks ( $18\times$ ). She is sculpted in the hard, central core of the tusk where the laminate structure of the ivory is poorly developed (Photo, R. White).

3. All figurines retain residues of sedimentary matrix and occasionally of ocrous staining (Walter, 1995).
4. While the form of certain figurines (*Ebauche*, *Manche de poignard*) is quite original, none of them stands out as aberrant against the background of known Gravettian figurines.
5. The techniques used in sculpting are precisely those found on other assemblages of Gravettian figurines, found much later, such as those from Kostienki, Avdeevo and Gagarino on the Russian Plain.
6. It is difficult to imagine who could have faked Gravettian female figurines before the advent of archaeological knowledge of the very existence of such objects.

The claim by Niedhorn (1990) that all but two of the Brassempouy figurines are recent fakes, and that all of those from Grimaldi are also fakes, has no credibility. This author did not examine the originals, had no experience with Paleolithic tools and did not consult archival sources.

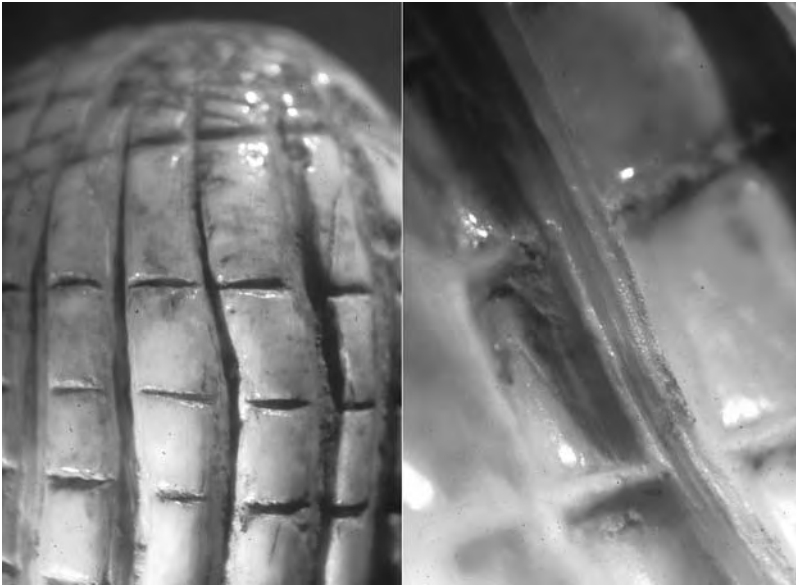


**Fig. 22.** Left The highly polished chin and neck of the *Dame à la capuche*. Note the border between the neck and “hair” created by a deep vertical depression, at the bottom of which is a classic stone burin-track ( $6\times$ ). Right: Profile showing natural fissure along a structural line within the ivory and, at bottom of cheek, partially smoothed-over scrape-marks ( $6\times$ ) (Photo, R. White).

### A Diversity of Gestures and Techniques

I have undertaken a detailed microscopic examination of more than 100 Gravettian anthropomorphic figurines, including those from the *grotte du Pape*. These latter are perfectly consistent with the range of techniques the stigmata of which (experimentally verified) are also observable on figurines from Grimaldi, Kostienki, Avdeevo, Gagarino, Malt’a, Laussel, Sireuil, Tursac, Milandes, Monpazier and Lespugue. These tool traces (Figs. 21–25, 27–30, 34, and 35), include hacking, pecking, gouging, scraping, incising, abrading and polishing, and are entirely consistent with the use of various flint tools and mineral abrasives. Burin-tracks are frequently observable, but this tool seems generally to have intervened relatively late in the fabrication process in order to create detail on an already shaped support.

