

Science and Paleolithic Archaeology, Harold L. Dibble

(July 26, 1951 – June 10, 2018)

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In the summer of 2018 international Paleolithic archaeology and paleoanthropology lost one of its leading and most creative practitioners. Harold Dibble was born in 1951 and was raised in southern California, Florida and Arizona. He was very much a man of his era and often mentioned playing in his rock band, doing odd jobs and his views of the social upheavals connected with the 1960s and 1970s. His early experiences may have contributed to his open-mindedness and tolerance with people during his prominent international career. His rigor in thinking and practicing science, however, led him to develop, formulate and publish a wide range of new ideas and methods that made him a leader in numerous areas in Paleolithic archaeology (Fig. 1).

Dibble studied at the University of Arizona where he earned his undergraduate and graduate degrees. He always spoke fondly of his principle supervisor Art Jelinek and his strong scientific and personal connections to the students and faculty in Tucson. Although Dibble had a broad scientific and archaeological background and a particular talent for mathematics and computer science, his first commitment was always to the Paleolithic. He defended his Ph.D. thesis under Jelinek entitled: *Technological Strategies of Stone Tool Production at Tabun Cave (Israel)* in 1981.

In 1982 the Department of Anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania hired Dibble. He moved through the ranks to a full professor and never left his appointment in Philadelphia. Dibble frequently hosted small workshops as well as international meetings, and he developed an excellent reputation for his ideas and his abilities to see major projects and publications through to completion. His publication record of outstanding papers, monographs and edited volumes is unique and impressive by any standards. From the start Dibble was always on the forefront of computer applications in archaeology and publishing. As a young scholar, Dibble's ideas on the importance of reduction patterns in the biographies of stone tools gained prominence and led to considerable controversy, since his views contradicted the received knowledge that Paleolithic tools fell neatly into



Fig. 1: Harold Dibble at Roc de Marsal in 2006. Photo: Dennis Sandgathe; reproduced with kind permission.

Abb. 1: Harold Dibble in Roc de Marsal im Jahre 2006. Foto: Dennis Sandgathe; Wiedergabe mit freundlicher Genehmigung.

specific types which were created by knappers to execute specific tasks. Dibble was a champion of studies documenting lithic variability and questioning the all-pervasive view that, above all else, human intentionality shaped the lithic assemblages recovered from Paleolithic sites. While he shared the commitment to study the dynamics of stone knapping and reduction with the French technological school that emerged in the generation following François Bordes and André Leroi-Gourhan, he always championed what might be considered a neutral scientific approach to these issues, in which hominin intentionality must be demonstrated and not simply assumed.

Although Harold Dibble is the best known researcher in Paleolithic archaeology in areas related to controlled study of stone knapping and laboratory experiments on knapping, he also counts among the greatest field archaeologists of his era. He took great pride in having worked with François Bordes, and he shared Art Jelinek's fascination with the French Paleolithic tradition. He made major contributions toward improving excavation techniques and documenting and analyzing the Paleolithic record. Dibble excavated sites, often working closely with colleagues including Phil Chase, Paul Goldberg, Deborah Olszewski, his former students, especially Shannon McPherron, and the collaborators listed below:

Combe Capelle (with Michel Lenoir) 1985–1990

Cagny-l'Épinette / Cagny-la Garenne (with Alain Tuffreau and Phil Chase) 1990–1994

Fontéchevade (with André Debénath, Phil Chase, and Shannon McPherron) 1994–1999

Roc de Marsal (with Shannon McPherron, Dennis Sandgathe, and Alain Turq) 2004–2010

La Ferrassie (with Alain Turq, Shannon McPherron, Dennis Sandgathe, Paul Goldberg, and Vera Aldeias) 2010–2015

La Gane (with André Morala, Shannon McPherron, Paul Goldberg, Vera Aldeias, Dennis Sandgathe, and Alain Turq) 2012

Pech-de-l'Azé IV (with Shannon McPherron) 2000–2003, and ongoing since 2016 (with Dennis Sandgathe, Paul Goldberg, and Vera Aldeias) (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2: Excavations at Pech-de-l'Azé IV in 1976. François Bordes is wearing the gray hat in the left part of the photo. Harold Dibble is seated wearing an orange shirt near the top of the photo. After Olszewski 2018. Photo courtesy of the Dibble family.

