Foragers or « Feasters ? » Inequalities in the Upper Palaeolithic

Foragers ou « festoyeurs » ? Inégalités au Paléolithique supérieur

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Over the last half century, the dominant view in European archaeology has been that Upper Paleolithic societies were highly mobile egalitarian groups. While this model may be accurate for resource poor areas, it is increasingly evident that in some rich refugia like the Dordogne and Charente, more complex societies existed that exhibited transegalitarian types of characteristics including socioeconomic inequalities. Ethnographically, it is in the context of transegalitarian types of societies that unique features occur such as rich burials, prestige items, feasting, complex astronomical observations, elaborate numbering systems, rituals in deep caves, and other special features of the French Southwest Upper Paleolithic. Indeed, due to the socioeconomic dynamics involved, these features make the most sense as part of transegalitarian societies, whereas both the dynamics and these features are rare or are completely lacking among ethnographic egalitarian foragers. This paper re-assesses the status of Upper Paleolithic hunter/gatherers from the transegalitarian perspective. It focuses particular attention on the role and importance of prestige items making the important distinction between communal ritual prestige items and individual status prestige items. Ten other key features are discussed briefly that indicate the existence of complex hunter/gatherers in the Upper Paleolithic.

KEY-WORDS
Upper Paleolithic, hunter/gatherers, inequality, prestige items, transegalitarian societies.

Depuis un demi-siècle, le point de vue dominant de l’archéologie européenne est de considérer que les groupes humains du Paléolithique supérieur vivaient dans des sociétés égalitaires très mobiles. Bien que ce modèle puisse être exact pour les régions pauvres en ressources, il apparaît probable que dans certains refuges riches en ressources comme en Dordogne et en Charente, des sociétés de type transégalitaire marquées par des inégalités socio-économiques aient existé.

D’un point de vue ethnographique, c’est préférentiellement dans ce type de dynamique socio-économique que naissent les sépultures, les objets de prestige, les festins, les observations astronomiques complexes, les systèmes de numérotation élaborés, les rituels dans les grottes profondes, autant d’aspects que l’on rencontre dans le Paléolithique supérieur du Sud-Ouest français et qui n’existent pas, ou de manière erratique, parmi les nomades égalitaires.

Cet article se propose de réévaluer le statut des chasseurs-cueilleurs ou de manière erratique, parmi les nomades égalitaires. Il porte une attention particulière au rôle et à l’importance du Paléolithique supérieur dans une perspective sociale trans-égalitaire. Il porte une attention particulière au rôle et à l’importance des objets de prestige en établissant une distinction entre les objets de prestige destinés aux rituels communautaires et ceux qui ont pour vocation de marquer le rang élevé des individus. Dix autres caractéristiques clés sont brièvement abordées qui plaident pour l’existence de sociétés complexes de chasseurs-cueilleurs au Paléolithique supérieur.

INTRODUCTION

Views of Upper Paleolithic groups in Europe as egalitarian foragers have dominated the discipline of prehistory for over a half a century (Guy 2017 p. 19 - 21, 59). A number of papers in this volume exemplify this tradition. A small minority of prehistorians, including myself, have always thought otherwise (including Bordes and Sonneville-Bordes 1970 p. 64; Jochim 1987; Soffer 1989; Beaune 1995; White 1999; Aldhouse-Green 2002 p. 226,230; Vanhaeren and d’Errico 2005; Guy 2017; Hayden 1990, 2007, 2014, Owens and Hayden 1997). While we can agree that small egalitarian groups probably existed near the ice fronts or in areas that were bereft of many food resources, multiple lines of evidence now point to the existence of much more complex and non-egalitarian groups that existed in select areas with more abundant food resources. This interpretation is not based on only one or a few lines of evidence, but on over ten different kinds of observations which repeatedly co-occur in specific geographical regions as coherent constellations of cultural traits. I hasten to add that I have often been criticized for advocating that « socio-economic stratification, » existed in complex hunter/gatherer societies like the Upper Paleolithic. This is not true. I have only ever claimed that inequalities existed at the transegalitarian level in which stratification is not obligatory, but is nevertheless within the realm of possibilities.

In France, this region is primarily between the coastal plains and the Massif Central highlands, i.e., in the foothills. We cannot determine at this point whether this foothill area harbored certain abundant species of plants (e.g., lilies) or animals (e.g., resident reindeer), or whether annual migrations through steep river valleys made it possible to seasonally harvest large amounts of animals or fish such as salmon. But it is clear from deep, rich Upper Paleolithic deposits in the foothills area (e.g., at Laugerie Basse, Le Placard, La Madeleine, and many other sites) that human populations were relatively high and that resources must have been abundant (Bordes 1969; Mellars 2009 p. 216-7; Jochim 1987). The healthy large stature of this population also indicates good provisioning of protein-rich food. This is the same area where most French Upper Paleolithic portable and rock art occurs, most burials occur, most exotic imported materials occur, and where most deep caves were used for elaborate rituals (White 1985; Beaune 1995 p. 53, 84, 132, 204, 216).

In the Pyrenees area, rich sites similarly occur in the foothills between lowland or coastal plains and the Pyrenean uplands. On the Russian Plain, it has also been observed that sites with similar characteristics including abundant art are located in or near river valleys that probably served as migration routes for large herbivores during the Pleistocene and were optimally situated for harvesting animals nearby on a large scale (Guy 2017 p. 82, 87, 149-154, 199, 202). When combined with the effective storage technology that first appears in the Upper Paleolithic (Soffer 1989), these locations could have provided a great deal of food, including recurring surpluses from migrating herbivores or salmonids.
First, I would like to establish the general interpretive framework that I will be using and then discuss indications of complexity for the Upper Paleolithic in more detail. I would like to emphasize again that there is a strong relationship between certain Upper Paleolithic geographical areas that appear to have been at least seasonally rich in resources, and the development of more complex societies. This is the same relationship that has been documented ethnographically for complex hunter/gatherers in the American Northwest by Donald and Mitchell (1975), Hayden (1992, 2000 p. 262; Hayden and Schulting 1997 p. 77) and others. Indeed, we need to ask: how are the co-occurrences of art, rich burials, deep cave use, and prestige goods in specific geographic areas—and their lack elsewhere—to be explained if they are all not related to abundant resources in these areas?