My own technical analysis confirms certain aspects of a previous examination of the *Dame à la capuche* using a magnifying glass (Delporte, 1980); for example, Delporte’s observation that the “hair” was created by a series of vertical incisions that were subsequently cross-cut by a series of horizontals. However, we can go



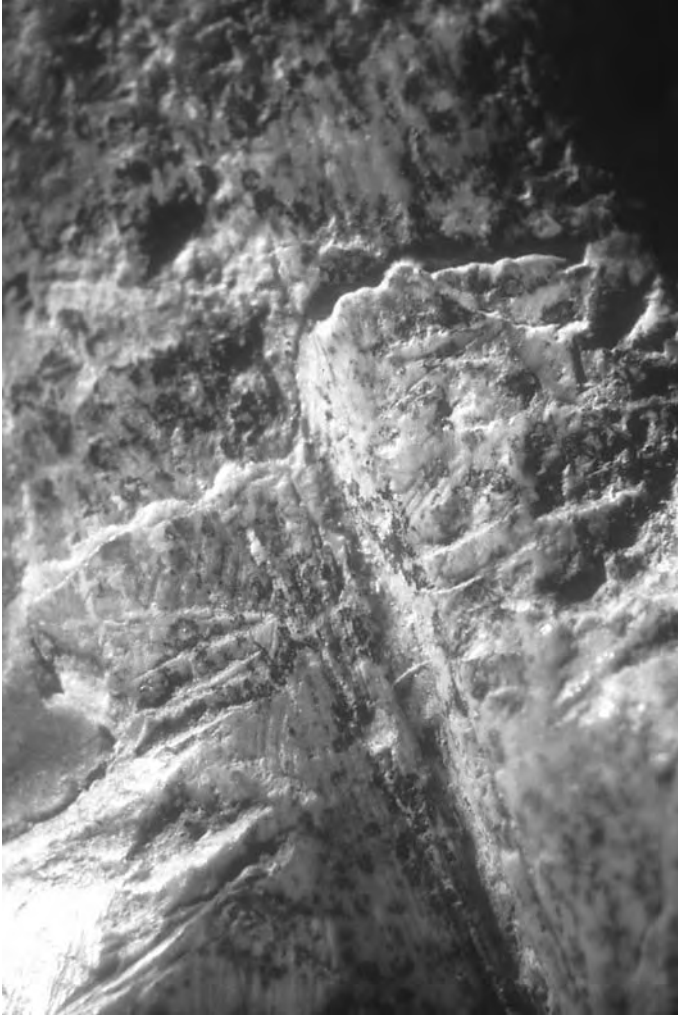
**Fig. 23.** Details of the hair/head-covering of the *Dame à la capuche*. Left: Deep, vertical incisions cross-cut by later, much shallower V-profile horizontals (18 ×). Right: Highly magnified detail of hair/head-covering of the *dame à la capuche* showing V-bottomed horizontals that cross-cut U-profile verticals with clear stigmata of the “bar-code” left by full-on application of the burin-bevel. Also visible are the highly polished surfaces of the grid elements (Photo, R. White).

even farther in noting that the verticals were creating by the application of a burin in what I have called elsewhere (White, 1982) “scraping mode,” that is, with the application of the full front of the burin-bevel, creating an incision with a broad U-profile. In contrast, the horizontals were created either by the edge of a flint blade or by the application of a burin in “graving mode,” resulting in a V-profile incision.

### **A Curious Exploitation of the Ivory Structure: Breakage During Fabrication**

I studied the Brassempouy figurines after those from the Russian Plain sites, where I had observed<sup>14</sup> that the support pieces for the figurines (with a few exceptions) were systematically oriented in the same way in relation to the tusk; back of the figurine to the nerve canal, front to the tusk exterior, head toward the proximal end of the tusk, legs toward the distal end. In contrast, the figurines from Brassempouy were extracted in every which way: horizontally, obliquely,

<sup>14</sup>Confirming the opinion of my dear colleague, the late Marianne Govozdover.



**Fig. 24.** The upper extremity of the back-crease of *Le Torse*. At roughly 90 degrees to this crease are a series of hacking marks from the initial roughing out of the form of the figurine. These are partially removed by the imprints of multiple passes of a flint point, probably the trihedral corner of a flint burin, which apparently served to deepen the back-crease (Photo, R. White).

longitudinally. . . The structure of the ivory seems not to have been taken into consideration.

