



Our Guardian Spirits?

High above the cliffs of Montjoux, overlooking a large swath of the Orb valley, is the site of an ossuary, a cave from where the bones of our bronze age forebears have overlooked their descendants and their land for more than 4,000 years.

Here the bones of over sixty individuals lie which, given the low population density of the time, is likely to represent a number of generations. These are not complete skeletons, but rather carefully arranged assortments with the skulls grouped in collections at the side of the cave and other bones deposited in the middle.

It is possible that the people practised excarnation, the leaving out of bodies for the flesh to be devoured by wild animals, and it is easy to imagine birds of prey – vultures or eagles – circling above Montjoux looking for an easy meal. Of course there are other possibilities – the bodies may have been de-fleshed by members of their community, or they may have been buried to decompose and then disinterred to be placed in the same space as their forebears. The presence of cut or teeth marks on the bones would give us clues but unfortunately the excavations were undertaken in the 1930s, and such evidence, if it ever existed, wasn't recorded.



The dig was undertaken from October 1934 through most of 1935 by Dr Jules Brunel and others. He was an amateur archaeologist who nonetheless “strictly applied the rules given by the Manual of Prehistoric Research”.

He tells how a friend had noticed a small hole that was being used by foxes and badgers. They cleared the surrounding area and opened it up to reveal a dry stone wall. This they dismantled and discovered the hoped for cave.

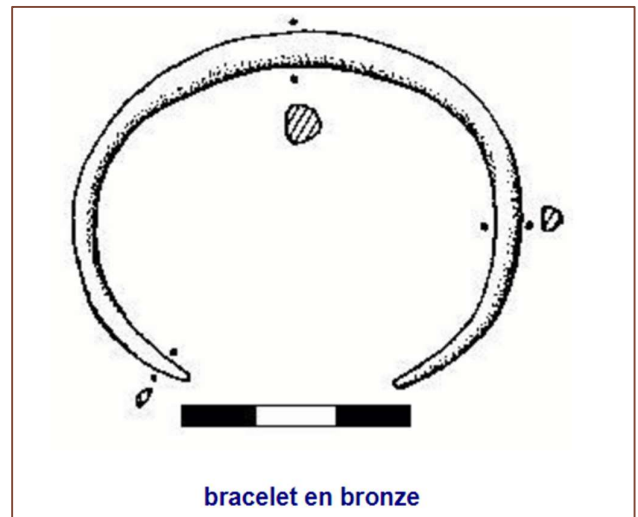


bague ouverte en bronze

Their first discovery near the entrance was the skeleton was what was thought to be a young woman, and near her were found one of two bronze rings, and a bronze bracelet which was “very beautiful . . . of very neat work with a very beautiful apple green patina.”

Given the location of the remains, she must have been the last person interred there.

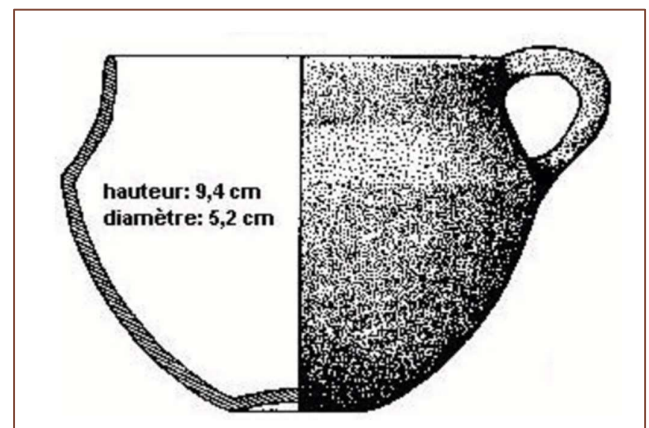
The entrance was an antechamber which, when excavated, was 1.3m wide by 2.1m long, and 1.5m high. This led to two larger caves, the one to the left was the largest, 1.5m wide, 12m long and 2.1m high, and the righthand one was 2m by 2.3m and 1.5m high.



