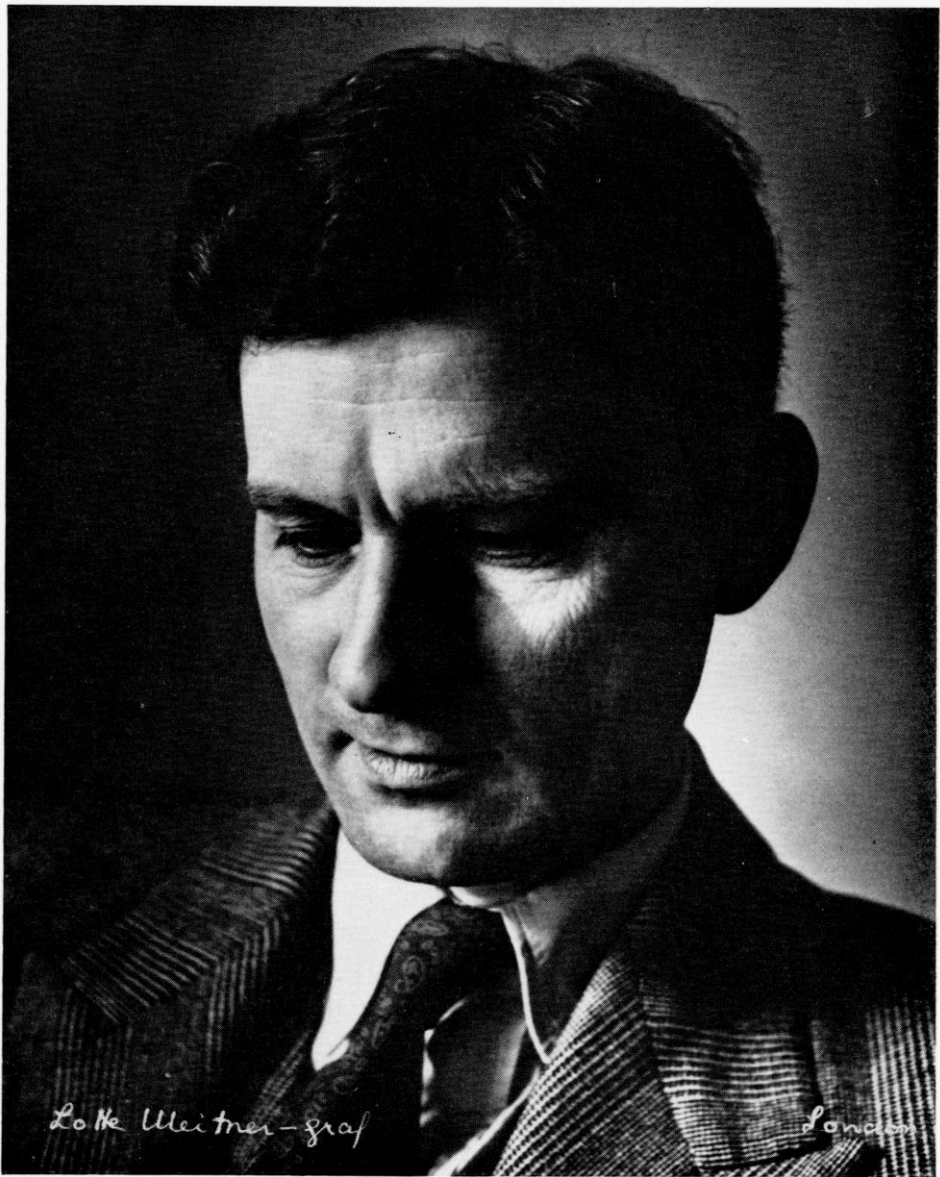


PLATE XV



CHARLES McBURNEY

Lotte Meitner-Graf

CHARLES BRIAN MONTAGU McBURNEY

1914-1979

CHARLES McBURNEY will be remembered for his impressive scholarship and as Britain's leading prehistorian of the Palaeolithic. His death on 14 December 1979, also deprived Cambridge University, where he held an *ad hominem* Chair in Quaternary Prehistory, of one of its most successful and dedicated teachers. In fact, the great success of the Cambridge School in training and research in the years following the Second World War was in no small degree due to the inspiration and grounding which he gave. He was both a product of and a major contributor to the expanding horizons in Palaeolithic studies and the excellence that we have come to associate with prehistoric studies at Cambridge. He was, first and foremost, a field archaeologist, and his often rigorous campaigns were the training grounds for not a few who are leaders in the field today.

