The Lower Paleolithic of Spain and Portugal

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To most English readers the Lower Paleolithic of the Iberian peninsula is known mainly through a few sites such as Torralba and Ambrona, whose age and behavioral significance remain controversial. In fact, the archaeological data base for this period and region is much larger and more varied than is generally appreciated and includes primary-context sites such as Aridos that have provided unique combinations of evidence on hominid exploitation of elephant carcasses. This paper is both a comprehensive synthesis of our current knowledge and a first attempt to see patterns in the data. Every major occurrence is presented in its regional and geochronological framework; each is critically assessed for data quality and behavioral significance. Major issues addressed in this paper include the working out of regional sequences and intersite correlation, the age and significance of the oldest occurrences, the density and preferred areas of settlement within each region, temporal variation within the Acheulean, and the strength and weaknesses of the data and of our approaches to it.

KEY WORDS: Lower Paleolithic; Spain; Portugal; Acheulean; Middle Pleistocene.

GEOGRAPHIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL FRAMEWORK

The Iberian peninsula, some 580,000 km² in area, can be roughly divided into two areas: the littoral zone and the interior. The interior itself comprises three units. In the north, the Northern Meseta is a flat area with a mean elevation of 800 m above sea level (asl). The Southern Meseta, separated from...
the Northern Meseta by the mountains of the Sistema Central, is more diverse (including the Tagus and Guadiana basins and the plateaux of Extremadura), lower (at about 600 m asl), and warmer in climate. The two areas share a continental climate with marked seasonal and diurnal temperature variations (Fig. 1).

A third natural region is the valley of the Ebro in northeastern Spain, which flows into the Mediterranean, unlike the Duero, Tagus, and Guadiana that drain the Meseta into the Atlantic. In addition, the Guadalquivir basin in the south is a diverse area, bordered by the Mediterranean and the Atlantic coasts and broadly coinciding with the traditional region of Andalusia.

The mountain ranges that separate these regions channeled human movement through natural passes. The main drainage systems provide links between the Atlantic littoral and the interior tablelands, facilitating movement across the steep gradient (> 600 m). Natural routes between the two Mesetas are provided by the right-bank tributaries of the Tagus, which have carved deep canyons in the Sistema Central, facilitating access to the Northern Meseta. Thus the headwaters of the Rio Alagón (a Tagus tributary) are very close to the Duero basin watershed, from which the Tormes river offers easy passage into the northern tableland. Likewise, the Medinaceli watershed, where the Torralba and Ambrona sites are located, provides a