

OBITUARIES

L'Abbé H. Breuil

THE Abbé Henri Breuil died on August 14 at the age of eighty-four. I first met Breuil in 1912 in Cambridge. At that time, except for the interest of a few amateurs and geologists, the subject of prehistory scarcely existed in Britain. It is true that in 1859 Prestwich and Evans had been sent over to France by the Royal Society to study the work of Boucher de Perthes in the gravels near Abbeville, and as a result had accepted the fact of the great antiquity of man on the Earth. But whereas in France interest in prehistory was abounding, there was only a handful of people in Britain who were keen about it. Breuil invited me to go abroad for a year or two and, after assisting at the famous cave excavation at Castillo in northern Spain under his colleague and great friend, Hugo Obermaier, to work with him in Spain. Thus, after a 'campaign' with Obermaier—another Roman Catholic priest, by the way, though few people seem to have known it—I joined Breuil and with him studied and traced the eastern Spanish and the Copper Age rock-shelter paintings of the Peninsula.

The Abbé was at this time thirty-six years of age and then, as always, of an electric character. Traveling for months together, often 'sleeping rough', makes either for enduring friendship or the opposite: my admiration for Breuil both as a prehistorian and as a man never flagged. He had only one really useful eye, but with it he saw far more clearly than did other more normally equipped persons, and his intuitions were brilliant. The working combination of Obermaier and Breuil was perfect. Both had by now become professors of the Institute of Human Palaeontology founded by the then Prince of Monaco in Paris. Breuil would see the answer to a problem in a flash; Obermaier, a Bavarian born, built up his solution with careful Teutonic thoroughness and documentation; but almost always they both came to the same conclusions. If you told Breuil a fact he would always remember it; Obermaier would note it down on a special card, of which he kept a supply in his pocket, and would later place it in his card index. Breuil was an artist, but a scientifically accurate one. It has been sometimes suggested that he used too much imagination when copying the cave art, but it is not always realized that there is a close similarity between examples of paintings belonging to the same style, and long experience had enabled him to interpret correctly what were sometimes apparently only faint indications. I can vouch for the meticulous accuracy of the tracings he made during the times I was his assistant.

At the beginning of the First World War we were together in the French Red Cross at a hospital near Bordeaux run by the late Dr. Lalanne. At that time there was not much 'war' work to do, and we spent most of our energies in typing and arranging the immense collections of stone implements which had been excavated by Dr. Lalanne at Laussel, and one could not fail to admire his scientific quickness of eye and his tirelessness in tackling this problem.

After the War, Breuil came often to England and frequently stayed with us at Cambridge, and the University awarded him an honorary doctorate of science. It must have been in about 1921 that I

asked him to come over and look at some new tertiary finds of *soi disant* flint tools which the late Reid Moir had unearthed from the Red Crag near Ipswich. He came over, and spent the afternoon somewhat silently examining the finds. In the evening, as I drove him back to our hotel, he turned suddenly towards me and said: "My dear friend to-day has greatly aged humanity". It was a magic moment and a characteristic remark.

From what has been already said, it will be clear that his prehistoric interests were by no means confined to problems of palaeolithic art, nor only to the upper palaeolithic periods in general. Of course, *Les subdivisions du paléolithique supérieur et leur signification*, published in 1912, remains a classic, as do the series of great cave-art monographs published under the auspices of the Prince of Monaco, but so too does his work on the gravels of the Somme Valley of lower and middle palaeolithic ages.

Between the two Wars the Abbé was elected to a professorship at the Collège de France—an honour in which he took a very great pride.

During the Second World War, Breuil did important work on river terraces in Portugal before he went to South Africa. He had stayed in France as long as he could, but both his age and his eyesight precluded him from much active war-work—he did, however, discover a secret underground enemy aeroplane factory and wrote to me on a postcard some lines in Latin about strange subterranean winged birds, purporting to come from a newly discovered MS. of Ovid and labelled "Quelque vers pour vos latinistes". It was duly forwarded to the proper authority in London and, later, I had an acknowledgment asking for more such verses.

The bare facts of Breuil's life have been well set out in the obituary in *The Times* of August 22. But his impact on the study of prehistory throughout the world can scarcely be exaggerated from the time long ago when he started with a study of the Bronze Age in the Paris basin to his later work, much of it in Africa. He inspired, instigated or personally undertook research in an immense number of parts of the Old World and correlated and assimilated the results—you had to go to the chilly cellars of the "Institute" to study the finds from the *Sinanthropus* site of Choukoutien. China, Abyssinia and South and South-West Africa were some of the regions included in his own travels. Thus, his knowledge of world prehistory became immense, and when he spoke at conferences there was little more to be said. He was, it is true, inclined to be a little pontifical—and, after all, after Obermaier's death in the Second World War, there were fewer people equipped to dispute with him—and when he had pronounced about something he had indeed pronounced, and nothing would make him change his mind. As he got older and perhaps less sure of touch in his intuitions—his opinions about Rouffignac and the 'white lady' of South-West Africa were decidedly open to question—he did not become less pontifical and it became more personally difficult to disagree with him. He knew that in the past he had so often been right. He was indeed one of the world's few really great prehistorians, and it is the world, as well as France, that has suffered a loss by his death.

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