McBurney¹ was born in Massachusetts, the son of an American engineer and a British mother. Thought to be delicate, he was brought up chiefly in England and Europe and educated by a series of young tutors until 1933, when he entered King's College, Cambridge. Unused as he was to the society of his peers, he at first found Cambridge life difficult but, once he had settled down, his charm, sensitivity, humour and great interest in learning soon enabled him to make friends. Initially he read French, which he already spoke fluently, and German, but at the end of his second year he changed to archaeology. This was the time of the new work on the Mesolithic and Neolithic in southern England and of the new discipline that Mortimer Wheeler was instilling into excavation methods and recording. The teaching McBurney received, both exciting and inspiring, set him on the course he was to follow for the next forty years—learning more about the biological and cultural evolution of early man.

Although Charles did not get a First in the Tripos, the College awarded him a studentship for 1937 and 1938 and elected him a Fellow in 1940. The outbreak of war disturbed the normal tenor of life but, as luck would have it, he was sent with the RAF(VR)

¹ For the personal details recorded in this memoir the writer is indebted to Mr Patrick Wilkinson of King's College, Cambridge.

(USA—he did not become a British citizen until 1950) to the Middle East. His service in the Western Desert in 1942/1943 introduced him to African prehistory, and the finds he made in those years along some twelve hundred miles of the North African coast (later (1947) described in *Proc. Prehist. Soc.* 4, 56–84) led directly to the work in Cyrenaica for which perhaps he is best known.

In 1946 Charles returned to Cambridge and, under the auspices of the Department of Archaeology and Anthropology, mounted an expedition in the summers of 1947 and 1948 with Richard W. Hey, a Cambridge geologist. Its object was to investigate the region of the Gebel Akhdar and the north Cyrenaican coast and to provide a palaeo-climatic framework for relative dating of the assemblages and correlation with the succession in other parts of the Mediterranean basin. The outcome was the jointly authored volume *Prehistory and Pleistocene Geology in Cyrenaican Libya* (1955). This study produced the first evidence from Libya for Quaternary marine fluctuations and temperature changes into which the archaeological evidence could be fitted and correlated with that of Europe and the Near East. The Libyan volume is also noteworthy because it contains the first accounts of two succeeding Upper Palaeolithic industries that show the special nature of the Cyrenaican assemblage as compared to those from Egypt or the Maghreb. It also sets the stage for the kind of systematic studies he was to undertake later, showing well the emphasis Charles always gave to taxonomy and well-defined classification and to looking for evidence showing the nature of the habitat and the economic base as well as to constructing a sound relative and absolute framework for palaeo-climatic and cultural sequences.

1948 was a good year for Charles: he was awarded the degree of Ph.D. by Cambridge and he also discovered a huge cave—the Haua Fteah—on the north side of the Gebel Akhdar, which he excavated in three field seasons in 1951, 1952, and 1955. He found there a stratified sequence of cultural horizons extending back into the time of the Last Interglacial more than 100,000 years ago and unequalled at any other site in the whole of northern Africa. With the very rich cultural remains were recovered well-preserved faunal assemblages together with hominid fossils and palaeo-temperature and environmental evidence. By this time also the radiocarbon method of dating had been developed by Willard Libby, and Charles was one of the first to make good use of it, so that the Haua Fteah is still the best-dated continuous sequence from the northern part of the African continent.

The volume *The Haua Fteah (Cyrenaica) and the Stone Age of the southeast Mediterranean* (1967) is a monumental compilation and Charles' best-known and most important work. For those of us who work in Africa the book is an example of thoroughness in analysis, interpretation and reporting that has rarely, if ever, been equalled and it is all the more important because of the chronology that it was possible to establish by combining the evidence from several different sources. The Haua Fteah volume also leaves no doubt that, at this time, Charles saw the disappearance of the neanderthal populations and the Mousterian industries of western Europe and North Africa as due to their abrupt replacement by Modern Man with a strikingly different material culture; and he stressed the essential importance of the regional stratigraphic and faunal sequence and of a well-established chronology as the only sure foundations for understanding the technological and behavioural changes manifest in the prehistoric record.

Charles McBurney's interest in North Africa and his knowledge of French rendered him probably the best-read English-speaking prehistorian on the subject of the French discoveries and publications on the Maghreb and the west and central Sahara. His volume *The Stone Age of northern Africa* (1960), the third of the Pelican overviews of the prehistory of the African continent, is an excellent synthesis that still remains the only general introduction in the English language. It is a thorough review of the evidence available at the time it was written, besides containing perceptive summaries of the changing pattern of European, Near Eastern, and sub-Saharan prehistory during the Palaeolithic.