Abb. 2: Ausgrabungen in Pech-de-l'Azé IV im Jahre 1976. François Bordes trägt den grauen Hut im linken Teil des Fotos. Harold Dibble sitzt, mit einem orangefarbenen Hemd bekleidet, nah am oberen Rand des Fotos. Nach Olszewski 2018. Foto mit Genehmigung der Familie Dibble.

Dibble's research focused on the Middle Paleolithic and on the lifeways and technological adaptations of Neanderthals, but he also enjoyed working on the Lower Paleolithic. The Upper Paleolithic and the lives of modern humans appealed to him less, because he viewed their range of behavioral variability as comparable to our own and less challenging to study.

Beyond his well known research in France, and publications on the archaeology of the Levant and the Zagros, Dibble also led major fieldwork in Egypt (**Abydos Survey for Paleolithic Sites**, with Deborah Olszewski, Shannon McPherron, and Jen Smith) in 2000–2008, and in Morocco (**Grotte des Contrebandiers**, with Mohamed Abdeljalil El Hajraoui) in 2006–2011. Everywhere he worked, Dibble and his team modified and improved methods of excavation, collecting, storing and analyzing data. Dibble's contributions in these areas rival his many achievements in lithic technology and other areas of Paleolithic archaeology and paleoanthropology.

Dibble was always a skeptic and insisted that researchers prove their claims. This characterized all aspects of his work, and he held himself to still higher standards. At times in Paleolithic archaeology, bold claims, assertions and even unfounded hype can dominate the discourse. Harold Dibble never participated in this kind of archaeology. With his labwork, fieldwork and experimental archaeology, he contributed toward making archaeology a serious science, in which researchers are expected to demonstrate the claims they make. This made debate with him lively, challenging and often highly entertaining. Harold Dibble loved his craft, loved his field and although he would not often express it in this way, he clearly loved his colleagues and students. He also loved a good argument, a stiff drink and a smoke. Dibble lived his archaeological life to the fullest and made far fewer compromises along the way than most of us do. His contributions to field will long be remembered.

Harold Dibble was often in Tübingen, occasionally accompanied by his wife Lee, who not surprisingly is also a warm and generous personality. Over the years Harold delivered several highly memorable lectures in Room 119 in Castle Hohentübingen. He would discuss his excavations and his knapping experiments, and he took pleasure in pointing out the weaknesses he saw in the work of the French technological school or in the work of scholars, who were all too willing to accept weak arguments to demonstrate the existence of Neanderthal burials or the controlled use of fire by Neanderthals. People who did not know Harold were surprised to hear the openness in which he debated scientific matters and were even shocked that he did not pull his punches in public speaking. His lectures were always an event, and he showed students and colleagues that science thrives on debate and is weakened by excessive emphasis on consensus. Although Dibble enjoyed a good argument, he also viewed the field of Paleolithic archaeology as highly civilized: He backed up this view with kindness and far more generosity than most. He was also funny and witty and the first person one would seek out at a bar or a gathering.

On a personal note, I want to thank Harold Dibble and Shannon McPherron for always helping me and my teams with open communication and guidance related to their many technological innovations for excavation and managing archaeological data. I did not always agree with Harold on all aspects of how to dig sites, but there was no better person for discussing and debating methods of excavation. This is exactly what we did at length the last time I spoke to Harold at the bar of the Marriott Wardman Park Hotel

in Washington DC during a meeting of the Society for American Archaeology in April 2018. We discussed and debated the best way to excavate combustion features from the Middle Paleolithic deposits at Pech-de-l'Azé IV. We talked and joked with his doctoral students who passed by. As always, Harold took time for serious conversation, which in no way lacked biting remarks, heartfelt laughs and great affection for the field and many colleagues. It also came as no surprise that Harold insisted on picking up the tab. At the time I thought I could reciprocate the next time Harold came to Tübingen. Unfortunately, as is the case with many other colleagues, I will never be able to pay him back for his generosity in science and beyond.

A complete list of Prof. Dibble's publications, excavations and students can be found in D. I. Olszewski's paper on Harold Dibble in the 2018 issue of the open-access, online journal *PaleoAnthropology* (Olszewski 2018).

References

- Olszewski, D. I. 2018: Harold L. Dibble, Preeminent Paleoanthropologist / Paleolithic Archaeologist, 26 July 1951 – 10 June 2018. *PaleoAnthropology* 2018, 30–46.

