

Migrations, Colonizations, and Diasporas in Archaeology

Marcel Otte, University of Liège, Liège, Belgium

© 2015 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Abstract

Demographic density, as much as the ideas of conquest and discovery, has always led to population movements since the origins of humanity. These are evidenced by stylistic and symbolic processes, as much as in art and technology, as in ways of life. Their systematic reconstruction enables the creation of 'historical' maps from the distant past to modern peoples today.

Humanity possesses an efficient adaptive ability due to the technological and cultural changes that it has accomplished. These changes have permitted hominid groups to occupy varied habitats that would have been incompatible with their natural anatomical capacities alone. From the beginning, one of the essential criteria defining humanity was mobility. The appeal of displacement was apparently based on the requirements of thought: courage, imagination, and challenge. Through time, various kinds of migrations were undertaken; in each case, it was a matter of overcoming new, successively encountered, constraints: steppe, tundra, and oceans. We distinguish seasonal migrations (hunting) from definitive displacement (colonization). We also recognize the cases of diaspora (where existing groups remained separate from the new ones) and of acculturation (groups living in symbiosis with each other).

Migrations are the basis for widespread human presence in the world today. The specificity of human migrations is related to their adaptive mode, and is entirely different from animal dispersions. The flexibility of cultural systems permits, in principle, their adaptation to any natural environment encountered. Thus, this form of expansion can be broader and more intense than modifications of a biological order. Demographic developments occurring in human populations due to technological adaptations are often evoked to justify such human migrations. However, causes of a metaphysical order seem to act more powerfully to drive populations toward dispersal.

Regardless of the cause(s), migrations are a constant, observable in human behavior up to the present. In reality, a sedentary way of life seems to constitute an exception rather than the rule, considering the immense history during which humanity was exclusively nomadic. Once technoeconomical capacities were adequate, they were immediately put to use for displacements, which required new forms of adaptation of the social group, including the readjustment of values.

In terms of methodology, we often distinguish seasonal migration from permanent displacement. In practice, the distinction is reduced to a notion of scale, applied to time, rates, and proportions of migrations. Human territorial extension was a result of perpetual movement, and only large-scale

phenomena can be considered permanent where diversity is constant and processes unending.

From the beginning, a distinctive feature of humans was their ability to leave the natural environment favorable to the way of life followed by other primates (Klein, 1989). Via bipedalism and the manipulation of objects, humans were able to leave the protective and nourishing environment of the tropical forests. The bipedal position, adapted to open environments, provoked these displacements, while a meat-based diet compensated for the loss of calories from vegetal foods, which were greatly reduced in the new savannah environments. Migration and the cultural adaptation that bipedalism and such a diet necessitated were therefore the driving forces behind the origins of humanity. The freedom acquired in relation to environmental determinism became the inevitable destiny of humanity, under the ultimate threat of its complete disappearance (Böhme, 1996).

The natural environments successively encountered in the process of hominid expansion toward northern latitudes required the development and adaptation of more complex and suitable physical forms (Wolpoff, 1998; Klein, 1989). These migratory movements, as early as 2 million years ago, extended north and east of the Old World, each time reaching new areas and demanding new dietary resources. The two keys explaining the range and the success of these migrations are the production of tools and the use of fire. Both were invented through imagination and audacity, forces that alone hold the explanation for such pioneering enterprises (Figure 1). Humanity eventually progressed throughout history according to this continuous thread of making evermore extended territorial conquests – toward the islands, the Americas, the moon. No force other than imagination pushed humanity, yet – retrospectively – we can retrace the high points, the pauses, the adaptations, and changes in rhythm. Within the confines of already-occupied areas, complex phenomena resulting from contacts and exchanges proper to humanity were produced. These phenomena can be classified in categories such as acculturation, colonization, and diaspora.

To appreciate the movements of migration toward unoccupied areas, the examination of conquests on the margins can

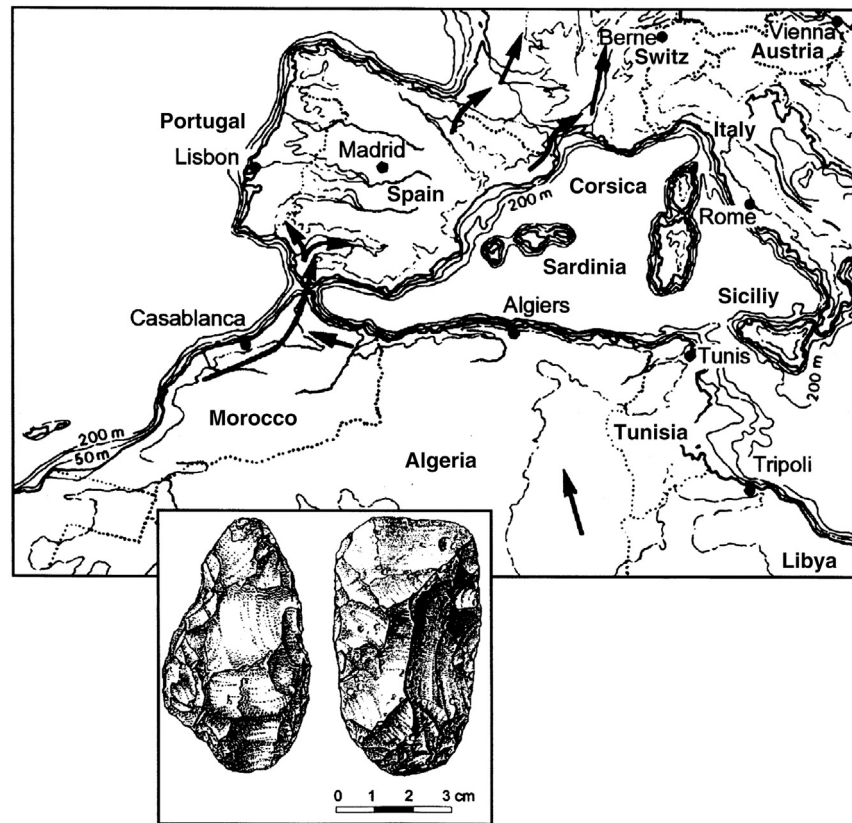


Figure 1 The first Acheulean migration in Europe passed from Africa to Spain via Gibraltar, after an earlier population from Asia arrived in Europe with a flake-based industry. After Roe, D.A., 1981. *The Lower and Middle Palaeolithic in Britain*. Routledge, London.

be instructive. For diffusion to the high seas of Oceania, migration is clearly linked to the mastery of navigation. An analogous situation is found on the northern margins of Europe during the Late-glacial: Hamburgian and Magdalenian reindeer hunters overcame climatic constraints as temperatures rose (Figures 2–4).

