

## With Björn Kurtén in Catalonia — a winter journey (1979)

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I was one of Björn Kurtén's last students and came to spend much time with him during the years that we overlapped at the University of Helsinki, which I entered in 1973. Those were marvellous, unforgettable and deeply formative years, rich with science, art and people of all sorts (*see* Fortelius & Werdelin 2024). While recently sorting through my old papers I stumbled on a forgotten diary from 1979, which contains, among other things, the description of a journey in deep winter from Helsinki to Marseille and back. The main goal was the Ph.D. defence of Evelyne Crégut<sup>1</sup> and a seminar to be held there at the same time. Björn was on the Ph.D. jury and had invited me to come along, at my own expense, of course. I think this was because he thought my experience of excavations at the Petralona Cave in Greece two years before might be of interest to the local scientists, whose research was focused on the Caune de l'Arago Cave in Tautavel, in French Catalonia. Both these caves had delivered fossil human cranial and postcranial remains, which at the time were among the oldest evidence for a human presence in Europe. I believe Björn travelled by air. I travelled separately by train, stopping at several points to see friends, researchers and collections; a holdover from my Interrail-and-hitch-hiker period a few years earlier. In the excerpt below I mainly describe events that occurred during an excursion to the Caune de l'Arago Cave and Prehistory Museum in Tautavel, the day after the defence and seminar (*see* Figs. 1–3). Despite some moments of transient chaos, it shows Björn as I remember him: kind, enthusiastic, open minded, determined, generous, sometimes rowdy — and with a wonderful sense of humour, even in moments of adversity.

The text has been Google-translated from re-typed, handwritten diary notes in Swedish, with (only) the worst errors fixed manually; '/.../' indicates omitted parts.

26.1.1979, 11.30<sup>2</sup>

Sitting on the train from Stockholm to Helsingborg. Nice 2nd class compartment, wooden interior, sliding doors.

Snowfall outside, from the train window it

looks like a blizzard. Lots of snow everywhere, risk of delays, which is also the reason I took this earlier train instead of the 12.22 to Copenhagen direct. I have reserved a sleeping berth from Copenhagen, and do not want to miss the train.

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**Fig. 1.** Björn Kurtén at the Caune de l'Arago, 3 February 1979, flanked by an unknown participant and Claude Guérin (to the right). Photo by Mikael Fortelius.



**Fig. 2.** — **A:** Henry de Lumley lecturing at the Caune de l'Arago, 3 February 1979. — **B:** Claude Guérin listening. Photos by Mikael Fortelius.

27.1.1979, 09.35

On the Paris Express, passed Aachen. For once, a quiet night without passport and customs controls. The only sensible way to cross the border is in a sleeping car.

27.1.1979, 14.10

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The snow, which was still quite thick in northern France, has now disappeared, and the fields lie bare. A slight green tint can be glimpsed here and

**Fig. 3.** Björn Kurtén and camera during the Tau-tavel excursion 3 February 1979, with unknown dogs. Photo by Mikael Fortelius.



there. Carrion crows, kestrels, etc., etc. in great abundance, ivy and mistletoe likewise. Germany's elegant power lines have been replaced by France's more prosaic ones. The train is obviously late; hope Jean-Pierre has found out the actual arrival time.

*Une nuit à Paris* .... France makes me think of 10cc: diffuse, chaotic, harmonious. Written in these days when order reigns in Tehran.

28.1.1979, 15.55

/.../

After a good night's sleep, we woke up around 10 o'clock, drank coffee and got up. Jean-Pierre went to a "family", where he was invited to visit, I set out to wander the streets of the city.

The walk first took me to Place de Clichy, where I took the Metro to the Invalides. From there I wandered to the Eiffel Tower, looked at it for a while, and then went by various detours down to the river, which I followed upstream as far as the Pont Neuf, where I again took the Metro, and after two changes re-reached the Place de Clichy. On the way home I bought a cheese *baguette* or something similar in a *boulangerie*. When I got home, I made tea and ate this. Have so far spent 4 F in just over 24 hours. Not bad!