Key to reconstructing the nature of Upper Paleolithic societies is the distinction between simple hunter/gatherers (also known as foragers) and complex hunter/gatherers (a.k.a. transegalitarian hunter/gatherers). Ethnographic foragers such as the Western Desert Australian Aborigines typically inhabited resource-poor areas or had limited technologies for extracting resources. As a result, population levels were very low (<0.2 people per square km), mobility was high, group sizes were relatively small (<20), sharing of food and most personal items was mandatory, competition involving food was prohibited, private property was very limited, and the interest of the entire group was far more important than individual interests (Testart 1982; Hayden 2019). They were probably the closest approximation to socioeconomically egalitarian societies that are known.

In contrast, transegalitarian hunter/gatherers ethnographically lived in regions with abundant resources such as the American Northwest, had high population levels (>0.2 people per square km), were at least seasonally sedentary and sometimes fully sedentary, had family and personal private property including ownership of resource locations, exhibited reduced food sharing, used surplus food in competitive ways (e.g., in feasts, marriage payments, alliance formations), and often prioritized individual self-interests over group interests using a variety of strategies, including feasts, marriages, conflicts, prestige items, and other pretexts. Indeed, surpluses have long been related to socioeconomic inequalities. Complex hunter/gatherers sometimes even developed hereditary elites and slavery. Testart (1982) insisted that there is a strong tendency for hunter/gatherer cultures to fall into either one or the other of the simple or complex groups with few transitional types or examples of groups.

It must be emphasized that when I refer to inequalities and complexity in the Upper Paleolithic, I am not primarily referring to stratified societies or chiefdom levels of complexity and inequality, but to transegalitarian types of inequalities. However, this initial form of inequality does not exclude the possibility that some stratified chiefdoms may have existed. In ethnographic transegalitarian societies, surpluses are not usually of sufficient magnitude or constancy to create permanent, inherited positions of dominance; however surpluses are adequate to support less permanent - but still significant - forms of inequalities based on the use of resources. Thus, most wealth accumulation is not typically as lavish or dramatic as in chiefdoms (with some exceptions), and there is a general circulation of wealth items (prestige items) predicated on private ownership and debts.

**INEQUALITIES IN THE UPPER PALEOLITHIC**

There are 11 lines of evidence for surpluses, socioeconomically stratified societies, and complexities that can be used to demonstrate that certain Upper Paleolithic were not egalitarian:

- Resource richness and degrees of sedentism
- Population densities and group sizes
- Evidence of mass killings and storage
- Prestige goods: imported or locally made by specialists for status displays vs. forager ritual objects
- Adult burials with abundant grave goods
- Child burials with grave goods
- High quality and costly specialist art
- Feasting
- Notation systems
- Complex rituals including secret societies, cannibalism, and deep cave use
- Domestication of dogs

Each of these indicators could be a separate topic for investigation and some of them have been addressed in more detail previously (e.g., Hayden 2014; Guy 2017). Given the space available here, I will focus mainly on an aspect that has not thus far received due explanatory attention: the occurrence of prestige objects at major Upper Paleolithic sites, especially items that were imported from long distances.

**Practical versus prestige technologies**

Initially, it is important to determine the practical vs. prestige role of items being made or transported in the Upper Paleolithic. The general distinction between practical and prestige technologies has been the focus of a separate study in which prestige items were defined (Hayden 1998). In essence, practical technologies are developed to solve practical problems as cost-effectively as possible because excessive time spent in solving problems of survival may adversely affect individual survival odds. Thus, spears, shelters, and digging sticks are all usually made among foragers the fastest, most economical ways possible within the constraints of time, materials, and effectiveness of the solutions available.

In contrast, prestige technologies are developed to solve social and political problems (e.g., how to maintain group loyalties, how to establish alliances, or how to arrange the most desirable marriages, and especially how to place individuals in indebted relationships (Herskovits 1940 p. 465; Sahlins 1972 p. 107; Earle 1978 p. 173; Hayden 1998). Due to the purpose of trying to impress people to make them want to join with hosts, the logic of creating prestige goods is turned on its head. Instead of creating gifts as efficiently and economically as possible, efforts are made to enhance the value or impressiveness of items (to the extent warranted and possible) by adding more and more effort and cost into their manufacture or
procurement not only to favorably impress viewers or recipients, but to increase the magnitude of any debts created.

From the ethnographic literature and my own ethnoarchaeological fieldwork in Australia, I have found that there are basically two contexts in which prestige items occur among hunter/gatherers: 1) as community or corporately owned ritual items that serve to bind members of ritual groups together and indicate group prestige, or 2) as individually owned or controlled status items that serve in sociopolitical strategies to increase the self-benefits of ambitious individuals or factions.

**Ritual prestige items**

Ritual prestige items occur in both simple and complex (transegalitarian) hunter/gatherer societies. Among the egalitarian foragers in the Central Desert of Australia, exotic or labor-intensive ritual prestige items took the form of shells imported long distances from coastal areas and tjuringa (carved wood or stone slabs that symbolically depicted mythical ancestors, their travels, or activities). Tjuringa had absolutely no practical functions, but existed merely as symbolic sculptures meant to impress viewers. Ritual prestige items were usually only shown to initiates so that they were never displayed in public. They were kept hidden in caves or other secretive places (pertalchera) located well away from residential areas and known only to select older men (Spencer and Gillen 1927 p. 101, 103, 111, 113). They were relatively rare items and would not normally be recovered archaeologically from residential sites or from burials. They may have existed in the Lower or Middle Paleolithic, but it is unlikely that they would ever be recovered from a datable context.