In order that massive displacements toward unoccupied regions may take place, technological equipment, in the subtlety of their elaboration, permitted adaptation to new environments and not simply to climatic modifications. This ‘call to conquest’ and the temptation of mobility seem to act as the only agents leading to displacement. Within occupied areas, more limited migratory cycles can be observed, for example, seasonal rounds (following the displacement of herds), or for ceremonial reasons (trade/exchange, marriage). These are such that potential mobility remains constant and is effectively begun from the moment that a threshold of ability is attained in relation to new constraints in a foreign environment. Technology, hunting, and group solidarity therefore had to become specialized before a migration could take place outside the original area of development (Otte, 1995).

The conquest continues east to Easter Island and north to Scandinavia. The case of the Americas remains perhaps the most revealing; migrations first followed the Siberian

coast, then the islands of Beringia, and finally the northwest Pacific Coast. Migratory waves then switched from the high latitudes to the southern opening formed by the Californian coast. The invasions, extremely intense in North America, passed through a bottleneck between glaciers where modes of adaptation could reverse abruptly. In other terms, it seems quite probable that the first migration took place via coasts, directly toward the south. This would explain the early site dates in South America (e.g., Brazil). Moreover, the northern plains were colonized later, either after the separation of the glaciers to the north or even by a return, coming from the south after having crossed the continent only in Central America. As means of communications were developed, displacements were organized, first by coastal or marine environments, later by land. The modes of occupation of the prehistoric Americas still reflect migratory waves following the first conquest (Dixon, 1999).

The contacts with the cultural milieus already in place during migrations appear more complicated than simple adaptation to new environments. Some classic cases are known. One example is the arrival of modern humans in Europe, evidence of which is given both by a new anatomical form and by a completely novel system of symbolic and technological behaviors. We can be certain at

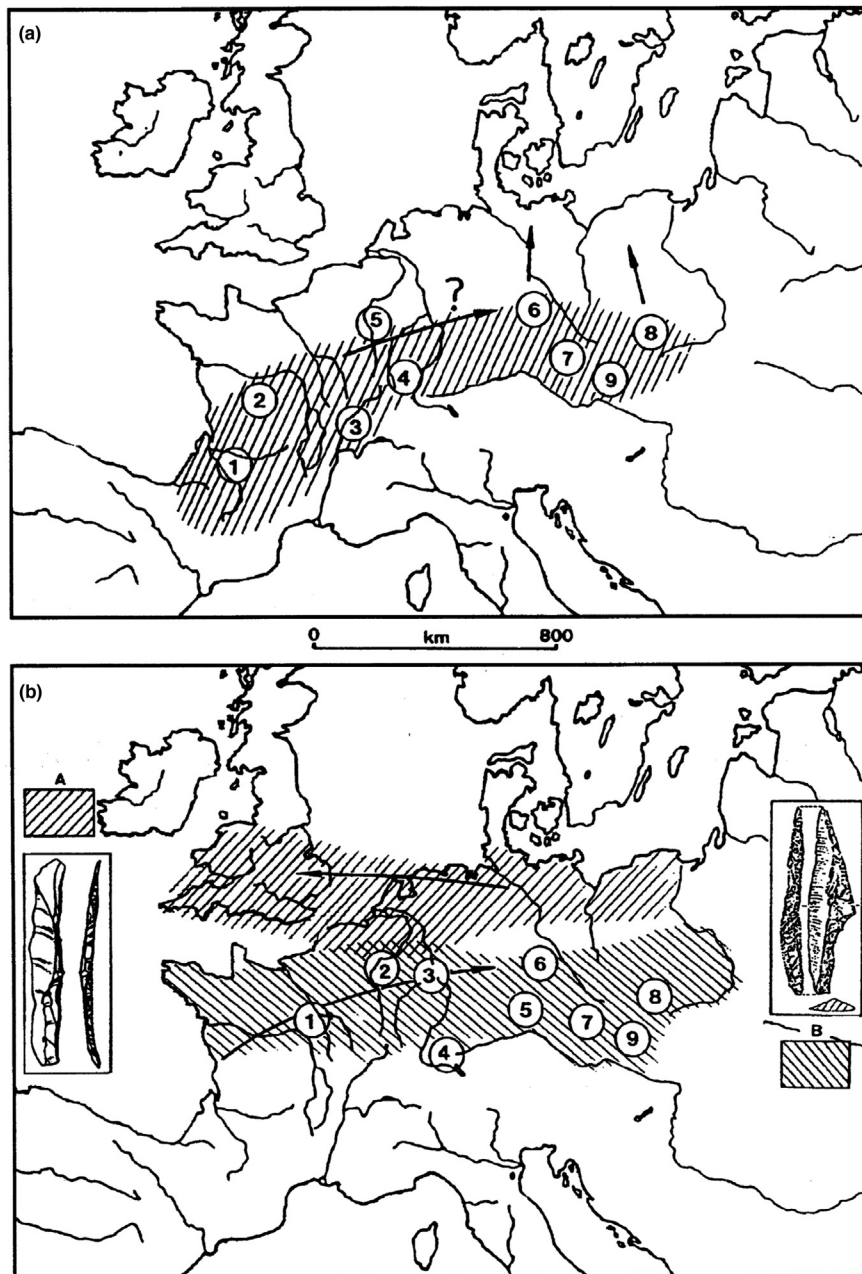


Figure 2 (a) Magdalenian movement in hilly regions during the Dryas I. (b) Dual movement during the Late-glacial, toward the northern plains and west across the then-dry North Sea. After Otte, M., 1996. Aires culturelles au Paléolithique supérieur d'Europe. In: Mohen, J.P. (Ed.), *La vie pré-historique*. Faton, Dijon, France, pp. 286–289.

