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Human-tooth ornaments from the French early Aurignacian : implications for early Upper Paleolithic treatment of the dead

R. White¹, D. Henry-Gambier², and C. Normand³

*1 Center for the Study of Human Origins, Department of Anthropology,
New York University, 25 Waverly Place, New York, NY 10003, U.S.A.*

randall.white@nyu.edu

*2 CR, CNRS UMR 5809 , Laboratoire d'Anthropologie, Université de
Bordeaux I, Avenue des Facultés, 33405 Talence , France.*

d.gambier@anthropologie.u-bordeaux1.fr

*3 Service regional de l'archaeologie, 54 rue Magendie, 33074 Bordeaux
cedex, France*

The richness and diversity of personal ornaments in the southern French early Aurignacian is now well documented. These are generally manufactured of marine shells, animal teeth, soft stone and, especially, mammoth-ivory. In addition however, early twentieth century excavations provided two examples of pierced human teeth, one from La Combe (Dordogne) and the other from Tarté (Haute-Garonne). New, high-quality excavations at Brassempouy (Landes) and Isturitz (Pyrénées-Atlantique) have now revealed several well-provenienced human teeth transformed into personal ornaments. This corpus of human-tooth ornaments is analyzed with particular attention to the anatomical position of the teeth chosen, the techniques by which they were transformed and stigmata on the teeth themselves indicating probable flesh removal. With the recent re-dating of the human remains from Cro-Magnon, there are no known burials of Aurignacian age, suggesting that Aurignacian treatment of the dead did not involve interment. Aurignacian human remains are generally sparse and highly fragmented. This fact, combined with the frequency of human-tooth ornaments implies alternative but equally complex mortuary practices.