**Status prestige items**

Personal status prestige items do not appear to occur in ethnographic pristine forager societies, but are abundantly attested to in relatively complex transegalitarian hunter/gatherer societies. In contrast to ritual prestige items, status prestige items were produced in much greater quantities due to transegalitarian dynamics including a number of ambitious individuals using the same prestige-item-based strategies to compete for the same marriage partners, political allies, and wealth benefits especially by using gifts to indebted others. In addition, these prestige items were used and displayed in public, and usually kept in their owners’ residences, or at least at residential sites, and were often buried with their owners as part of their privately owned possessions. Archaeologically, although not abundant in comparison to stone tools due to costs, status prestige items nevertheless occur with consistent low-level frequencies at many residential sites of complex hunter/gatherers whether in the North American Archaic, the Middle Eastern Epipaleolithic, or the European Upper Paleolithic where such items were evidently used and displayed in public. What were the main uses of status prestige items? Why were they created, and why did they only begin to appear relatively late in the Paleolithic?

Because of their high effort investment, individually owned prestige items appear rarely or not at all in pristine, egalitarian hunter/gatherer societies where sharing is obligatory and it makes no sense to expend unnecessary effort on anything that might be appropriated by others. It is true that some groups may have adopted a few forms like the beadwork of the !Kung San, but the !Kung collaborated with herders for many centuries, and they were perhaps themselves former herders (Wilmsen 1989). Among pristine foragers, it was the obligatory sharing ethics of egalitarian hunter/gatherers that generally made it counterproductive to invest any extra effort in the manufacture of material items. In egalitarian societies, other band members could demand and expect to obtain the «loan» of most objects, with a high probability of loaned objects never being returned. Thus there is no significant material wealth among egalitarian foragers. As I have observed in Australia, this is still a major impediment to the integration of Aboriginals into capitalist economies. Because of this, the only egalitarian context in which procuring, acquiring, or making prestige goods makes sense is if the items are jointly owned by a group as with communal ritual paraphernalia (Hayden 1998 p. 16). The general persistence of hunter/gatherer societies as simple foragers throughout the Lower and Middle Paleolithic plausibly explains why no, or extremely few, status prestige items have been recovered from those contexts. Thus, the onus is upon those who deny that costly objects were used for personal status to explain why such objects did not generally occur among simple foragers.

On a number of occasions (Hayden 1998, 2003 p. 224, 2014 p. 159), I have presented the basic uses of status prestige objects in traditional transegalitarian societies that I or others have studied. These uses are not mutually exclusive. Briefly, in transegalitarian societies, status prestige items serve to:

1. Transform surplus food into more durable desirable material forms that maintain value;
2. Create social bonds and debts when given to others;
3. Validate and display the importance of key sociopolitical events such as marriages, alliances and funerals;
4. Serve as compensations, i.e., payments for the taking of lives rather than demanding reciprocal revenge killings, or payments for the loss of group members through marriages;
5. Display economic success and political power.

Prestige objects therefore play key roles in the dynamics of transegalitarian communities, especially in regard to aggrandizer strategies developed to create inequalities — strategies which were based on economic production. Prestige items are not simply gewgaws that emerged from the creative impulses of anatomically modern humans in order to satisfy artistic or other impulses. They served specific social and political functions geared to promote the interests of ambitious individuals and their supporters or kin.

When we canvas the material remains of Upper Paleolithic communities in the richest regions of Europe, we cannot help but be struck by the diversity and number of prestige objects that have been recovered from residential and burial sites (grave goods indicating not only the occurrence of such goods, but also their private owner-
ship, and their unequal distribution within communities, sometimes to extreme degrees). There are the well-known pieces of art mobilier (sculptures in ivory, antler, and stone, Beaune 1995 p. 185, 213); carved spoons (Beaune 1995 p. 125); pierced and decorated prestige bâtons; exquisite non-functional oversized and over-thinned Solutrean laurel leaves; excessively long flint blades (Simonnet 1982); exotic flint materials; decorated stone grease lamps; shells from distant coasts; amber; tailored and decorated buckskin clothing (Beaune 1995 p. 75, 167-170); jewelry (beads, pendants, bracelets, Beaune 1995 p. 170-179, 247); domesticated dogs (Geronpré et al. 2009, 2020), special constructions (Beaune 1995 p. 245, 258); complex musical instruments (Beaune 1995 p. 221); specialist art (Guy 2017); and elaborate burials (Binant 1991; Beaune 1995 p. 175-179, 245-252; Pettitt 2010). Prized materials have been found up to 600 km. from their sources (Taborin 1993).

**TRANSEGALITARIAN STRATEGIES**

The number and nature of these and other prestige objects and contexts make the most sense as personal or family status prestige items, especially the beaded clothes, the necklaces and bracelets, the perforated bâtons, and domestic dogs. As such they would have played key roles in strategies used by ambitious individuals or groups to increase their influence. In traditional societies these strategies usually take a number of forms including feasting, marriage prices, alliance formations, and forming ritual societies (see Hayden 2014). Many of these strategies incorporate gift-giving with semi-contractual obligations of indebtedness and required returns of gifts, often with interest. As Edmund Leach observed: «Kachins tend to perceive every kind of mutual relationship that may grow up between a pair of individuals as being part of a system of debts...the debt is a kind of credit account which ensures the continuity of the relationship» (1954 p. 152-153, emphasis added). Leach was primarily referring to debts created by giving valued prestige items to others. This seems to have been a universally important strategy for establishing binding sociopolitical relationships of support or dominance, as well as power, prosperity, political control, and inequalities. In New Guinea, Wohlt (1978 p. 100) has stated that «A bigman prospers by indebted others.» Walens (1981 p. 13), too, observed that «The nobelman’s success was achieved only through careful deployment of his food resources to create reciprocal obligations.» And Gosden (1989) stated that, in general, debt constitutes the central principle of social organization, political centralization, and power. It seems axiomatic that the more valued the gift, the stronger the indebtedness and the relationship. There is therefore an inherent pressure to develop more lavish material gifts.

In numerous parts of the world, people intent on creating debts sought hard-to-procure exotic materials from distant lands such as exotic shells, amber, or native metals (Hayden and Earle, in press). The greater the difficulty of obtaining these items and the greater their attractiveness, the more valued they were, and the more easily access to them could be controlled by a few enterprising aggrandizers. I suggest that this is the real meaning behind regional exchanges of items like shells in Upper Paleolithic Europe. Shells, amber, beads, and lavishly decorated clothing simply cannot be construed as serving practical functions; they were status prestige objects.