Paris is quite nice in the winter. This morning Jean-Pierre tried to impress me with the fact that

there would be frost outside. It didn't feel particularly awful like this in the middle of winter. Although of course I feel a little peculiar in my black military boots and my big shaggy sheepskin coat — a bit like a "*Rhinocéros laineux*" from the periglacial steppe here in the warm Paris Basin.

I didn't take a single picture, even though I dragged my camera equipment with me the whole long walk. I already anticipated this when I left, but still took it with me just in case.

Slogans abound as usual, from weathered "*Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité*" to new, angry ones, in Turkish and Arabic. As well as "*Es lebe der Führer*". Earnest or irony?

/.../

1.2.1979, 17.00

/.../

Now on the train, heading towards the main destination of the trip: Marseille. All sorts of things have happened, mainly with regard to my "*Thèse*", and out of necessity here follow some purely technical comments<sup>3</sup>.

/.../

It's raining outside, and we stand still for ages at a station. Delta-shaped fighter planes fly across the sky. The compartment is practically empty. It's chilly. I liked Lyon, and Guérin<sup>4</sup> and his students, who were both pretty girls.

In general, people were extremely friendly and accommodating in Lyon. Marseille next. There rule the de Lumleys and “Madame Bonifay”. My 25th birthday. A little unusual but not completely unpleasant. Something seems to be wrong with me. Possibly it is my subconscious that has finally understood that Guérin’s work completely covers everything I have done. Or maybe it was the kidney I got to eat (believing it was mushroom sauce, I chose it myself). I don’t know, but yesterday’s victorious enthusiasm is definitely gone. Now I’m pretty much waiting for the next disaster. Until then, au ‘voir!<sup>5</sup>

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## 2.2.1979, 08.20

Still on the train. In an hour, the defence will begin. My fabulous capacity for getting lost has never yet failed me in times of crisis. Consequently, God knows how, I ended up on a train that, despite all claims, was not going to Marseille, but somewhere else entirely, in a god-forsaken place called Béziers. It was 10 o’clock in the evening; the next train back (sic!) to Marseille would leave at two a.m. There was not much left to do but check into a hotel and catch the first morning train to Marseille. I miss the defence itself, but should instead be in reasonable shape for the seminar, which would not be the case after a sleepless night. Really typical!

We are now traveling through a wonderful morning landscape with vineyards. Small fires burn here and there, probably dry branches and the like. In a body of water there is a flock of flamingos (sic!), I thought they were South American. Actually, I still think so<sup>6</sup>, but how to explain this flock? It stood completely free and independent in a body of water next to the railway. It is somewhat hazy, and the morning blush is strong. Let’s see if it doesn’t rain.

The vineyards have been replaced by industrial areas, marshlands and larger wetlands. We have passed a town whose name I missed, and the landscape to the west is very Mediterranean, with mountains not unlike “Katsika” in Petralona<sup>7</sup>. Although the vegetation is richer, of course. Swamplands and vineyards alternate. A new and unexpected combination for me. In the east now lies something that can hardly be other

than the Sea. I am completely confused and have no idea where we are. But in an hour we should be in Marseilles.

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## 4.2.1979, 10.40

*Goodbye To All That*; “*Le Séminaire*” is over, and the train rolls out of Marseille Saint-Charles. Should be timely to try to sort out the impressions. First the more general: it’s more or less summer here at the edge of the Mediterranean; fur and boots are an impossibility, therefore I carry them, so my luggage is now quite Colossal.

On the excursion to Tautavel, Björn and I were dressed in light jackets; for us it was warm enough. However, most of the participants had different kinds of coats, furs and jackets, with those field boots etc. But I would probably have had that too, if this had happened in Finland. You want to use the equipment you have. Two girls from Tautavel joined the expedition in elegant furs and high-heeled boots. How they managed the climb up to the cave is beyond me, but they didn’t seem to have any problems. But the beginning first, so to speak.

