

# **Gudenus Cave**

The Earliest Humans of Austria

**Robert G. Bednarik**

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Front cover: Amygdaloidal rolled hand axe of yellow jaspilite. Original 1963 field sketch.  
Back cover: Perforated wolf tooth of the Gudenus Cave Magdalenian.

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## Preface

The project of Pleistocene archaeology is fraught with many epistemological adversities. The discipline's humanistic rather than scientific basis is at the root of many of these and has determined much of the historical trajectory of the discipline. For instance, the common practice of rejecting significant paradigm changes and promoting false models has characterised much of the course of archaeology for well over one and a half centuries. The tendency to reject significant improvements by clinging to conservative but false views can fairly be described as one of its hallmarks. Inevitably, such corrections were introduced by non-archaeologist heretics and were rejected unanimously by the world's archaeologists. For instance, if it had not been for the persistence of customs official Jacques Boucher de Crèvecœur de Perthes (1788–1868), Pleistocene archaeology would not have been introduced in the mid-19th century. In 1858, a unanimous declaration was issued at a large French archaeology congress that all of de Perthes' stone tools from the Abbeville and St Acheul region were 'a worthless collection of randomly picked up pebbles'. The following year, two British non-archaeologists, who had done precisely what good scientists do (testing falsifiable propositions), announced that de Perthes had been right for almost three decades. Hugh Falconer and Joseph Prestwich, who had taken part in the supervised 1858 excavation of Windmill Hill Cave, Brixon, by yet another autodidact, William Pengelly, had decided to dig alongside one of de Perthes' trenches. They confirmed his finding that humans using Acheulean stone tools lived simultaneously as Ice Age fauna.

In witnessing his vindication in his lifetime, de Perthes was fortunate, which other pioneers in the discipline were not. The discoverer of fossil man, schoolteacher Johann Carl Fuhlrott (1803–1877), died decades before his find from Kleine Feldhofer Cave was recognised, and he received no posthumous recognition. The discoverer of Ice age rock art, Don Marcelino Santiago Tomás Sanz de Sautuola (1831–1888), died a bitter and broken man because of his complete rejection by archaeology. That he was accused of having faked the rock paintings of Altamira Cave without any effort to examine his evidence weighs heavily on the discipline. The discoverer of *Homo erectus*, physician Eugène Dubois (1858–1941), was treated just as severely from the 1890s to the 1930s. Indeed, there is a pattern emerging of a delay of about forty years in accepting major paradigmatic changes in archaeology and palaeoanthropology. For instance, anatomist Raymond Arthur Dart (1893–1988) reported the discovery of *Australopithecus* in 1924, but it was almost completely ignored. After all, at the time it was well known that hominins first evolved in England, as borne out by the perfect specimen found in a Piltdown gravel pit. That it was an obvious fake did not make much difference. It took forty years again to correct the blunder — and the attention of scientists like Kenneth Oakley.

The discovery in 1924 of the Glozel site complex in central France by teenager Émile Fradin is of particular interest because it illustrates most starkly the reasons for the acrimonious responses by archaeology when it fears its authority threatened. Fradin's find challenged several French senior scholars, and when the curator of the Louvre and the director of the French Prehistoric Society accused him of fraud, Fradin filed for defamation. He was beaten during a police raid on his home, and it took to 1932 for him to be vindicated in court. Several decades later, avocational archaeologists demonstrated that, apart from material planted by professional archaeologists to discredit the site, the Glozel finds were all authentic.

The same pattern has continued ever since. Examples abound, including the pandemonium after radiocarbon analysis was introduced, the treatment of Alexander Marshack, the Côa affair in Portugal, the Jinmium affair in Australia, and many others (Bednarik 2013a). To this day, the absurd 'African Eve' hypothesis holds sway in archaeology, even though it was introduced by a discredited German professor who faked his data, and it lacks any archaeological, palaeoanthropological or genetic evidence in its favour. The far more economical and vastly better supported alternative hypothesis of the origins of present humans (the auto-domestication theory) remains disregarded and undiscussed, just as de Perthes had complained: 'They employed against me a weapon more potent than objections, than criticism, than satire or even persecution — the weapon of disdain. They did not discuss my facts; they did not even take the trouble to deny them. They disregarded them.' Another current example is the discipline's belief in an invented species it calls *Homo floresiensis*, rejecting the much more reasonable explanation of the Liang Bua remains.