Thus, in a prestige goods context, the procurement of exotic items is best viewed as primarily the result of sociopolitical strategies by ambitious individuals who could produce or control surpluses for exchange in order to create debts and binding relationships. The appearance of prestige objects at habitation sites is unlikely to have been the result of group rituals or genetic cognitive improvements or the biological evolution of symbolic mental capacities as implied by the «arrival of modern humans» explanation for art in the Upper Paleolithic. The presence of status prestige items in residential contexts is a prima facie indicator that private property with constrained sharing was a recognized norm for the society thereby creating an important precondition for the establishment of inequalities, wealth, and transegalitarian societies.

**OTHER INDICATORS OF COMPLEXITY**

In addition to prestige items, a few comments are warranted on some of the other strategies used by aggrandizers to create socioeconomic inequalities. These include marriages, ritual networks and interaction spheres, burials, child investments, dogs, feasts, and notations.

**Marriages**

Generally, emergent elites in transegalitarian societies not only used their children as a means of gaining wealth from marriage payments (bride prices or dowries), but as a means of establishing exchange networks that gave families access to resources including hunting grounds, prime fishing locations, and exotic materials. In addition, the higher the marriage price, the more status parents acquired, and the more control parents acquired over their children who became heavily indebted to their parents for underwriting their marriages (Meillassoux 1981). Ethnographically, not only were high-ranking marriages restricted to members of comparably wealthy families, but relative status or rank was often taken into account as well. Marriages with lower ranking families were shunned so that the highest ranked families typically had to seek marriage partners from outside their own communities, sometimes at considerable distances (Donald 1997 p. 26, 277, 287, 293; Hayden et al.; Schulting 1997 p. 78).

Thus, high-ranking or elite marriages differed considerably from commoner marriages, and they tended to create regional networks of elites who became affiliated through marriage and who exchanged prestige items (wealth items) often on an ongoing basis involving periodic visits and debt exchanges. Donald (1997 p. 293) observed that such marriage networks on the Northwest Coast resulted in elite regional body styles involving labrets, tattoos, and head deformations. Marriage also conferred rights to use affinal crests which were always depicted in a stylized form. It seems reasonable to extend these kinds of material stylistic provinces to the art styles of prestige objects that elites also exchanged in marriage
alliances. Such elite marriage exchanges probably involved many of the prestige items previously discussed so that the occurrence of prestige items from distant sources in Upper Paleolithic deposits can be viewed as one component of such marriage and exchange networks. Evidence of the value and investment in children (arguably for marriage purposes) is certainly present in the Upper Paleolithic burials of children with considerable wealth in the form of specialized clothing and jewelry (see Child Burials).

Ritual Networks

Another very common aggrandizer strategy that was ethnographically used in transegalitarian hunter/gatherer societies, and that resulted in establishing regional exchange networks, was the establishment of ritual societies or organizations similar to them. Ethnographically, secret societies provide one model of such societies. They typically required very high initiation payments, were exclusively restricted to the wealthy and politically powerful members of communities, and wielded great power throughout entire regions (Hayden 2018a,b). They were relatively common among ethnographic complex hunter/gatherers. High-ranking members of these ritual societies traveled considerable distances to take part in each others’ ritual ceremonies, and undoubtedly carried some of their nicest lithic materials with them on such trips, as they undoubtedly also did when visiting their married offspring and affines in other communities. Exotic prestige items were required for many secret society rituals such as the cowrie shells used ethnographically in the Midewiwin rituals of the Ojibway; these shells were imported from more than a thousand kilometers away (Hayden 2018a). Due to the considerable wealth controlled and displayed by members of ritual societies, status prestige items commonly occurred in their households at habitation sites and were exchanged regionally.

I have identified a number of archaeological indications for the existence of ritual secret societies in the Upper Paleolithic, especially in regards to the ritual use and painting of caves (Hayden 2018a, 2020), although these are not definitive. Indicators consist of the use of deep caves; the wealth exhibited by the specialist art in the deep caves as well as the wealth apparent at major residential sites; the emphasis in cave art motifs on power animals; the preferential occurrence of musical instruments typical of secret societies in deep caves; the occurrence of cannibalism; the special hidden character of some Upper Paleolithic burials such as Cussac and El Mi-rón (Cantabria); and the regional networks of elite interaction evidenced by long-distance transport of prestige goods and art motifs. Even if one does not endorse the secret society model for the Upper Paleolithic, some kind of similar ritual organization seems implied by the above characteristics.

INTERACTION SPHERES

The combination of the general use of prestige items for the five general purposes that I have listed, together with their special regional roles in aggrandizer marriage strategies and in ritual organizations, creates a tangible and realistic explanation for the rather impressive long-distance transport of exotic materials and the artistic/ritualistic homogeneity of very large areas in the Upper Paleolithic. This model is strongly grounded in ethnology whereas traditional views of such exchanges occurring due to the genetic cognitive improvements of anatomically modern humans are nebulous and fail to explain why such behavior was not universal among all modern human populations (Hayden and Schulting 1997), i.e., why it only occurred in some parts of Europe and a few other select locations. Indeed, studies of material transport in the Upper Paleolithic have generally focused on documentation and rarely, if ever, have addressed questions of who was transporting those materials and why.

The involvement of prestige items in regional exchanges and the savoir-faire required for making them indicates a far different dynamic responsible for the zones of interaction than simple marriage exchanges or nomadic movements such as documented among simple hunter/gatherers like the Australian Western Desert where neither status prestige items nor important economic inequalities existed. The regional exchange networks of materials and styles in the Upper Paleolithic are much more like the elite exchange networks of transegalitarian societies which involved status prestige goods that are characteristic of the ethnographic and archaeological records elsewhere in the world involving personal adornments and possessions like beads, shells, pendants, sculptures, and regalia items. The North American Northwest Coast and Northwest Plateau Interaction Spheres are prime examples of elite-driven exchange networks among ethnographic complex hunter/gatherers with pronounced inequalities. In terms of material characteristics and geographical extent, these ethnographic (and other archaeological) interaction spheres compare very favorably with those of the Upper Paleolithic. Long-distance ritual exchanges involving prestige items among the Late Archaic complex hunter/gatherers of North America provide comparable and compelling examples (e.g., Sanger et al. 2019).