Charles did not return to Libya after the 1955 season but he maintained an active interest and continued to publish on North African prehistory and its significance within the Mediterranean world. In particular he was concerned with the origins of the Upper Palaeolithic there and its antecedents as these relate to the North African neanderthal populations. However, in spite of the fact that the accident of war had sparked Charles' interest in North African prehistory, his chief pre-occupation had always been with Europe. Indeed, his work in Cyrenaica and the Middle East followed from his interest in searching for the origins of the Upper Palaeolithic, unconvinced as he was by those who believed they could see an autochthonous development of this from the Mousterian industries of western Europe. In turning to the eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East he was looking for evidence to show the reliability or otherwise of the single origin and

migration hypothesis and, from the beginning, he showed his interest in the relationship between cultural expression and geography, publishing a number of research papers that sought to show prehistorians how to make every possible use of palaeogeographical and environmental evidence.

In 1958, at the request of the Prehistoric Society, Charles turned his attention to investigating the antecedents and associations of the Upper Palaeolithic in Britain in a series of excavations near Wookey in Somerset and on the Gower Peninsula in Wales. Although few artefacts were recovered, good stratigraphic and palaeo-environmental data were obtained, and in the chapter that he contributed to the book *Prehistoric and Early Wales* (Foster and Daniel (eds.) 1965), entitled 'The Old Stone Age in Wales' he was able to provide both a general and a more regional review of the Palaeolithic in Britain as he saw it as a result of his investigations.

One of the most important tasks that Charles undertook was responsibility for the excavations at La Cotte de Saint-Brelade in Jersey. These he directed for most of the last eighteen years of his life (from 1961–1978) on behalf of the Department of Archaeology at Cambridge. His work here not only added very considerably to knowledge of the palaeo-environment, climate, and cultural manifestations immediately prior to the Last Interglacial but it also provided a training ground for a considerable number of Cambridge undergraduates who acquired there an understanding of stratigraphic control, precise recording and an introduction to inter-disciplinary teamwork. Unfortunately Charles died before the work was finished, but the preliminary report, published with Paul Callow (*Proc. Prehist. Soc.* (1971) 37, 167–207), shows the many ways in which these excavations have contributed to knowledge of the transition from the Lower Palaeolithic (Acheulian) tradition and its replacement by the Middle Palaeolithic (Mousterian). Although he was not himself able to oversee the final report on this significant site, he did have the satisfaction of knowing that its publication (it is to appear shortly) is in the hands of the associates and friends who worked with him there.

In 1975 Charles was awarded a Visiting Fellowship at the Academy of Sciences of the USSR and set out his findings later that year in the Albert Reckitt Archaeological Lecture to the British Academy. The lecture, published in 1976, not only makes available in English a number of new discoveries by Soviet prehistorians but presents an elegant interpretation and synthesis of a great deal of literature and first-hand observation that is an important contribution to Palaeolithic studies of wide signifi-

cance for students and professional archaeologists alike. Charles particularly stresses the originality and regional nature of the northern Eurasian Upper Palaeolithic industries. He sees the industrial complexity of that time in western Europe as the outcome of the very varied micro-environments found there, while the smoother ecological gradients in the north Asiatic and Russian steppe made possible a much more extensive spread of industrial entities. This spread he interprets, as he does that into western Europe and Africa, as deriving from a single focus in south-west Asia. He was subsequently called to task for some of his statements by a Russian archaeologist because of later work in the USSR but his death prevented him from replying. However, his working hypotheses still raise the question of the transition from the Middle to the Upper Palaeolithic and the rival hypotheses of 'phyletic gradualism' and 'punctuated equilibrium'. As is very evident from all his writings, Charles was an adherent of the latter, and his handling of the Soviet evidence certainly appears to support the spread from some central focus.

Between 1961 and 1969 Charles carried out investigations in Iran, where he was seeking evidence for the place of origin of the Upper Palaeolithic; several surveys and field seasons were undertaken there in the early 1960s. However, no Upper Palaeolithic cultural material came to light, so that Charles concluded that the Iranian plateau was more likely to have been an area of passage than its ultimate homeland. In 1969 in the Zagros area in Eastern Iran he examined a group of painted rockshelters on behalf of the Iranian Antiquities Service. Apart from his report to the Antiquities Service, the results are unpublished, but from his descriptions of the paintings—highly stylized human figures, rather more naturalistic animal figures and scenes of hunting, possible armed combat and horse-riding—they are suggestive of the prehistoric rock-paintings in the Vindhya Hills in central India. These Iranian paintings are one of the very few known groups between the Mediterranean and India, and Charles's evidence led him to consider them to be no earlier than Bronze Age and to show general affinities with the metal age art of the central and western Mediterranean.