I arrived as expected about an hour late for the defence, missed Mlle Crégut’s presentation. But except for the first part of Guérin’s critique, I heard the entire subsequent assessment, where the speakers were: Guérin, “Madame Bonifay”<sup>8</sup>, Kurtén, Heintz<sup>9</sup>, an unknown person and H. de Lumley<sup>10</sup>. After this, this “jury” withdrew to deliberate, and soon returned with the message “not guilty”, i.e. I think it was *laudatur*<sup>11</sup> or whatever it may be called here. Applause, and then lunch, which was a kind of mammoth cocktail party with ready-made sandwiches and good wine (including from Tautavel). The wine made the mood very lively, and I was introduced to a lot of people, whose names I only partially remember. Perhaps the most important (and quite possibly the nicest) was Dr. Villalta<sup>12</sup> from Barcelona. Would love to work with him. To my great disappointment, Kahlke<sup>13</sup> was not there (he had not received a visa!), and neither was Altuna<sup>14</sup> from San Sebastian, whom I had very much hoped to meet. But instead there were, of course, a lot of people I hadn’t heard of before, and several very nice ones.

After lunch we were driven to another university, quite far away, where the actual seminar was to be held. I went with the de Lumleys (which may not have been well received), clinging to Björn who was in top form and talking to everyone. Also in the car was Rickles (if his name is spelled like that)<sup>15</sup>, who works on dinosaur histology and other hugely interesting things. Asked him about ΣΥΛΛΟΓΕΣ (K-Tee-Workshop), which he considered a good example of an interdisciplinary effort, but not much more. According to him and Björn, palaeomagnetism can be used to show that there is a long gap between the end of the Cretaceous on land and in the sea (about half a million years or something). Two supernovae, one that wiped out only large land animals and another that only wiped out large sea animals, eh?<sup>16</sup>

Well, then coffee and wandering around various laboratories, etc., talking about everything possible, then the seminar itself, in a typical lecture hall with a floor that sloped down towards the podium. De Lumley's<sup>17</sup> grand synthesis scheme of the Pleistocene was distributed and discussed, at times very animated, Monsieur Bonifay in particular was very heated and repeatedly used the word "*stupide*". But it wasn't that bad. Uncle Kurtén drew on the blackboard and told us about size variation in carnivores, as well as about Petralona. I also gave a short talk, also about Petralona. Hope Aris Poulianos<sup>18</sup> never hears about it. But Björn was satisfied and liked that I publicly contradicted him. "A picture of how we cooperate in Finland," he said. And of course it's quite fun to shock the patriarchal Southern Europeans.

After the seminar there was dinner for a select few at the de Lumley's. Of course, I was not one of these, so I begged a lift to the hotel, checked in (with some difficulty) and went out into the Marseille evening. I was quite tired, and soon found a couscous food bar, where I dined. On the way home, I drank tea at a stall, and then went "home" and went to bed at 9 in the evening. I was for some reason quite pessimistic and discouraged, and thought that my presentation at the seminar was stupid and uncalled for, and that my work was completely pointless.

However, I slept well, and woke up to the sweet ringing of the phone at half past five in

the morning. Rapid ascent and departure to Tautavel. Judging by Rickles and others, Björn had been a little confused at the de Lumley's, but he turned up, a little tired, admittedly. First we went to Lunel-Viel, and had the cave (one of them) shown to us by Monsieur Bonifay. Horse, bovids and cervids, hyena and man. Almost the most fun were the bats, in great numbers, and mushrooms. Took some pictures.

The journey continued on to Tautavel in the shadow of the Pyrenees, where, as mentioned, we climbed up to the cave that is quite high up. (Much like climbing up to the top of Katsika, but steeper.) The cave itself was not much to see; a large opening that narrowed inwards and ended blindly. This state is not the original; the cave has been worked by people later<sup>19</sup>.

De Lumley gave a long talk up by the cave, unfortunately I didn't understand much.

The scenery at Tautavel was fantastic, with brown vineyards, high mountains, a small river and a winding country road, and the Pyrenees mountains, blue and unfathomable in the background. Catalonia. A peculiarity of this excursion was that Mlle Crégut was missing. According to vague rumours, she doesn't agree with de Lumley. Typical.

Around 14.00 we climbed down to the buses and went into the city, where we (for the first time that day) got food, served at long tables in the city's cinema hall<sup>20</sup>, which was completely packed.