BURIALS

Burials in the Upper Paleolithic provide an important indication that at least some communities were far from egalitarian. It is a remarkable fact that very few individuals in the Upper Paleolithic were buried at all. In 1991, Binant reported only 63 convincing intentional burials in her survey. The remains of the vast majority of other individuals must have been disposed above ground (such as practiced by Tibetans and Plains Indians) or in water so that their remains have not survived (e.g., Donald 1997). Who were the individuals who warranted special funerary treatment by burial? One of the most plausible reasons for special funerary treatment is that some individuals had a higher status in life. In death, they may have been used as the focus of ancestral worship cults. Ethnographically, ancestor cults were typically used to warrant claims over resource ownership or control and to consolidate control over other individuals within the kin group (Freedman 1965; Pardoe 1995).
However, there is even more compelling evidence of inequalities from burial evidence. This consists of the well-known lavish burials of a few select individuals at Sungir, St. Germain-la-Rivièrè, Brno, Barma Grande, and other sites. The hundreds or sometimes thousands of ivory beads, shell beads, pendants, disks, fox canines, stag canines, sculptures, and other objects buried with these individuals attest to inordinate inequalities in wealth, status, and political power that tend to typify the more complex transegalitarian societies ethnographically. Vanhaeren and d’Errico (2001, 2005) have explicitly linked red deer canines in the St. Germain-la-Rivièrè burial, and dentalium ornaments at La Madeleine to social inequalities in the Upper Paleolithic. White (1999) came to the same conclusions about the Sungir burials. In addition, at Sungir, the headless body of a woman was placed on top of the two children buried there, while her head was placed over the male adult burial near the children (White 1999 p. 520, 530; takovleva 2017 p. 104). On the face of it, this looks like the human sacrifice of someone like a slave.

Finally, the attempts to hide bodies, as in the case of Cussac and El Mirón, seem to attest to a different kind of consideration which I have suggested makes most sense as part of the documented logic of ritual secret societies, i.e., to prevent body parts of the most powerful members from being pilfered by ambitious individuals trying to enhance their own supernatural powers through the possession of bones from spiritually powerful dead leaders (Hayden 2018).

Secret societies were, above all, created for the benefit of its members, especially those in the highest ranks. They existed to enhance socioeconomic inequalities within communities and regions.

**CHILD BURIALS**

The importance of children for creating alliances between families based on wealth production has already been mentioned as a key feature of marriages. Ethnographically, ambitious families attempted to increase the value of their children for marriage exchanges in bids to increase influence, to get larger wealth exchanges, and to gain access to resources owned by other affluent families (e.g., drive lines or river fordings for game, fishing locations, root collecting areas, or berry stands, Teit 1909 p. 582; Boas 1934; Bouchard and Kennedy 1992; Hayden 1992 p. 545). They thus created close alliances with other powerful families that formed formidable political factions in their communities as well as regionally. Such practices also tended to create an exclusive elite class that concentrated economic, social, and political power in the hands of a few. These practices also indebted children to an extraordinary extent enabling the parental figures to control the behavior and economic production of their married offspring. Neither these strategies, nor lavish child burials, have been documented in any strictly egalitarian ethnographic society that I know of. Indeed, the dominant sharing ethic in strictly egalitarian societies would seem completely incompatible with the accumulation by one individual or family of large amounts of wealth, not to mention its investment in children.

In the Upper Paleolithic, the number and proportion of subadult burials with large quantities of prestige objects is remarkable and represents a very strong social pattern. The most dramatic example is undoubtedly the two young children at Sungir who were each buried with about 5,000 ivory beads sewn onto their clothes together with other accompanying ivory objects representing well over 3,500 hours of production (White 1999). The polished human femur with one child and the headless adult laid immediately above the children White (1999 p. 520, 530) add further dimensions of inequalities. However, there are additional impressive examples (Petit 2010; Guy 2017 p. 129), including the adolescents at Barma Grande, Arene Candide, Paglicci, and Baouosso da Torre wearing headpieces copiously decorated with shells and stag canines plus ivory pendants. Younger children were buried with decorated clothes or jewelry at Kostenki (150 fox canines, Mal’ta (120 ivory beads and pendants), La Madeleine (1,200 Dentalium beads and 250 other shell beads or canines attached to clothes), Grotte des Enfants (hundreds of shells on aprons), Saint-Germain-la-Rivièrè (69 stag canines), and Abri Pataud (an infant with 80 ivory beads). As Vanhaeren and d’Errico (2001) argue, these examples go far beyond what one would expect of egalitarian foragers who lacked surpluses or wealth and who might place sentimental objects with dead children. The use-wear on the shell beads and tooth pendants of the Madeleine child indicates that the ornaments were worn regularly in life and were not part of special mortuary clothing (ibid.). The same was true at Sungir (White, pers. com).

Rather than parental affection or community sympathy, these and other child burials, represent a very strongly established and widespread strategy for investing wealth in children - investments that were sometimes lost when children died before marriage. While I do not think that they necessarily represent hereditary inequalities (the usual archaeological inference of rich subadult burials), they certainly represent the value of the children for their families, and the most likely situation where this would occur is conferring value on children (via feasts and gifts) in order to broker marriage alliances with other affluent families or kin groups. Whether in Australia or elsewhere, nothing remotely like these burials is represented in any ethnographic simple hunter/gatherer society unaffected by exchanges with more complex societies.