least that a migratory wave from external populations can be revealed at the level of their customs, and attested by archaeology. A point of contact is then established, as it was with the Celts or the Germans, whose migrations were – elsewhere – attested by texts. A double control confirms the validity of archaeological data in the study of migration: anthropological on one hand, historical on the other. The Aurignacian trail crossed a Europe already

regularly occupied by Neanderthals of the Mousterian culture.

The two milieus are clearly opposed, according to archaeological data, but on the margins, acculturation phenomena were produced locally, evidenced by 'mixed' assemblages: the Chatelperronian industry, foliate point cultures (Figure 5). In this way, tertiary phenomena (acculturation) emerge, from which later cultures develop. The case

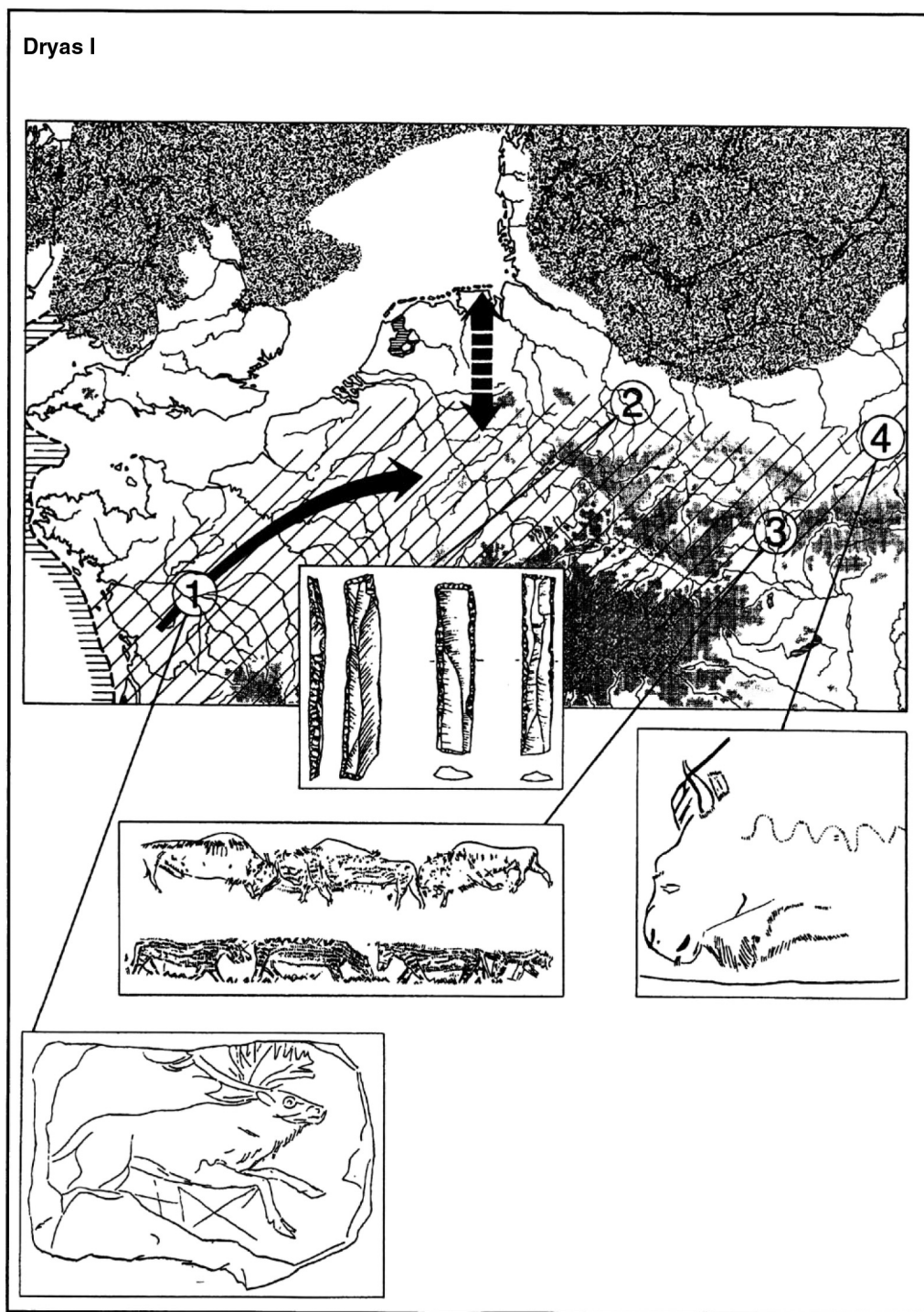


Figure 3 Two forms of migrations are observed in the northern plains during the Late-glacial: conquest in the eastern hilly regions and seasonal movements from north to south, following fluvial axes. After Otte, M., 1997b. Paléolithique final du nord-ouest, migrations et saisons. In: Fagnart, J.P., Thévenin, A. (Eds.), *Le Tardiglaciaire du Nord-Ouest de l'Europe*. CTHS, Paris, pp. 353–366.