Following visits to the European caves, Charles also had a deep appreciation of the Franco-Cantabrian Upper Palaeolithic art, in particular the *art mobilier*. Already in 1961 he had published a review article (*Antiquity*, 35, 107–114) on Graziosi's monumental *Palaeolithic Art*. In this he showed his concern as to context (cultural, chronological, and geographical), content, and the

philosophical problem that lies behind the very emergence of this art. He saw it as providing the first concrete indication of the evolution of conceptual thought and, by its association with the Upper Palaeolithic blade tradition and biologically Modern Man, as emphasizing the intellectual distance that separated him from the neanderthals.

In the summer of 1971, with a grant from the British Academy, Charles carried out a survey in the northern part of Afghanistan, visiting already known sites and finding new ones, both Mousterian and Upper Palaeolithic. Although his work in the Middle East remains unfinished, it has provided important insights into the Palaeolithic there and is an example of careful and meticulous reporting valuable to all doing research on that period.

Charles's writings are possessed of so many facets and approaches that it is hard to single out one as being more important than another. Like others of the Cambridge School he was imbued with the need for the recovery of sound, precise, empirical data and, in turn, he impressed this upon his students. He was also one of the first to recognize the importance of radiometric methods of dating, in particular the radiocarbon and potassium argon methods. He saw these as clarifying the role of archaeology as a science in its own right and, in his introductory paper 'Archaeology and Dating' in *Science in Archaeology* (Brothwell and Higgs (eds.) 1963) he sees the progress in supplying the absolute framework of chronology to the different periods and areas occupied by man in the past as 'perhaps the most exciting development achieved in archaeology by our generation of workers'. Although his interest embraced the whole vast range of time covered by the Palaeolithic, he chiefly focused his attention and his skills on understanding better that period of time when the Middle Palaeolithic was replaced by the Upper Palaeolithic some 45-35,000 years ago; and much of his fieldwork can be seen as a searching to discover whether a focal centre of origin for the Upper Palaeolithic could be identified and where this might be.

It was, however, not only in the field of research that Charles excelled and there can have been few teachers of the Palaeolithic that were able, as he was, to make it both rewarding and inspiring to his students. He took particular care with his graduate students, many of whom are now well-known archaeologists in their own right. Several of those he taught speak of his 'vitality', the immense depth of his knowledge and the finesse with which he used the material to construct a web of interpretation that was most impressive to listen to. The Prince of Wales dug for him as a boy in

Jersey, attended his lectures as an undergraduate and kept in touch with him to the end. The Queen of Denmark, when at Girton, was a pupil of his and a very successful one.

Charles was a Research Fellow at King's from 1940 to 1952, his Fellowship having been prolonged exceptionally by an additional three years. In 1962 he was elected a Fellow of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, and, with his conservative instincts, he soon found its community congenial and enlarged his loyalties to embrace it.

His high-pitched voice and boyish looks were possibly deceptive: he was a strong character who had old-fashioned principles and stuck to them, exemplifying in his life the integrity that characterized his scholarship. A friend saw in him the 'high New England aristocratic temper' but he was also exceptionally kind, perceptive and imaginative in dealing with people. He encouraged his friends' ideas and ambitions and whole-heartedly welcomed their successes. Above all he was a devoted and beloved family man. He was nearly forty when he married his second cousin Anne Charles. They had three children and their happy, hospitable home figured largely in the pleasurable memories of Cambridge retained by many of his students. He made light of the inconveniences of diabetes, from which he suffered for a number of years, and when cancer was also diagnosed he accepted it with characteristic dignity. His funeral was held in Corpus, his memorial service in King's. We, his fellow undergraduates, students, colleagues, and friends will remember him for the charm that endeared him to us all, for his sincerity and enthusiasm and for the brilliance of his scholarship.

Charles was the recipient of a number of honours during his lifetime. In addition to the creation by Cambridge University of an *ad hominem* Chair in Quaternary Prehistory for him in 1977, he was at various times a Fellow of King's and Corpus besides being a Fellow of the British Academy (1966) and of the Society of Antiquaries of London (1948). He was an active member of the Prehistoric Society and served four years as its Vice-President; was a Corresponding Member of the Istituto Italiano di Paleontologia Umana, Rome; a Membre d'Honneur de la Société Jersiaise, and a Knight of the Order of Dannebrog (First Class).

J. DESMOND CLARK

A full list of Professor McBurney's publications will be found in the volume of essays in his memory to be published by the Cambridge University Press.