It was as if the sculptor/sculptress was habituated to sculpting other materials, such as soft stone, that lacked such a highly developed internal grain. In other words we are seeing the hand of someone skilled at sculpting but with little



**Fig. 25.** Macro and micro views of the *Ebauche de Poupée* showing significant tool traces that, if the piece is interpreted as an anthropomorphic figure, define the head, chest and abdomen (Photo, R. White).

experience with ivory. The consequences are obvious within the Brassempouy sample: virtually all the pieces were broken during fabrication. This further implies that the sculptor(s) was working with partially dessicated tusks, where the collagen binding the lamina together had been compromised. In fresh tusks, these laminar interfaces are not points of weakness. In case the reader is skeptical, I provide two remarkable examples.

The first of these is embodied in the re-fitting of two of the figurines (the *Figurine à la pèlerine* and the *Figurine à la ceinture*), previously considered by most researchers to be independent objects. However, Breuil had astutely seen that their forms were such that the two might conjoin if we had the missing intervening fragments. It is not clear whether he ever tried to refit them as is; an opportunity

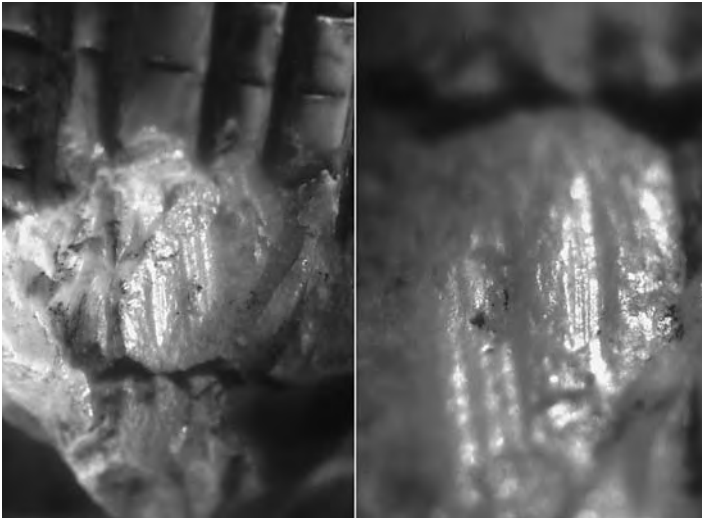




**Fig. 26.** The strange refitting of the *Figurine à la pèlerine* and the *Figurine à la ceinture*. At right, the slight gap results either from a very thin, missing lamina or from subtle chemical solution. (Photo, R. White).

that was given to me by the curators at Saint Germain-en-Laye. The result was stunning.

The two figurines, found together on the right side of the *avenue* (Fig. 20), share a common fracture surface along a laminar interface, although there may be



**Fig. 27.** Views ( $18\times$  and  $40\times$ ) of the burin-tracks on the fracture surface of the *Dame à la capuche* (Photo, R. White).



**Fig. 28.** The lower extremity of the leg of *La Poire*, showing coarse traces of scraping ( $6\times$ ). The inferior margin is a prehistoric fracture unrelated to the breakage during excavation.

a very thin lamina missing. They re-fit nicely, even if the margins of the fracture surface are slightly smoothed by very subtle chemical solution. However, when re-fitted, the result (Fig. 26) makes no morphological sense . . . even if certain surface structures (the belt for example) mesh very cleanly, one with the other. For me, there is only one solution to this enigma. The sculptor began to sculpt a figurine out of partly desiccated ivory. This first figurine was quite far along when it broke into at least two pieces along a laminar boundary. Each fragment



**Fig. 29.** Left: The chest of *La Fillette* with slightly undulating, vertically oriented tool-marks from the beveling of this surface by scraping. A V-profile incision provides the impression of the neck. Center: The back of the head of *La Fillette* showing no evidence of lines representing hair. Right: The pubic area of *La Fillette* (Photos, R. White) (all magnifications at  $6\times$ ).

was subsequently reappropriated, each to be sculpted in its own right. The fact that the fracture surface remained intact may suggest that one or both of the “new” supports was abandoned before completion. In the case of the *Figurine à la pèlerine* the portion above the “belt” was apparently carried away by a subsequent (but prehistoric) transverse fracture.