This brief characterisation of Pleistocene archaeology and the pedigree of many of its propositions illustrates the need for a critical approach to its authority. This is, after all, by far not the only adversity for the discipline. The more fundamental epistemological burden preventing it from becoming a science is the lack of refutability of its propositions. Each section of each layer of each excavated site is unique and can only be a 'sample' of itself. It does not 'represent' anything else, and it can only be excavated once; whatever data are not collected at that time are

irrecoverably lost. Not only can the excavation not be repeated, but the observations reported can only be accepted as personal views. That explains the unusual sensitivity of the discipline to criticisms: since it relies so heavily on individual authority rather than repeatability or testability as in the sciences, it simply cannot tolerate challenges to that perceived authority.

A particular problem with the inability of repeating an excavation is that, when Pleistocene archaeology began after the mid-19th century, it was completely unknown what variables needed to be recorded as sediment was dug. This knowledge had to be acquired gradually, essentially from mistakes made. This is easier said than done in a field that finds it hard to admit its mistakes, and especially one that presents its findings in non-falsifiable formats at the best of times. In practical terms, this meant that during the second half of the 19th century and even for several subsequent decades, many hundreds of the prime Pleistocene sites — especially in Europe — were subjected to excavations through which the discipline hoped to achieve its methodological bootstrapping. The enormous cost of this process was the destruction of most key Pleistocene occupation sites. This volume records the efforts of recovering data from one of these hundreds of sites supposedly depleted during this pioneering phase of archaeology.

All of this is perfectly understandable but what should be of concern is that the average level of data recovery in modern excavations still leaves so much to be desired. It will be regarded as hopelessly antiquated some centuries from now. Much of it forms part of the grinding mill of securing academic degrees or advancement. However, the number of suitable sites is finite, and at the rate they are still excavated, there must come a time eventually when no prime sites will be left. Indeed, there has recently been a profitable trend towards focusing on the reassessment of Pleistocene sites subjected to previous attention.

Certainly, archaeology has adopted many scientific methods in interpreting data, but even this commendable tendency has led to countless misinterpretations. An example we are familiar with is the numerous claims of rock art age proposed, based on various methods. Consider, for instance, the many such applications of uranium-thorium analysis in this pursuit. It has been demonstrated that the method is unsuitable for reprecipitated carbonates such as speleothem skins and travertines (Tang et al. 2020), yet we have most recently seen a claim that rock art in Tibet is around 200,000 years old based purely on misuse of this method (Zhang et al. 2021). It was made in the wake of many other recent sensationalist assertions about  $^{230}\text{Th}/^{234}\text{U}$  ages of rock art, especially from Spain. In the pursuit of spectacular archaeological claims, the veracity of propositions imported from the sciences can easily become casualties, and objections by scientists are then ignored.

The present volume is the result of six decades of work applied to one of the hundreds of Pleistocene occupation sites excavated across Europe in the quest to learn how archaeological excavations should be conducted. In Austria and elsewhere, some of these sites were literally quarried, for instance, for phosphate needed to compensate for shortages imposed by more important business — such as conducting world wars. Gudenus Cave is one of many Pleistocene sites in Europe that had been regarded as entirely bereft of any sediment until they were subjected to more detailed examination that led to tangible improvements of our knowledge about them. The research efforts so far applied to this significant site had not clarified any concerns of archaeology: the number of human occupations, their respective ages, the ages of any of the faunal remains recovered from the site, the nature of the sediment layers in the cave, how they came to be deposited, or the environmental conditions at the times of their deposition. Virtually nothing of archaeological relevance was known about this most important site, except that it had contained a great deal of evidence of Palaeolithic human occupation and Pleistocene faunal material: no apparent progress since Boucher de Perthes. The issue was not about the failure of the initial excavators of 1883/84 to provide better-resolution empirical evidence. They merely contributed to archaeology's endeavours to establish the methodological parameters and protocols of the discipline. Nor is it about the failure during many subsequent decades to extricate the missing information. It is about the inaction of the responsible agencies to do so when Gudenus Cave faced obliteration by a hydroelectric scheme in 1962, and they were informed that the site still contained intact sediments and other sources of archaeologically important information. With the site destined to disappear entirely within years, it was left to a young scholar without any official support to salvage what was salvageable. He considered it scientifically unpardonable to forfeit this opportunity to restore the site's importance. This volume is a record of his life's labour of love.

Prof. Robert G. Bednarik  
Melbourne

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R. G. Bednarik