**DOMESTICATED DOGS**

Germonpré et al. (2009, 2020) have presented compelling evidence for the domestication of dogs in the Upper Paleolithic of Europe. If her results are accepted, and assuming that dogs were domesticated for social or work purposes rather than for eating, it indicates that at least some families had enough surplus food to maintain and breed dogs over many generations. Lupo (2017, 2019) has shown that dogs cannot subsist off of human garbage in small nomadic or semi-sedentary hunter/gatherer communities. She concludes that “Without significant provisioning... sustaining dogs in these [cooler] areas would be impossible” (Lupo 2019 p. 9). For breeding to be successful, a minimum population of dogs must have
been maintained, perhaps a minimum of 10-20 individuals, implying a community or regional network of breeders and owners. Ethnographic observations from Siberia, Alaska, and the Northwest Coast indicate that it would have been necessary to provide about 365 kg of fish per year (or the equivalent in calories) to feed each dog, that is about 584,000 kcal per dog per year (Lupo 2019: Appendix B; Hayden 2020). This represents a considerable surplus that only wealthy families could have afforded, and Lupo (2019 p. 7) notes that « added costs...to support dogs, even seasonally, could be prohibitive. » As such, I think the presence of dogs indicates the existence of considerable surplus food production and major inequalities between families in communities with dogs. It should be obvious that far more benefit could be derived from the direct consumption by people of the food needed to maintain dogs, than from consuming dog meat. If dogs were ever consumed, they must have been as a high-cost prestige food.

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**SPECIALISTS AND COSTLY ART**

The exceptional quality of much Upper Paleolithic art as well as the considerable time and effort required to create it go far beyond what has been documented ethnographically among egalitarian hunter/gatherers. The costs involved complex paint recipes; preparations for spending long periods in caves including the building of scaffolds; and sculpting life-sized three-dimensional animals in stone like those at Cap Blanc and Le Roc Aux Sorciers. Such investments, as well as the training of skilled artists are only known from complex hunter/gatherers with substantial socioeconomic inequalities including individuals or organizations capable of underwriting major art projects and compensating individuals willing to become skilled artisans. The thousands of practice plaquettes from sites like La Marche and Le Placard testify to the efforts that went into developing artistic skills in some locations. Furthermore, Guy (2017 p. 209-213, 289) has observed that naturalistic art is strongly associated with relatively complex, even hierarchical societies, and is virtually unknown in egalitarian societies like simple hunter/gatherers. This is understandable due to the training required to master naturalistic techniques. Upper Paleolithic art represents the first appearance of naturalistic art and is another strong indication of social complexity and socioeconomic inequalities in the Upper Paleolithic.

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**FEASTING**

Although Upper Paleolithic material remains have not generally been interpreted or recognized in terms of feasting, there are nevertheless, a number of cases and indicators of feasting for this period. Ethnographic studies of feasting have demonstrated the key role that feasts play in traditional societies in creating socioeconomic inequalities through giving food gifts to create debt relationships, and the resulting pressures to increase surpluses (Hayden 2014). A number of unusually large hearths (up to 13 meters in length) like those at Abri Pataud, Blanchard, and Dolni Vestonice (Movius 1966 p. 313; Oliva 2000 p. 105; White et al. 2017 p. 290) very probably were feasting features, while the unusually dense faunal remains and hearths within caves such as La Garma, Tito Bustillo and Enléine (Bégouën and Clottes 1981; Beaune 1995 p. 152, 212) may represent feasts held in hidden locations by select groups like secret societies. In addition, there are artfully carved spoons in antler and ivory which primarily make sense in feasting contexts (Beaune 1995 p. 125).

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**NOTATIONS**

Complex hunter/gatherers like those of California or the American Northwest had private property, wealth, investments that were part of feasts, and gifts sometimes involving thousands of beads, furs, blankets, dried fish, and other important items. They therefore needed to keep records of large sums and developed numbering systems that extended into the hundreds or thousands (Hayden and Villeneuve 2011 p. 350). In contrast, egalitarian foragers lacked such wealth, as well as the obligatory return of gifts, the need for elaborate record keeping, and the need for elaborate numbering systems. In fact, their numbering systems rarely exceeded 10, with 20 being about the maximum known (Overmann 2012; Hayden and Villeneuve 2011; Hayden 2021). What are we to make, then, of Upper Paleolithic objects like the Taï plaque which is evidently a notational record of over 1,000 items (Marshack 1991a,b; d’Errico 1998)? Recording 1,000 items (about the equivalent of the dentalium shells decorating the clothing of the child at La Madeleine) is a notational record that is several orders of magnitude (i.e., 10,000%) beyond any numbering or notational system recorded for any pristine egalitarian hunter/gatherer group. Similar large numbers were recorded on Upper Paleolithic bones from Los Azules, Oküzini, and Zigeunerhöhle while other notations are less extreme involving scores or hundreds of items (d’Errico 1998) which are still well outside the range of numbering systems among egalitarian hunter/gatherers. The existence of these notations clearly indicates that some Upper Paleolithic groups were far from simple egalitarian hunter/gatherers.

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**RESOURCES AND POPULATIONS**

A sharp rise in site and population densities is one of the more notable features of the Upper Paleolithic in Europe. It is inconceivable that this did not result from a profound increase in the resources that people were able to extract and use at that time, plausibly due to the development of mass harvesting and storage technologies (Soffer 1989; Beaune 1995 p. 52, 132). This is supported by faunal studies indicating the mass harvesting of herd animals together with filleting of meat, generally undertaken for drying and storing (Beaune 1995 p. 53, 132; Guy 2017 p. 82), and Perlès (1996 p. 39) has noted that Upper Paleolithic art flourished where there was good evidence for mass harvests and filleting of game. The evidence for filleting and exponential population growth only makes sense if meat is being stored; and Halstead (1989) has shown that storage by its very nature generates surpluses due to overcompensation for the risks involved, while Testart (1982) and Halstead have explicitly linked storage to the development of inequalities.
Bordes (1969 also Mellars 1994 p. 44, 64; 2009 p. 217; Beaune 1995 p. 179; Guy 2017 p. 66, 267) emphasized the unparalleled richness of the low latitude tundra grasslands that covered parts of Europe during the Upper Paleolithic, with Mellars estimating that the abundant game supported population levels in some areas equal to early agricultural populations in the Neolithic period. Such richness explains how certain groups could establish seasonal or even year-round sedentary residences (Soffer 1985), something most egalitarian foragers would be incapable of. As previously noted, Donald and Mitchell (1975) have demonstrated a strong relationship between resource abundance and sociopolitical complexity on the Northwest Coast, and the same relationship exists on the Northwest Plateaux (see Introduction). I expect the same was true during the European Upper Paleolithic as well.