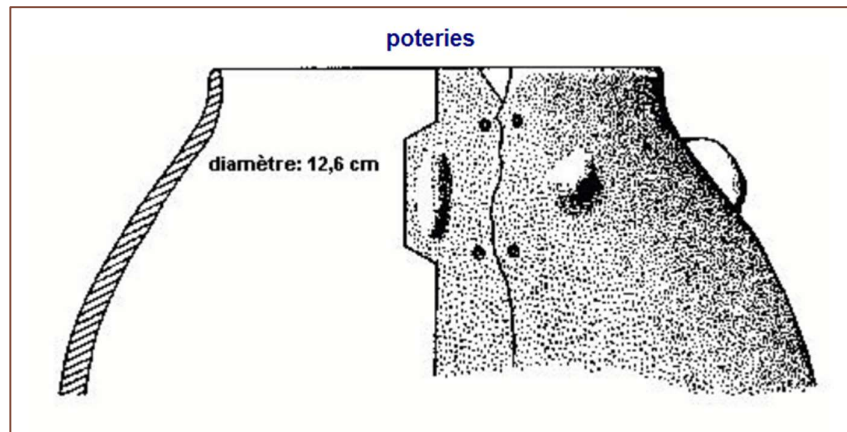
bracelet en bronze

They found some of the bones in the smaller righthand cave but most were in the larger one on the left. Strwn throughout the site were many pieces of pottery and also a knapped flint spear head and a spherical shaped stone with a diameter of 10cm. They suggested this was a striker for making flint tools.

One of the pottery pieces was thought to be for cheese making as this cup shaped piece had a perforated base.



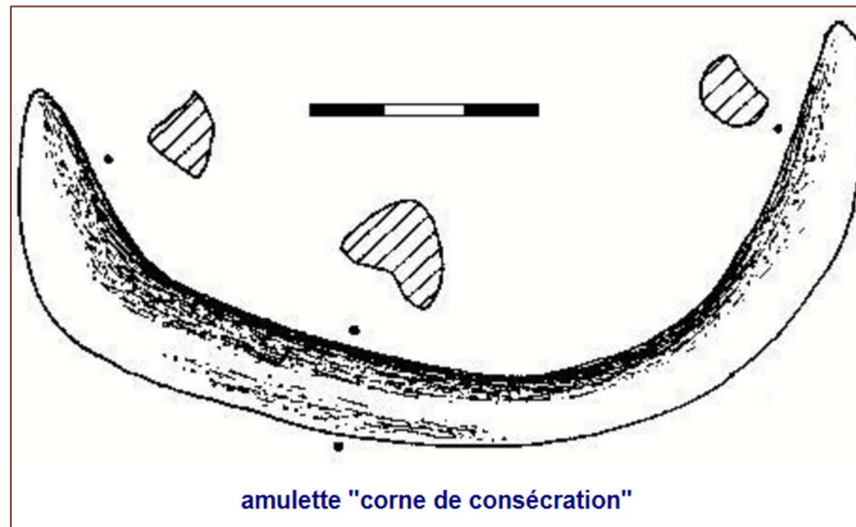
Another was part of what was likely a storage vessel. This contained a black paste which these days could be analysed to determine what the vessel had contained, but back at the time of the excavation the technology didn't exist for this.



The bones were described as very degraded and he determined that only four skulls were fit for study, though they were “stripped of their lower jawbone”. These he sent to Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle de Paris. What became of these skulls and the other bones isn't known by your reporter.

And what became of the other objects discovered also isn't known. Possibly they are in the Musée de Lodève? This is something that we will have to follow up.

The object he seems to have found most of interest was a crescent of “fossilised” bone that measured 12.5 cm from tip to tip. This he interpreted as being of religious significance, and resembling in shape bulls horns, he speculated that it related to the religion of the Cretan and Mycenaean civilizations.



How old precisely were these burials? Dr Brunel was sure that they pre-dated the Romans – there were no iron objects or any obvious Roman artifacts, and the pottery wasn't patterned or glazed.

As mentioned above two bronze rings were found, one was found at the entrance of the cave, but the other right at the back and at the lowest level of the excavation. So all the burials must have been during the bronze age era which was from 2800 to 800 BC.

The description of the pottery suggests earlier rather than later – if only some of the bones could be located then their age could be determined with carbon-14 dating!

<http://www.amisdelunas.fr/prehistoire/prehistoire-montjoux.htm>

https://www.persee.fr/doc/bspf_0249-7638_1936_num_33_5_4471