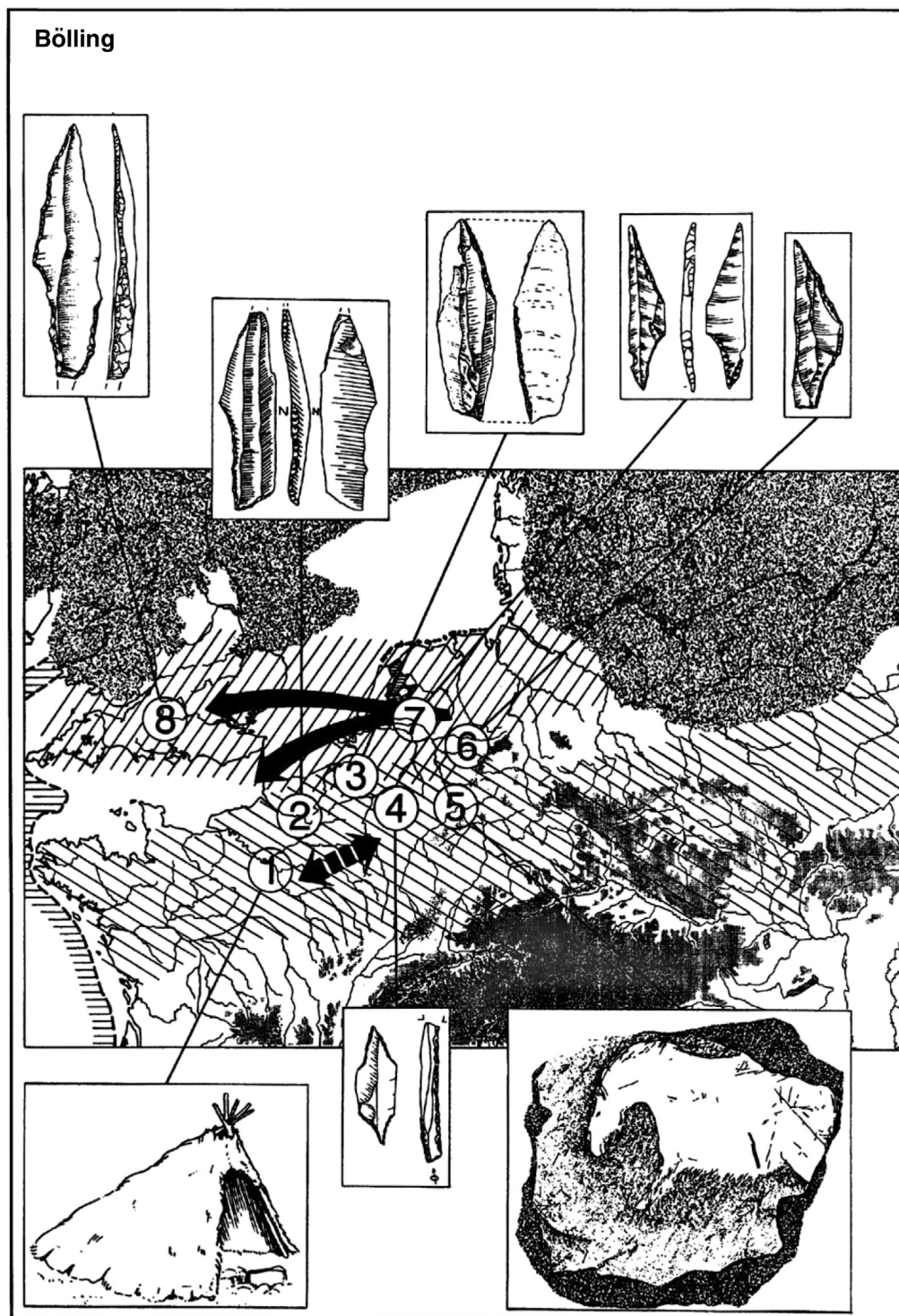


Figure 4 While Magdalenian migrations followed the axis of the plateaus, the northern plains were crossed by Hambourgian and Creswellian groups. After Otte, M., 1997b. Paléolithique final du nord-ouest, migrations et saisons. In: Fagnart, J.P., Thévenin, A. (Eds.), *Le Tardiglaciaire du Nord-Ouest de l'Europe*. CTHS, Paris, pp. 353–366.

