

## Obituary: André Debénath (1940 Ouezzane, Morocco – June 02, 2016 Montbron)

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André Debénath (Fig. 1), world renown scientist in the field of West European and North African Prehistory, died in Montbron (Charente, France), 2 June 2016, at the age of 76. He moved with his wife Geneviève to Montbron, his adopted homeland, in the early 2000s when he retired.



*Fig. 1: André Debénath (left) at La Chaise-de-Vouthon with Prof. Jean Piveteau in 1968.*

Named professor at the University of Perpignan in 1995, André Debénath began a new phase of his career after thirty years at the CNRS (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, France). This first period of his professional life before Perpignan is closely linked with the *Institut de Préhistoire et de Géologie du Quaternaire* at the University of Bordeaux where he worked within the research team of François Bordes, a scientist he respected and admired. This respect was accompanied by the many delightful stories he enjoyed sharing with young scholars on the unique character of Bordes. As a former student of François Bordes, André Debénath was part of an older generation of researchers who came to prehistoric research by way of geology. His expertise encompassed a solid analytical knowledge in sedimentology and site formation processes together with an extended knowledge in lithic typology, following the methodological framework established by Bordes.

Beyond his analytical expertise, André Debénath was basically a man who enjoyed being in the field. His involvement in fieldwork began in the Charente region where he grew up. His first investigations were carried out at La Chaise-de-Vouthon, which formed the topic of his Doctoral thesis in geology, and probably remained his favorite topic of study, which he continued to investigate throughout his career (Fig. 2). In the Charente region he also excavated in Hauteroche, Clouet Cave and in the upper shelter of La Vauzelle. In the 1990s, he initiated collaborative Franco-American field projects at La Quina and Fontéchevade, where he co-directed the excavations with Arthur Jelinek and Harold Dibble. The large number of Neanderthal fossils discovered by André Debénath's teams at these important Middle Paleolithic sites have greatly contributed to our knowledge of Neanderthals as well as to the outstanding prehistoric heritage of the Charente region. The involvement of André Debénath in Charente was remarkable



**Fig. 2:** André Debénath facing the archaeological sequence of La Chaise-de-Vouthon. Photo: J.-F. Tournepiche.

in its regularity and in its scope. He considered his contacts with schools or local associations as important as his involvement in scientific meetings or in regional societies and museums, an example being his long-term collaboration with Jean-François Tournepiche at the *Musée d'Angoulême*. While becoming over the years the most prominent figure associated with the prehistory of Charente, he also developed during this time a keen interest in the work of his illustrious predecessors. Dr. Henri-Martin was among these. His pioneering work at La Quina in the late 1800s and early 1900s deeply influenced André Debénath, who regarded Henri-Martin's work as a unique early model for applying a scientific approach to archeology. He had been working actively until his final days on a book project dedicated to Henri-Martin, a book that unfortunately will probably remain unpublished.

His second main field of research was Morocco, his native country, where he started working as early as 1969 as a member of the French archeological mission in Morocco before becoming the director of this mission from 1978 to 1990. His long-term investment in Morocco resulted in the discovery and excavation of a number of important



*Fig. 3: André Debénath at an exhibition on bats in Montbron. Photo: P. Messelet.*



sites: Dar-es-Soltane 2 and 3, and El Harhoura 1 and 2. His excellent relationship with the Moroccan academic community helped produce the long lasting cooperation between French and Moroccan scholars that continues today as part of the El Harhoura-Témara Franco-Moroccan archaeological mission, in which he remained active until recently. His attachment to Morocco was scientific but also deeply personal. This emotional aspect of who he was defined his character and guided most of his professional choices.

His endearing personality extended to his deeply caring behavior toward his family. He could be resolute as well, even willing to consider the most polarizing of positions, though one might add willing to condemn them just as quickly. He was a connoisseur of the good things in life, and imbued with an exceptional natural charisma and unfailing good humor. Beneath his earthy and extroverted nature was hidden a man capable of great sensitivity and generosity, a man who was open-minded, eclectic and deeply cultured. He will be greatly missed by many of us (Fig. 3).