

PREFACE

Grotte des Pigeons, or Taforalt Cave, is without doubt one of the most famous yet perhaps curiously enigmatic Palaeolithic sites in North Africa. Since its discovery more than a century ago, the cave has been periodically investigated and has aroused great interest but there is still relatively little recognition of its importance as a key reference point in the prehistory of the continent. In this edited volume we aim to rectify this shortcoming by bringing together the latest results of excavation and research in a new project that began in 2003. In doing so, we draw particular attention to the fact that the cave now has one of the most detailed and well-dated cultural and environmental sequences in North Africa covering at least the last 120,000 years. It thus represents a major benchmark for all other chronostratigraphic studies in this part of Africa. At the same time, it contains a remarkably rich, continuous and varied record of human activity which includes in its later phases significant evidence for the use of the cave as a funerary site. Indeed the cave is principally known as one of the largest and oldest cemetery caves in the whole of North Africa, although paradoxically these assertions were based on questionable estimates of numbers of buried individuals and only minimal dating evidence in the original studies. Now as a result of the new project it has been possible to examine and reaffirm these claims and to establish that Taforalt provides an exceptional wealth of scientific and cultural information concerning early prehistoric hunter-gatherers in this part of the western Maghreb.

In this volume we focus on the excavation archives of the Later Stone Age (LSA) levels (known regionally as the Iberomaurusian) which run at this site from around 23,000 to 12,600 cal BP (calibrated radiocarbon years before present). Earlier phases of occupation that include the Aterian (Middle Stone Age, MSA) will be dealt with in a companion volume, now in preparation. One of the objectives of the present volume is to provide a clear description of the later stratigraphy of the site and at the same time a context for understanding the human occupation of the cave.

The main subject of our enquiry and the results of the study are presented in chapters written by each of the contributing project specialists. Following **Chapter 1** on the history of research and recent excavations, **Chapter 2** deals with the sedimentary sequences, concentrating upon the lithostratigraphy but also including discussion of site formation processes and inferences concerning human behaviour and environmental factors. **Chapter 3** contains a pilot study on the sediment micromorphology of a key sequence. The chronology of the Iberomaurusian, using various absolute dating techniques, is presented in **Chapter 4**, and this is followed by specialist reports on the Wood Charcoal (**Chapter 5**), Other Charred Plant Remains (**Chapter 6**), Phytoliths (**Chapter 7**), Land Mollusca (**Chapter 8**), Large Mammals (**Chapter 9**), Avifauna (**Chapter 10**) and other (smaller) Faunal Remains (**Chapter 11**). In each of these chapters description of the evidence is accompanied by discussion of the implications for understanding environmental and human behavioural change. This is also true of the succeeding chapters on the Lithic Artefacts (**Chapter 12**), Organic Artefacts (**Chapter 13**), and Inorganic Finds (**Chapter 14**). The next chapters focus more specifically on the human burials, from the point of view of individual interments (**Chapter 15**), the physical anthropology (**Chapter 16**) and the isotopic evidence as it relates to the human diet (**Chapter 17**). In the final part of this volume (**Chapter 18**), we offer a synthesis and interpretation in which the site and human behavioural aspects are placed within their wider regional and North African perspectives.