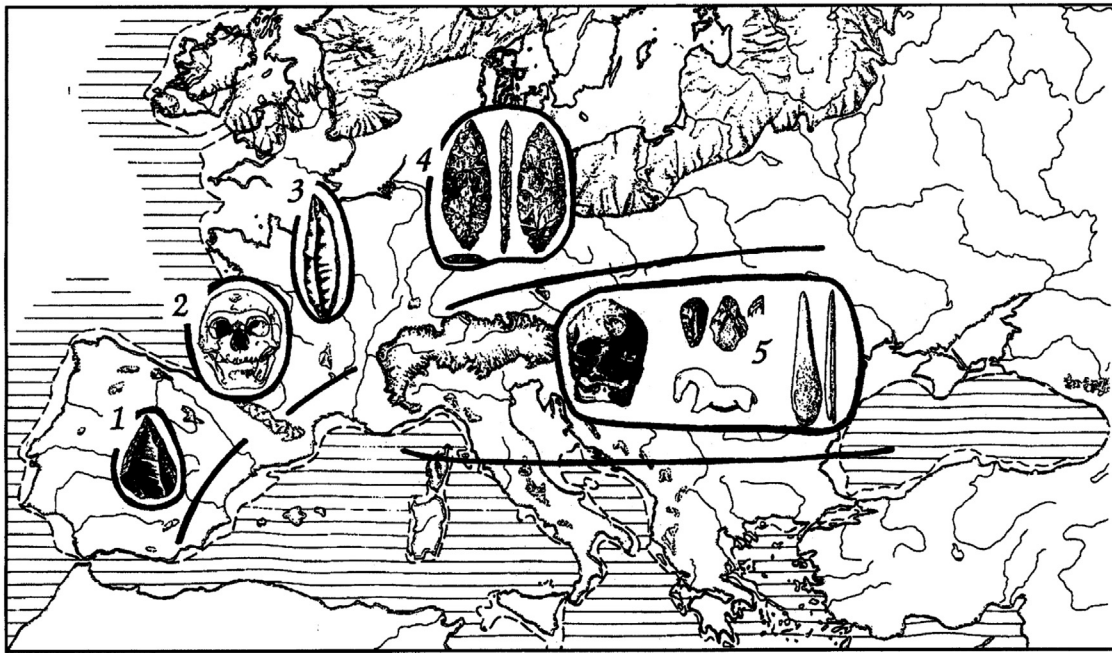


Figure 5 The first migration by modern humans in Europe met the established local Neanderthals. The Aurignacian remained homogeneous with respect to people and traditions. At the margins of this movement, contact phenomena arose: the acculturation of the Neanderthals by the Aurignacian culture. After Otte, M., 1995. *Traditions bifaces. Les industries à pointes foliacées d'Europe centrale*. *Paléo* (Suppl. 1), 195–200.

of the Aurignacian, at first clearly imposing itself, then completely disappearing in favor of a local Gravettian, forms a good example of migrations melting into a new and finally dominant population. These types of migrations to already occupied regions occur throughout the Palaeolithic with more or less clarity (Otte, 1997b).

Another instructive case is illustrated by the southern Solutrean industry, which includes one element that seems to originate in North Africa and another from northern Gravettian migrations (Otte, 1997a). When these two movements from north and south met, a new region of acculturation made its appearance, provoking the creation of a culture (the Solutrean) lasting several thousand years in Southwest Europe. Only general artistic trends reflect continuity with the preceding period, tracing their development under a harmonious form. Other elements of a stylistic character are profoundly modified at the end of the period of contact between these two opposing migratory waves.

A third migratory model also appears within the archaeological domain: the establishment of colonies, far from their points of origin but maintaining contact via exchanges with the intervening regions. This mode of colonization is well known from recent historical periods: Greek and Roman colonies, and later European colonial expansion. Colonial migrations first appear during the Linearbandkeramik (LBK) period of the Neolithic, 6000 years ago, when early Neolithic groups expanded across the European continent from the east and southeast (Otte, 2001).

The settlers traveled in a distinctive manner, under a permanent form but without modifying their own way of life, in this way maintaining contact with their original culture. The LBK people had architecture and an urbanism in balance with a stable economy (agriculture and animal husbandry), and an effective and appropriate technology (production of ceramics, grindstones, and polished adzes). A coherent way of life was harmonized with a new, totally mastered, environment. Contacts with indigenous populations modified the internal equilibrium acquired by the new arrivals. Archaeological data clearly illustrate this migratory model, with a great constancy presented by habitats and ceramic styles (Figures 6 and 7). Contacts are revealed by the long-distance exchange of raw materials from previously occupied regions. The impression of a strong cultural unit thus dominates the entire area of expansion of the archaeological culture.

Finally, the diaspora shows people whose migrations have integrated them into other milieus without affecting the structural articulation created by their own traditions. Modern cases are eloquent and well known, such as the Armenians, the Roma (gypsies), and the Jewish groups. Archaeological cases of widely dispersed cultures superimposed onto local traditions yet remaining stable, are also known. For example, the Bell Beaker people during the Neolithic period, identified by the presence of distinctive, globular goblets, were spread across Western Europe, particularly along seacoasts and rivers. Their simple burials, individual and with highly standardized grave goods, suggest the existence of a network of traveling merchants, perhaps linked to the exchange of the first metals