Bread and garlic mayonnaise, snails, sausages and chops with lots of wine and champagne. The mood was high, and there was a lot of singing. De Lumley was cheered, and Bonifay too. Many well-received speeches were given, both by the excursion's management and by the city's representatives. Björn gave a slightly confused but very heartfelt speech to Catalonia, where he compared the Catalan and Finnish-Swedish minorities. I don't think many people understood the speech, but the applause was enthusiastic.

After several hours of partying, the group left for the museum<sup>21</sup>. Björn was slurring his speech a bit, and wobbly on his feet, but insisted on measuring the material of *Lynx* and *Felis*. With some hesitation his request was granted. A large crowd of people gathered around to watch the specta-

cle, and of course the result was eventually that Björn, distracted by all this, fell over the display case and spread chaos. H. de Lumley exploded; according to him something had broken, I don't know what. The display case was locked, and Björn was left to his fate. However, he did not give up, and a "battle of the giants" followed, which Björn finally won. New spectacle: Björn measured, assisted by Madame Bonifay, who received many compliments on her beauty. The de Lumleys stood by, giggling hysterically. Then departure, rather heavily delayed by all this. The French were very shocked, but polite enough.

The journey home was uneventful, and Björn fortunately did not manage to buy the bottle of wine he was trying to get at a gas station. The mood eventually calmed down, and we discussed literature, writing, Björn's books, music and palaeontology. Once home we took our things to the hotel and went out for a beer. Of course we ended up at the same *Brasserie* where the poor de Lumleys sat and recovered. They didn't look very enthusiastic, but everything went well. Afterwards we walked down to the centre, and ate a sandwich with beer at a snack bar, after which we went home and went to bed. Björn complimented me on my "criticality" and on the presentation at the seminar, which was particularly encouraging<sup>22</sup>.

Fell asleep feeling optimistic at midnight, and woke up rested at 08:30 in the morning. Ate "*le petit déjeuner*", and began the walk to the station. I found that the next train to Paris would leave in 5 minutes, so there was no time for provisions. But it will probably work out, there should be a restaurant car among other things. I have promised to send bear cult references to a girl from Barcelona and to write to Guérin.

#### 4.2.1979, 16.00

Rain and fog. The rivers are overflowing and running fast. The coastal vegetation is partly under water. Crows, magpies and birds of prey, a heron.

Been reading *Goodbye to All That*<sup>23</sup> for hours, and this weather seems somehow ominous. We are far from the Mediterranean. The pen is running low, making writing difficult. For this reason, I end here.

#### 7.2.1979, 18.40 (Swedish time)

On the ferry (Viking 4), finally on my way home, poor but happy. The customs control in Helsingborg was thorough as usual, we ran into something which is apparently called the "Black Gang"; tough guys in black leather jackets. Almost everyone's luggage was checked meticulously. Fortunately, it has not yet come to the point where they open film cassettes or cameras; that would be quite frustrating.

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Slept quite well and called Ulf Borgen<sup>24</sup> at the Swedish Museum of Natural History in the morning to get hold of Lars Verdelin<sup>25</sup>. Promised to go out and look at a couple of *Coelodonta* skulls they were having trouble with, which I did too.

Verdelin was not there, as he had been ill for a long time, but I spoke to him on the phone and told him that Uncle Kurtén had measured new lynx teeth for him, "at the risk of his life". Verdelin was very tired, so I ended the call pretty soon. Read a nice paper written by Ulf Borgen about a muskox find from Jämtland. He promised to send a reprint. Also looked at those *Coelodonta* skulls, and gave my opinion on the placement of a detached piece. It was difficult, partly because it could come from either of the skulls, partly because there were no fresh fracture surfaces. However, we achieved a reasonably satisfactory result.

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### Acknowledgments

I thank the editors of this volume and the organisers of the centenary meeting for inviting me and for patient and constructive comments to the manuscript. I am much indebted to the kindness of Björn Kurtén's children Solveig, Joachim, Andrea and Marina, for agreeing to the publication of this text. Special thanks to Asta Rosenström-Fortelius, Henry Pihlström, Jordi Agustí, Deborah Barsky and Lars Werdelin for good suggestions and critical corrections.