In sum, in the wake of my own experience with ivory-working, I interpret this piece as an attempt that failed due to a mis-estimation of the points of weakness at laminar interfaces. In simple terms, it attests to a piece broken during sculpting. An attempt was made to salvage the two fragments but my guess is that these were abandoned, perhaps following additional breakage events.

A second example is more dramatic because it concerns the *Dame à la capuche*. Since her discovery, there has been a general assumption that this minuscule head was a fragment of a broken figurine; in other words, that she had a corresponding body. In actual fact, with the piece in hand, it is difficult to imagine how the fracture surface that runs along only a part of her posterior surface might have connected head to body. Moreover, in profile view, a kind of inferior projection or tab, unbroken and intact, can be clearly seen. This projection resembles a similar feature on the “double statuette” from Gagarino (White, 1997a), actually two figurines in the course of being sculpted, that apparently served as a finger hold for the sculptor. Seeing all of this, after having studied Gagarino, I wondered whether the small fracture surface might simply have been an accident during the sculpting of a self-standing head. With this in mind, I turned my microscope on the fracture surface itself and immediately observed that its surface bore the distinctive marks of stone burins (Fig. 27). In other words, after the fracture, an attempt had apparently been made to recover by re-working the



**Fig. 30.** The so-called “double statuette” from Gagarino in Russia, which is in fact two unfinished statuettes in the course of being sculpted on a single ivory rod. Both top and bottom figures show the same angled chest shelf that one sees on *La Fillette*. (Photo R. White).

fracture itself. My guess is that too much material had been lost and the piece was abandoned or “used” as is.

Both of these examples imply that the *Avenue* at Brassempouy served as a kind of atelier for ivory-sculpting. We are left mostly with pieces broken



**Fig. 31.** The pubic triangle and scraping on the angled chest shelf on the least finished of the Gagarino rough-outs, showing very specific similarities to *La Fillette*. (Photos R. White).

during fabrication. Others, if they existed, may have been carried away by their makers.

The mis-estimation of the ivory structure may suggest sculpting by someone used to sculpting in other materials where laminar structure is less problematical; for example fresh ivory, soft stone, bone, antler or wood.

Although parts of *La Poire* are very finely worked, the surface of her right leg shows extremely coarse working stigmata (Fig. 28). Although it is difficult to be sure because of her incompleteness, it is possible that even she was unfinished or broken during sculpting, before being broken again by Dubalen's workmen.

There seems little doubt that *L'Ebauche*, as Piette himself saw, is an unfinished figurine, broken at the waist before the lower extremities could be finished. *La Fillette* may have been unfinished as well. Without close examination, it might be imagined that *La Fillette* is either male or ambiguous. A clearly defined pubic triangle (Fig. 29) argues against this, as does the approach to disengaging the chest from the neck (Fig. 29) which is seen in other Gravettian ivory figurines such as the unfinished women on the "double statuette" from Gagarino (Figs. 30 and 31). This creation of a sloping shelf was frequently used in early stages of figurine shaping in order to create an appropriate volume for the detailed sculpting of the breasts and pregnant abdomen. This raises the possibility that, like the Gagarino



**Fig. 32.** The broken pubic area of *l'Ebauche* leaving sexual determination impossible (18 ×). (Photo R. White).

rough-outs, *La Fillette* is in fact a small, unfinished figurine that was destined to represent an adult woman. Under the microscope, the long hair on her back that was seen by Piette is unconvincing, being nothing more than the natural texture of the ivory.

Defining what is a “finished” statuette is tricky business and may involve the imposition of our own standards of finishing. I have previously observed that many of the figurines interred in ritualized pits in Russian Plain sites retain significant production scarring and sometimes have the appearance of rough-outs. Even fragments of broken figurines can end up in such pits. At Brassempouy there is no indication of such ritualized placement of the figurines with the possible exception of *Le Torse*, which I doubt was being sculpted 12 m deep inside the *Grande Galérie*.