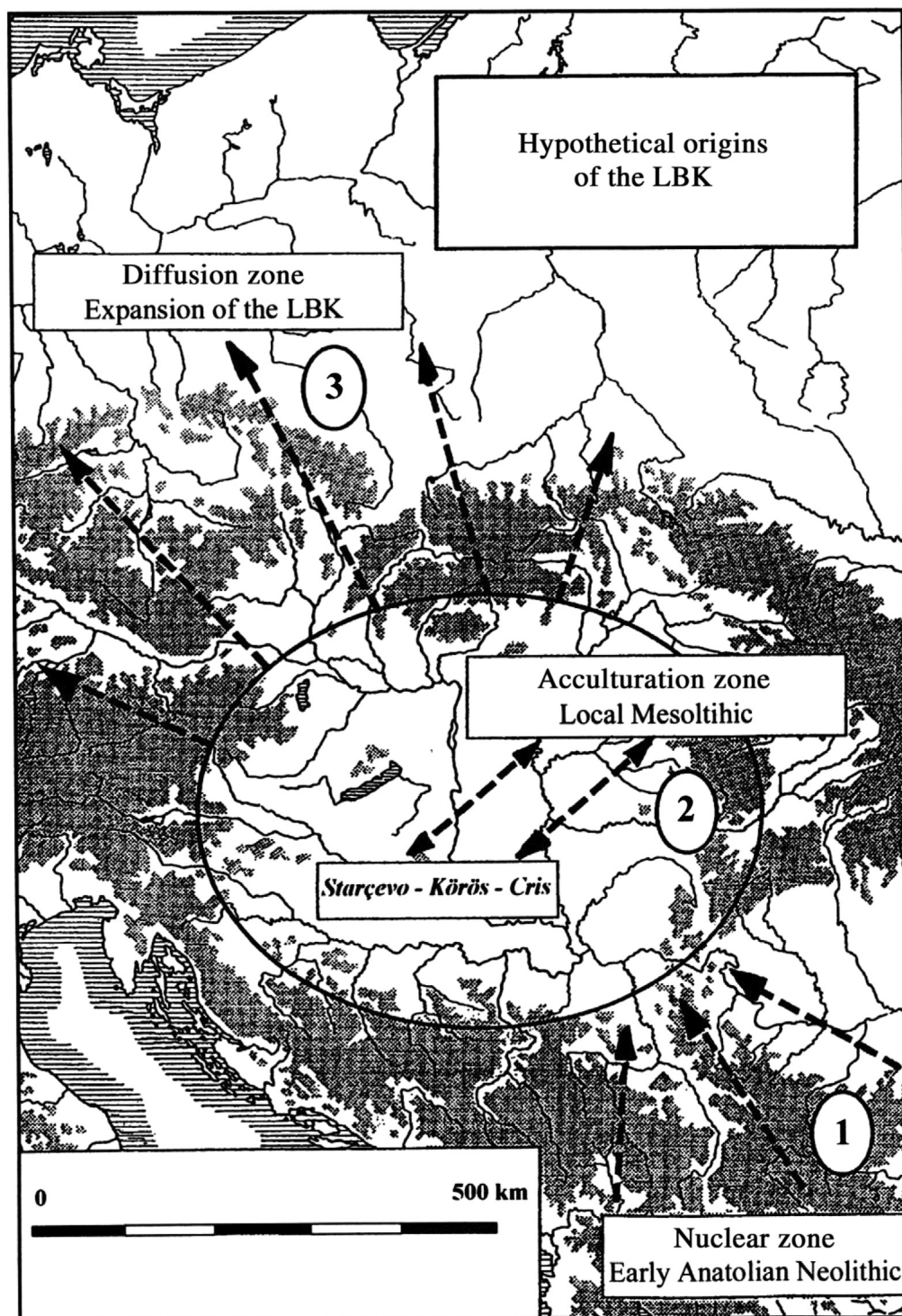


Figure 6 The LBK appears as a movement of colonization from a cultural center in modern Hungary. The settlers kept contact with nuclear areas and remained stable. After Otte, M., Noiret, P., 2001. Le Mésolithique du Bassin Pannonien et la formation du Rubané, *L'Anthropologie* 105 (3), 409–419.

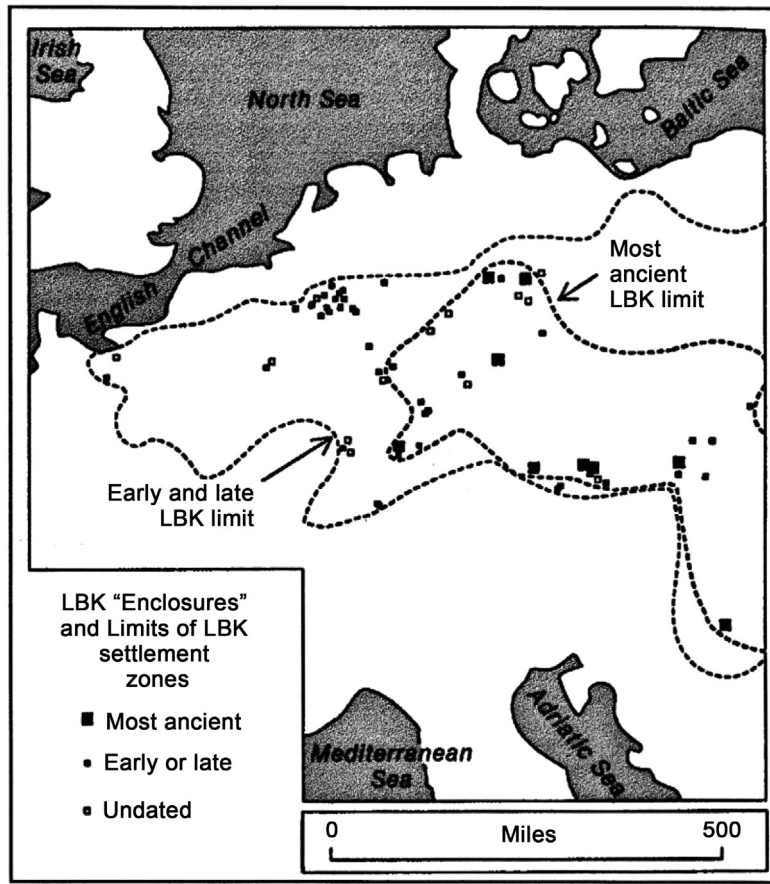


Figure 7 The LBK expansion represents the clearest model of prehistoric colonization: artifacts remained unchanged over a vast territory and are radically different from those found in preceding periods in the regions crossed. After Keeley, L.H., 1996. *War before Civilization*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

(Figure 8). Cultural links remain obvious between these different populations, because they participated in an extended exchange network over a vast territory. However, not a single center seems to exist as a unifying and referential model for the culture.

Migrations in archaeological contexts are thus frequent and refer to all humanity. We are able to recognize clear traces throughout virgin territories such as the Americas or northern Europe; here it is the artifacts themselves that directly retrace the paths of human expansion. Stylistic criteria permit us to recognize different cultures and to follow their movement across space and through time.

Mitigating cases where such migrations are superimposed on indigenous populations demand different and more elaborate methods appropriate to the human sciences. The styles of equipment must be compared between the two groups in order not only to distinguish them but also to identify possible symbioses or influences. Maps of dispersion

aid, stage by stage, in understanding archaeological evidence across space (Figure 9). To distinguish the influences of possible convergences, and similarities produced in different environments but at similar developmental stages, critical analysis must be applied to the archaeological record. The classic case, for example, is the Late Mousterian in Europe, where the same 'inventions' are known across all cultural environments in different regions but in similar circumstances. Migration can only appear in the global distribution and cohesion of a phenomenon, paired with territorial expansion. The more stylistic criteria are elaborated, the less random they are, and the more therefore they correspond to the system of values conveyed by a homogeneous population. It is this general key that archaeologists follow in their reconstructions of displacement. Although this law is not infallible and demands constant vigilance, comparisons with recent culturally well-defined peoples, permit us to ensure its effectiveness (Figure 10).