I have attempted to quantify some aspects of surplus production in terms of resources required to obtain or produce prestige items as well as assessments of food storage, population levels, and environmental richness (Hayden 2020b). In specific terms, the keeping of dogs entails the production of considerable surpluses (see Dogs). Another « cost » would have been the procurement of shells. Ethnographically, on the American Northwest Plateaux (an area that not only had pronounced wealth inequalities but that has archaeological assemblages resembling the Upper Paleolithic), acquiring dentalium shells from coastal sources was transacted at a rate of two-meter strings of shells (c. 200 shells) for 300 dried salmon (c. 1,200 kg fresh fish), representing about 1,800,000 kcal (Teit 1900 p. 262; Hayden 2020b).

At this rate, the procurement of the 1,200 dentalium shells attached to the clothes of the child buried at La Madeleine on its own would have required paying the equivalent of a staggering 7,200 kg of salmon, or 10,800,000 kcal of surplus food. This is clearly a case of prestige items used for personal status. And, as the ethnographies from Western North America abundantly document, this is wealth. Even if the Upper Paleolithic exchange rate was a fraction of that documented ethnographically, the surpluses required would have been of great proportions.

It should be noted that historically, there has been a broad consensus among most anthropologists from the time of Marx (including, Boas, Childe, Bunzel, Tax, Herskovits, and Harris) that surpluses were required for socioeconomic inequalities to develop, although surpluses may not have guaranteed this development, (Harris 1959 p. 185). As Harris observed: « The surplus theory is so widely accepted among anthropologists that many regard it as an innocuous truism. »

**HISTORICAL EFFECTS**

The examples that Stépanoff (2018) uses to show that there are no necessary links between storage and complexity (and to show that prestige items can exist in egalitarian societies) are all drawn from the Kamchatka region of Eastern Siberia. However, these were not pristine hunter/gatherers who were removed from influences of world economic systems. From one end of Siberia to the other, major trading powers had enormous impacts on hunting and gathering societies. In Western Siberia, the Tartar Khans, followed by the Russians, imposed fur tributes on Khanty hunter/gatherers from Medieval times until the 19th century. Furs were «as valuable as gold» and ambitious individuals became Khanty chiefs rich in furs and silver. Chiefdoms emerged as a result. Not surprisingly, with so much to be gained, conflict escalated leading to the widespread ditching and palisading of fortified communities (Jordan 2003 p. 25, 35, 41). It was only with Russian monopolistic control of the fur resources that the economic basis for Khanty complexity was eliminated and they reverted to simpler sociopolitical formations.

The situation was similar in the region around the Kamchatka Peninsular. Kamchatka, Sakhalin Island, the Kuril Islands, the Amur Basin, and northern Japan were all involved in intensive trade of furs, marine oils, and other products. This trade was dominated in the early historic period by the Ainu who «managed lucrative trading empires between the Asian mainland and Japan» (Fitzhugh 1999 p. 19). « By the fifteenth century, Ainu mariners had become influential traders linking Japan, Korea, China, Russia, and Kamchatka » (Sasaki 1999 p. 86). As in Western Siberia, because of this lucrative trade, by the 1300’s hundreds of sites had become fortified and chiefdoms had emerged, warring with each other and outside interests over wealth from the 15th to the 17th centuries (Fitzhugh 1999 p. 46; Siddle 1999 p. 69,97).

In the 17th century, Russian and Japanese parties took control of this trade, resulting in the collapse of indigenous sociopolitical complexity (Fitzhugh 1999 p. 19). Indeed, « by 1749 most Ainu and Kamchadal natives had been baptised as Orthodox Christians » (Siddle 1999 p. 70). The Russian American Company also occupied the Kuril Islands adjacent to Kamchatka for sea mammal hunting which was important for the larger regional economic system of Northeast Asia (Gjesfjeld 2019 p. 85, 99).
However, major impacts began even earlier when the Mongolian Yuan empire took over Sakhalin Island in the 14th century, an event that had «considerable impact on the economic and social structures» of the natives (Sasaki 1999 p. 86). Guy (2020) provides additional critiques of Stépanoff’s use of the Kamchatka ethnographic material.

All in all, Stépanoff has not told readers what transformations resulted from participating in these world trade networks in the societies that he advances as examples of « egalitarian hunter/gatherers » which had prestige items and wealth, or what the differential effects were from Chinese, Japanese, and Russian territorial takeovers. However, it is clear that they were profound and affected the entire region’s social, political, and material realms.

Nor do we know what levels of surpluses could be produced (whether food or commodities) by the societies that Stépanoff or others cite. This is a critically important variable without which none of Stépanoff’s critiques can be entertained. These societies were essentially what I have called «commercial hunter/gatherers» relying on the commercial exchange of their products to supplement their economic production. The claim by Stépanoff that the East Asian hunter/gatherers were egalitarian is belied by his admission that they all had slaves. Slavery is simply and completely antithetical to egalitarian societies, no matter how some authors would like to rationalize this. Given such historical trajectories, these societies seem to exhibit mixed characteristics that were quite different from the pristine egalitarian hunter/gatherer communities in Australia, the Americas, and Africa.

In view of this history, the realist style of carving and the elaborate clothing made by many Siberian hunter/gatherers were very likely developed during the more wealthy, more politically complex phase of their past, as undoubtedly was the practice of keeping slaves. With the usurpation of their sources of wealth by state powers, these societies must have returned to more prosaic subsistence and egalitarian practices in many, but not all, domains—specifically the ownership of prestige items and slaves.

Moreover, the ethnographers that Stépanoff relied on to document the so-called egalitarian nature of these societies are compromised by their evident political attempts to demonstrate — in accord with dogmas leading up to and following the Russian revolution—that complex societies could be constructed within an egalitarian (primitive communist) framework. This is perhaps not so different from the utopian ideology expressed in the French revolutionary slogan of « Liberté, égalité, et fraternité » lauded for modern complex societies, and perhaps not so different from the ideals upheld by a number of contemporary French prehistorians. The ethnographers that Stépanoff cites (Shrenk, Shternberg, and Lopatin) were extreme ideologues who lectured native groups on how to act in proper communist societies, and who repeatedly emphasized their views of the communist nature of Kamchatkan festivals, their «communist spirit,» collective life, and the collective property of these societies. They pretended that individuals could be rich without creating inequalities. They wanted to believe that the ownership and public display of prestige items existed in egalitarian societies to distinguish between rich and poor, to make corporate groups the focus of display and competition, but positioning themselves as exalted leaders of those groups (e.g., Clarke 2001, Adams 2019, Hayden 2016). Thus, the ownership and public display of prestige items by a leader in the name of his clan is entirely characteristic of most transegalitarian societies with inequalities between corporate groups and their leaders. Lack of individual ownership is not an argument for identifying egalitarian societies, or for excluding either inequalities, economically-based competition, or the pursuit of self-interests.