### Men or Women?

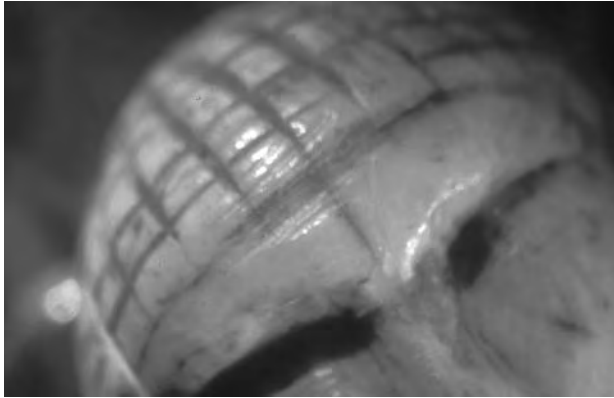
Among others, Piette (1895a, 1895b), Chollot (1964), Duhard (1993a) and Dobres (1992) have raised the question as to the sex of the humans represented in the Brassempouy sample. In some cases, the question simply cannot be answered because relevant morphology is absent or ambiguous. In some cases, inauspicious breakage has occurred, for example *L'Ebauche* (Fig. 32). It is my opinion however,





**Fig. 33.** The highly polished *mons venus* of the *Figurine à la ceinture* viewed from above and to the right. The impression of an out-of-focus vaginal slit is confirmed by higher magnification in image at right ( $18\times$ ). This is quite strong evidence in favor of a female attribution of this figurine (Photo, R. White).



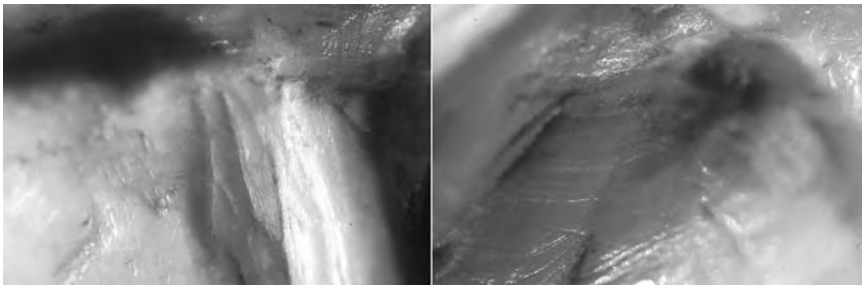


**Fig. 34.** The brows and eye sockets of the *Dame à la capuche* are treated in precisely the same ways as those from another Gravettian figurine from Avdeevo, Russia. Deep corner gouges overhung by deep brows create a play of light and shadow that gives the impression of eyes ( $6\times$ ) (Photo, R. White).

that in all cases where pubic anatomy is well preserved, women are represented. In spite of the absence of such sexual anatomy, it is clear to me that the *Dame à la capuche* represents a female subject, although I suppose that even she is open to honest debate.

It may seem strange to begin this discussion with *La Poire*, the sex of which has never been disputed. However, one aspect of her anatomy, a pronounced *mons venus* (Fig. 6), is relevant to a sexual determination of some of the other statuettes. One can say little more about her vulvar anatomy and there is absolutely no justification for Adrien de Mortillet's (1894) detailed observation that,

... the sex organs are perfectly represented. Between the greater labia, the labia minora are visible. Although these are not as developed as the so-called apron in the Hottentots, they nonetheless protrude considerably beyond the greater labia.



**Fig. 35.** Detail of the eyes of the *Dame à la capuche* oriented as if she were looking at the viewer. Note the deep, vertical tool gouges that descend to define the contours of the nose. At right, oblique scrape-marks soften the vertical gouges ( $18\times$ ) (Photo, R. White).

In reality, the areas relevant to the labial details cited by de Mortillet are absent due to breakage.