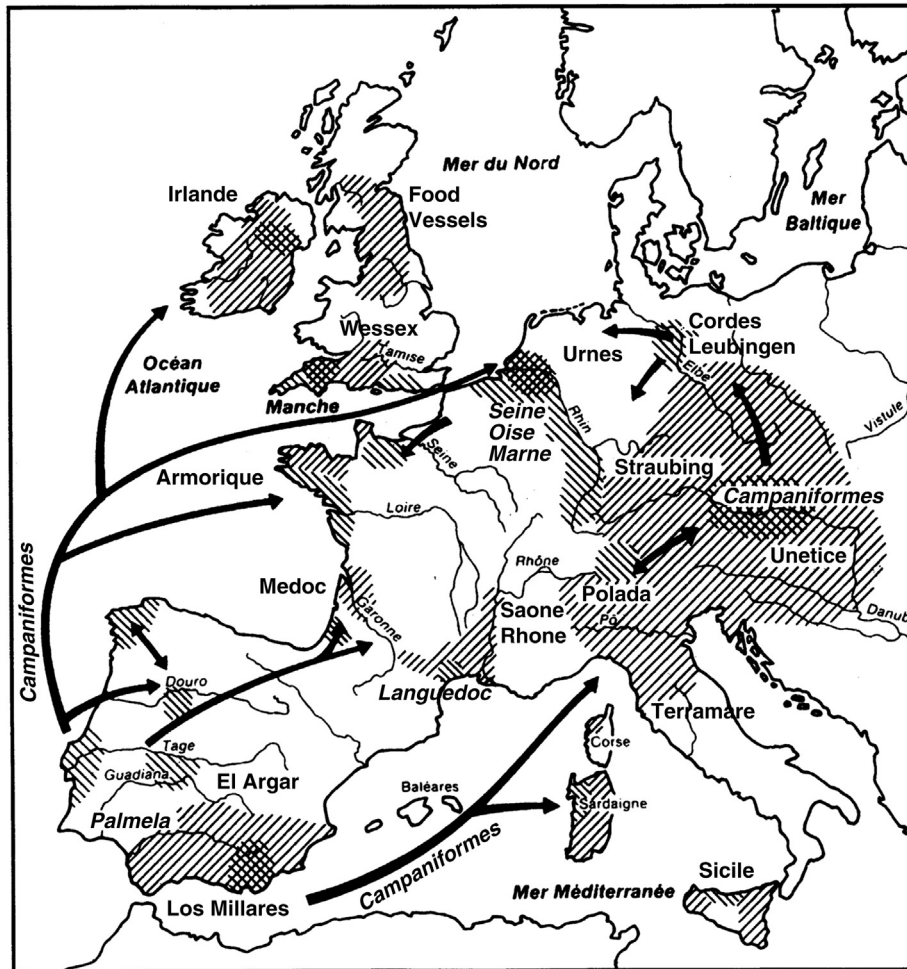


Figure 8 Small groups of Bell Beaker people had an enormous territorial expansion. They are characterized by graves, a particular ceramic form and copper objects. Their distribution, superposed on to local traditions, evokes the diaspora observed in historical times. After Briard, in Mohen, J.P. (Ed.), 1996. *La vie préhistorique*. Faton, Dijon, France.

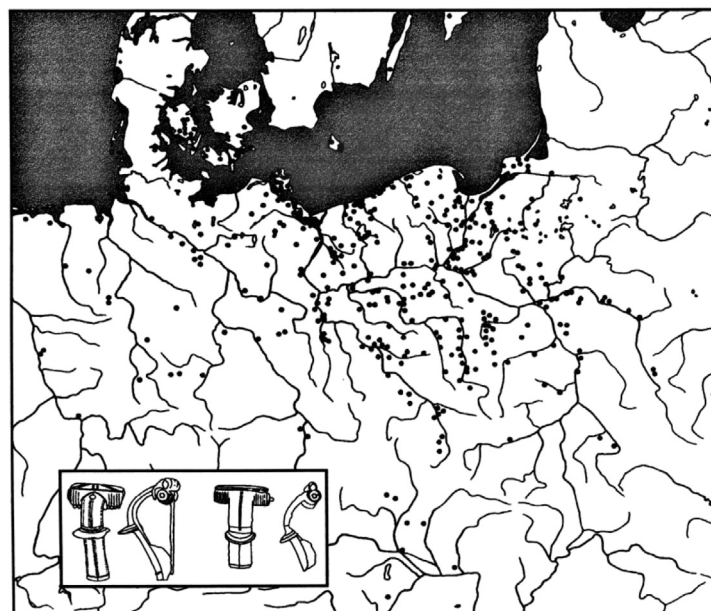


Figure 9 Methodological example of distribution of a particular type of decorative elements along the Baltic coast. These Germanic elements identify an ethnic group and permit us to follow their migrations until the time of Christ. After Böhme, H.W., 1996. *Kontinuität und Traditionen bei Wanderungsbewegungen im frühmittelalterlichen Europa vom 1–6 Jahrhundert*. *Archäologische Informationen* 19, 89–103.