The same is true of the bear ceremonies that Stépanoff refers to. In these rituals, it was the rich who raised the bears, who hosted the feasts, who invited other rich individuals to participate as representatives of their kinship or support groups, and who «display wealth, symbolizing personal and community political power» (Ohnuki-Tierny 1999 p. 241; Watanabe 1973 p. 75; 1999 p. 201). In fact, these feasts are very much like potlatches with strong elements of competitive displays between corporate groups and their heads.

Appeals are also sometimes made to prestige items that occur among other hunter/gatherer groups presented as examples of egalitarian hunter/gatherers. In these cases, entire culture areas like Australia or the Arctic are treated as though they consisted of exclusively egalitarian societies. However, this was far from the case. Complex transegalitarian groups existed in the southeast and some other areas of Australia, and in the Arctic (e.g., groups at Point Barrow). In some cases, they even created chiefdoms, hosted competitive potlatch-like feasts, and may even have engaged in rudimentary cultivation (Lourandos 1985; Williams 1987; Buith 2006; Westaway 2021; Spencer 1959 p. 210-12; Sheehan 1985; Burch 1988). Nor is there any attempt by those citing the existence of wealth items in egalitarian societies to distinguish between ritual and status prestige goods.

Therefore, simply stating that prestige items existed in Australia or the Arctic cannot be used as an argument that prestige goods occur in egalitarian societies. Moreover, there is no archaeological assemblage in Australia that can compare in any way with the quantity and quality of prestige items that occur in key Upper Paleolithic sites or
burials of Southwest Europe, particularly the thousands of shell and ivory beads in the burials previously documented. Australia has nothing like the decorated clothing, no comparable deep cave art, and its burial practices completely lacked the lavish grave goods that occur in Europe (aside from a few necklaces at Roonka Flats that pale in comparison). In fact, Southwestern Europe falls far outside any material culture manifestations of any ethnographically known simple egalitarian foraging societies.

Boulestin and Henry-Gambier (2019 p. 116) have maintained that there is no evidence for surpluses or wealth in the Upper Paleolithic and that I employ «assumptions that, at best, are non demonstrable and at worst have no foundation and cannot be considered scientifically acceptable» (ibid. 117). Based on the evidence that I have discussed, I do not view their assertions as warranted.

CONCLUSIONS

I derive some comfort from the thoughts of Upper Paleolithic complexity expressed by my old professor, François Bordes (Bordes and de Sonneville-Bordes 1970 p. 64) among others. The model of the Upper Paleolithic as being entirely egalitarian has far more serious problems than the model being proposed here based on the ethnographies of complex hunter/gatherers from California, the American Northwest, Florida, and elsewhere. Moreover, other archaeological manifestations of inequality and wealth that appear in various parts of the world during the Late American Archaic, European Mesolithic, and Near Eastern Epipaleolithic are invariably associated with rich resource environments and increased population densities. This is a strong cross-cultural pattern while the proposed ethnographic examples of egalitarian hunter/gatherers with prestige economies are all problematical.

Given the multiple lines of evidence presented, I feel that there is a strong case for viewing groups in the most favorable Upper Paleolithic environments as complex transegalitarian hunter/gatherers who were at least seasonally sedentary and exhibited significant socioeconomic inequalities in which some families acquired or controlled substantial surpluses and wealth. This conclusion is based on: ethnographic comparisons with complex hunter/gatherers; on the existence of abundant status prestige items exchanged over long distances and which required surpluses to produce or acquire; on grave good inequalities in burials especially with children; on the level of skill, training, and sophistication of art; on the existence of interaction spheres which make sense in terms of rituals, marriages, and procuring prestige goods; on the existence of record keeping extending into the hundreds and thousands; and on the existence of an economic support base commensurate with the development of transegalitarian hunter/gatherers cross-culturally.

Given the development of technologies that were capable of capturing, filleting, drying, and storing surplus meat and/or fish, it is likely that surpluses were being used to obtain prestige items from afar or to commission them locally. I am convinced that the recurring presence of prestige items in Upper Paleolithic burials and residential occupations testifies to the use of aggregating strategies that involve the creation of inequalities at least at the transegalitarian level.

In addition, if large numbers of animals were being taken, there would also have been an abundance of hides that could be processed whenever time permitted and turned into highly valued buckskin clothing and furs, either plain or decorated. Ethnographically, such buckskin clothes were very labor-intensive to produce and constituted the most valued possessions that many families possessed (Hayden 1990). Consequently, extra hides, too, could be used as surpluses for exchange. Such a «hide and fur trade economy» in key areas would explain the unusually high proportion of grattoirs in many Upper Paleolithic assemblages. And this is probably also reflected in the evidence for elaborately decorated tailored clothes in many Upper Paleolithic burials.

If proponents of an entirely egalitarian Upper Paleolithic do not accept instances such as Sungir or La Madeleine as indicators of surpluses and wealth, then what criteria could be acceptable as valid indicators of wealth for hunter/gatherer societies? There simply is nothing comparable to these burials from any known pristine egalitarian society of hunter/gatherers. Nor is there anything from any ethnographic egalitarian hunting and gathering groups that comes anywhere close to the quantity and quality of prestige objects from the Upper Paleolithic in Southwest Europe. The differences are of several orders of magnitude. Nor is there any numbering or notational system of egalitarian hunter/gatherers that is remotely comparable to those that occur in the Upper Paleolithic.

Were some Upper Paleolithic groups complex, non-egalitarian (transegalitarian) hunter/gatherers? From my experience, the evidence that has accumulated over the last century leaves little doubt.

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