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lections of Björn Kurtén. — *Annales Zoologici Fennici* 61: 47–55.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Subsequently Evelyne Crégut-Bonnoure, established at Avignon, eminent mammal palaeontologist and archaeozoologist, bovid specialist.
- <sup>2</sup> The format used for date and time in the diary is retained. The generic translation here is “January 26, 1979, at 11:30 AM”.
- <sup>3</sup> Too detailed and out of date to copy here. Still dealing with new insights and questions regarding Europe’s Ice Age rhinoceroses and their relationships.
- <sup>4</sup> Claude Guérin at Lyon (Fig. 2B) was a leading specialist on fossil rhinoceroses, the subject of my intended Ph.D. project, selected in ignorance of the fact that he was just about to complete a huge thesis on the same topic. If it hadn’t been for Guérin, I might have become a specialist in extinct rhinos for real, now the visit came instead to mark a critical bifurcation in my career.
- <sup>5</sup> My French was non-existent then as now. Here as elsewhere in my diaries and letters from those years I liked to throw in something colloquial-sounding. Here the intended meaning is obviously *au revoir*.
- <sup>6</sup> As a child I would have known better for sure!
- <sup>7</sup> Petralona Cave in Chalkidiki, northern Greece, famous for its fossil human skull.
- <sup>8</sup> Marie-Françoise Bonifay, palaeontologist and married to Eugène Bonifay, archaeologist. Both participated in the seminar.
- <sup>9</sup> Émile Heintz, prominent French palaeontologist with expertise on the fossil ruminants of Crégut’s thesis.
- <sup>10</sup> Henry de Lumley (Fig. 2A), a leading figure in European Prehistory during my entire life in science. His wife Marie-Antoinette, who also occurs in this text, is a prominent palaeoanthropologist.
- <sup>11</sup> The highest mark in the Finnish degree system in place at that time.
- <sup>12</sup> Prof. José F. de Villalta: Research professor from the CSIC (Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, the Spanish equivalent of the RCMNS) at Barcelona. Specialist in Quaternary large mammals. Co-organizer with M. Crusafont of the *Cursillos de Sabadell* and hence an old friend of Björn’s.
- <sup>13</sup> Hans-Dietrich Kahlke from Weimar in the then Democratic Republic of Germany, eminent Quaternary palaeontologist with important papers on fossil rhinoceroses. I did finally meet him in Weimar in 1982.
- <sup>14</sup> Dr. Jesús Altuna: Palaeontologist specialized in the Late Pleistocene large mammals from the caves of northern Spain.
- <sup>15</sup> Prof. Armand de Rickles, French paleontologist specialized on the dinosaur bone histology. French defender of the then emerging idea of “hot-blooded” dinosaurs.
- <sup>16</sup> Just two years later, the discovery of extraterrestrial iridium in the Cretaceous-Tertiary boundary (using the terminology of the time) exploded on the scientific world and the hypothesis of a devastating asteroid impact with resulting global mass death had arrived. By a curious coincidence, I was back in Catalonia when I first heard the news in an unscheduled talk by the famous Chicago palaeontologist David Raup in May 1981, at a meeting in Barcelona called *Concept and Method in Palaeontology*.
- <sup>17</sup> ‘de Lumley’ in this text refers to Henry, while the plural form refers to both him and his wife.
- <sup>18</sup> Aristides (Aris) Poulianos, Greek palaeoanthropologist and director of the Petralona excavation that I had attended in the summer of 1977.
- <sup>19</sup> This is evidently my misunderstanding at the time. As Deborah Barsky kindly informs me, humans did not work the cave. The cave’s original morphology was altered by natural karstic events (erosive forces) and the depositional sequence accumulated through time.
- <sup>20</sup> Doubts have been expressed regarding a cinema hall in Tautavel village, but that must be what I was told at the time.
- <sup>21</sup> Tautavel Prehistory Museum.
- <sup>22</sup> We had a warm relationship with much humour back and forth. Later the same year we published a funny coauthored “paper”, Fortelius & Kurtén (1979).
- <sup>23</sup> Autobiography by Robert Graves from 1929, when the author was 34 years old.
- <sup>24</sup> Palaeontologist, specialist on fossil fishes. He was very young at the time of my visit.
- <sup>25</sup> Werdelin. As the spelling shows, and as Lars confirms in December 2023, this was before we became acquainted, *see* Fortelius and Werdelin (2024).