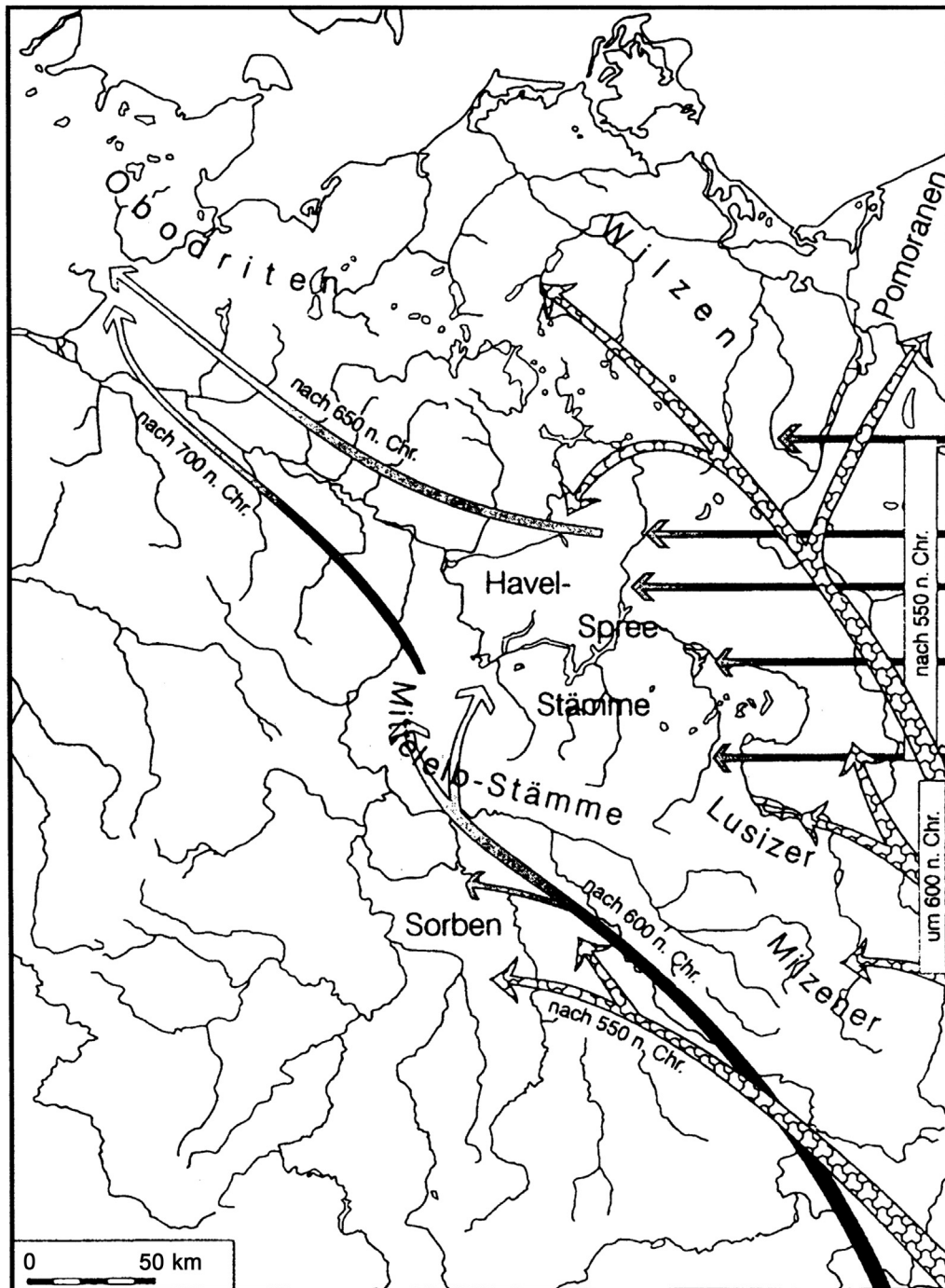


Figure 10 Historical migrations (here, the Slavs) are reconstructed by the distribution of languages, written sources, and archaeological information. After Kóčka-Krenz, H., 1996. Die Westwanderung der Slawen. *Archäologische Informationen* 19, 125–134.

See also: Adoption, Demography of; Demographic Techniques: Data Adjustment and Correction; Demographic Techniques: Indirect Estimation; Ethnic Identity and Ethnicity in Archaeology; Ethnicity and Migration in Europe; Migration: Anthropological Perspectives; Population Dynamics: Momentum of Population Growth.

Bibliography

- Böhme, H.W., 1996. Kontinuität und Traditionen bei Wanderungsbewegungen im frühmittelalterlichen Europa vom 1–6 Jahrhundert. *Archäologische Informationen* 19, 89–103.
- Dixon, J., 1999. Late Pleistocene maritime adaptations and colonisation in the Americas. *Pre-prints of the World Archaeological Congress* 4, 10–14.
- Keeley, L.H., 1996. *War before Civilization*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Klein, R., 1989. *The Human Career*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- Kóčka-Krenz, H., 1996. Die Westwanderung der Slawen. *Archäologische Informationen* 19, 125–134.
- Mohen, J.P. (Ed.), 1996. *La vie préhistorique*. Faton, Dijon, France.
- Otte, M., 1995. Traditions bifaces. Les industries à pointes foliacées d'Europe centrale. *Paléo* (Suppl. 1), 195–200.
- Otte, M., 1996. Aires culturelles au Paléolithique supérieur d'Europe. In: Mohen, J.P. (Ed.), *La vie préhistorique*. Faton, Dijon, France, pp. 286–289.
- Otte, M., 1997a. Contacts trans-méditerranéens au Paléolithique. In: Fullola, J.M., Soler, N. (Eds.), *El món mediterrani després del Pleniglacial (18.000–12.000BP)*. Museu d'Arqueologia de Catalunya, Girona, pp. 29–39.
- Otte, M., 1997b. Paléolithique final du nord-ouest, migrations et saisons. In: Fagnart, J.P., Thévenin, A. (Eds.), *Le Tardiglaciaire du Nord-Ouest de l'Europe*. CTHS, Paris, pp. 353–366.
- Otte, M., 2001. Le Mésolithique du Bassin pannonien et la formation du Rubané. In: Kertész, R., Makkay, J. (Eds.), *From the Mesolithic to the Neolithic, Proceedings of the International of Szolnok (22–27 September 1996)*. Budapest, *Archaeolingua Main Series*, vol. 11, pp. 375–378.
- Otte, M., Noiret, P., 2001. Le Mésolithique du Bassin Pannonien et la formation du Rubané. *L'Anthropologie* 105 (3), 409–419.
- Roe, D.A., 1981. *The Lower and Middle Palaeolithic in Britain*. Routledge, London.
- Wolpoff, M., 1998. *Paleoanthropology*. McGraw-Hill, Maidenhead, UK.