*La figurine à la ceinture* (Fig. 12), has perhaps been the most disputed. Piette (Piette, 1894e, 1895a, b; Chollot, 1964) vacillated between interpreting the pubic area as that of a man with a cod piece and that of a woman with a pronounced *mons venus*, finally preferring the former view. His reading is shared by Duhard (1993a), while Dobres (1992) sees it as ambiguous at best. Before analyzing it microscopically, I too thought it was probably a male.

Careful microscopic examination (Fig. 33) allowed me to observe that, in fact, the slightly downward facing anterior surface of the protruberance shows two converging, oblique incisions between which is a vertical, incised midline: a classic pubic triangle with vulva. For me, there remains no doubt. *La figurine à la ceinture* has a vulva situated on what seems to be a protruding *mons venus*.

Of course we need to remain prudent about such sexual attributions. As I have pointed out elsewhere (White, 2003a), Gravettian figurines often manifest such visual ambiguity which may well be purposeful.

### Eyes or no Eyes?

From time to time, colleagues have asked me whether the *Dame à la capuche* has eyes. The answer, technically, is no. The impression of a *regard* was created by the interplay between overhanging brow and the deeply gouged inner corners of the eye sockets (Figs. 34 and 35). Depth and shadow were produced by gouging deeply into the corner of the eye socket and then dragging downward with considerable pressure, creating at the same time the lateral margins of the nose. The tool used was apparently not a burin, but rather a pointed flint tool. At least in the case of her left orbit, the heavy traces of this work were subsequently scraped away (Fig. 35 right).

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In spite of the complicated circumstances surrounding the excavations at the *grotte du Pape* more than a century ago, the stratigraphic and spatial provenience of the figurines is, for the most part, surprisingly unambiguous. We owe this to Piette's extreme prudence, scientific scepticism and careful observations during the 1894–97, excavations as well as to Henri Delporte's (1968) meticulous re-analysis of Piette's archaeological collections from Brassempouy.

Over the years the figurines from Brassempouy have served several different masters. They have been variously appropriated by advocates of fertility magic, goddess ideology, original matriarchy and militant feminism, most of whom have ignored the rather messy and oppressive origins of the Venus terminology they so

willingly employ. In the *melée*, their original and spontaneous integration into a colonial ideology of racial inequality, in which human differences were seen as evolutionary stages, seems to have been largely overlooked.

For this author, there remains little doubt as to the authenticity of the Brassempouy figurines, a position supported by the detailed technical traces evident on the figurines themselves. To the experienced eye, these tool stigmata can be linked directly to a wide range of gestures and stone tools of which they are the product. Moreover, they speak to a rather complex repertoire of Gravettian sculpting procedures, including hacking, pecking, gouging, scraping, incising, abrading and polishing. This is the same range of techniques observable on better excavated and better documented female figurines from other Gravettian sites, notably Kostienki 1, Avdeevo and Gagarino.

There is every indication that the Brassempouy figurines reflect a production context in which sculpting occurred on-site, making use of locally available, partially dessicated tusks. This partial dessication, seemingly not taken into consideration by the Brassempouy sculptor(s), resulted in a high frequency of breakage during fabrication. The primary sculpting area seems to have been at the very front of the cave and in nearby areas of *l'Avenue*. Nonetheless, it is possible that differential preservation of ivory across the site as a whole may explain the perceived density of figurines in this area.

The remote location of the *Torse*, deep inside the *Grande Galerie*, may imply removal from the outside production area to a potentially ritualized context.

Although representations of women seem to dominate the Brassempouy assemblage, certain figures are difficult to attribute to sex due to breakage or representational ambiguity induced by a protruding *mons venus*. The *Figurine à la ceinture*, thought by some to be a male representation, appears upon closer inspection to be female or at least ambiguous.

Inevitably, the remarkable assemblage of figurines from the *grotte du Pape* will continue to stoke debate, in part due to their fragmentary nature and in part due to the low resolution of Piette's excavations by modern standards. Hopefully, the foregoing has served to clarify a certain number of questions and also to demonstrate the research potential of female figurines when studied according to 21st century research designs and when attention is paid to historical and archival sources.

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