

Catalogue of Palaeolithic Artefacts from Egypt in the Pitt Rivers Museum

Sarah Milliken

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This book by Milliken is divided into two parts. The first outlines past and present research on the Paleolithic of Egypt, while the second contains a catalogue of the Paleolithic artifacts from the Pitt Rivers Museum. A strong focus throughout is on the life, research, and collections of Charles Seligman. His collections, mainly from around Thebes and Abydos, form by far the largest component of the Paleolithic artifacts at the Pitt Rivers Museum. The choice to make him a returning focus in the book is therefore a logical one.

As Milliken says, the collections at the Pitt Rivers Museum represent a historical document of early research on the Paleolithic in Egypt. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, there were many active collectors. Among them were tourists, given cheap access to Egypt by Thomas Cook, but also anthropologists and Egyptologists. Most of these collectors had a goal of comparing implements from Egypt with those from the, by then fairly well established, prehistoric past in Europe. Documenting this history of collecting and early Paleolithic research in Egypt is the main contribution of the book. Milliken, however, has expanded this by adding chapters on the state of archaeological research in the area. While this is a good idea, it does give the book a rather eclectic character.

The chapter on Charles Gabriel Seligman is thorough and provides some interesting insights into his work. Seligman, an anthropologist with very broad interests, visited Egypt twice in the early 20th century, collecting extensively each time, especially in the areas around Abydos and Thebes. Particularly valuable are significant field observation passages from his diaries. At Abydos, for example, Seligman noted discolored circles on the desert surface and interpreted them as remnants of Paleolithic huts (Milliken 2003). While this interpretation is likely erroneous, similar discolorations still intrigue researchers today (see: <http://www.oldstoneage.com/abydos/asps-04.htm>). Seligman not only conducted, but also published, the first thorough investigations of Egyptian prehistory. In one of his contributions he reaches the conclusion that there is no correlation between archaeological industries from particular periods and Nile terraces, an insight well ahead of his time. Indeed, Sandforth and Arkell (1933) later struggled with this same question.

Most of the early debates, however, focused on a different problem, namely the establishment of the antiquity of the stone artifacts themselves. Similarity between European and Egyptian artifacts did not suffice, so finding artifacts in stratified context became increasingly important. As Milliken indicates, Egyptologists played a significant role in this debate, as they were involved in many excavations, some of which supplied good evidence for the antiquity of stone artifacts. Despite these, doubts about the antiquity of Egyptian artifacts persisted for a long time, possibly because they did not match well with the idea that humans originated in Europe. This inherent, albeit unspoken, bias has been part of Paleolithic research for a long time and some argue it still lingers today (see McBrearty and Brooks 2000). Unfortunately, the chapter on the

history of Paleolithic research in Egypt is not as complete as the one on Seligman. A lot of work after WWII is treated rather cursorily, perhaps understandable given the collections that form the core of the book.

The following two chapters focus on the state of archaeological research in Egypt today. The first uses prehistoric chronology and the second, geography, as an organizing framework. Milliken primarily uses articles published by Wendorf and colleagues, and those from the Belgian team led by Vermeersch and, more recently, Van Peer. She does not, however, try to provide a new synthesis, as did Van Peer (1998). Instead, Milliken presents a nice summary of existing work rather than developing a reinterpretation or new approach. Similarly, the following (fifth) chapter reflects the current state of affairs, with sections on the Nile Valley, the Western Desert, and the Eastern Desert. As Milliken points out, Paleolithic research coverage in Egypt is spotty at best, with little known particularly for Northern Egypt and the Sinai.

The last chapter of the first part, "a technological and typological glossary", is much appreciated, simply because archaeologists do not pay enough attention to the definition of terms. In reading this chapter, the value of such a list became clear, as one of the definitions was not at all what I expected. The definition of truncated-faceted pieces reads: "a thick flake of which the bulb has been removed by a ventral truncation" (Milliken 2003: 93). This contrasts sharply with the definition found in Debénath and Dibble (1994) who define these pieces as "flakes that exhibit an inverse truncation on one or several margins, which serves as a platform for the removal of one or more small flakes from the exterior surface". The definition as given in Milliken seems to fit what others typically refer to as Kombewa cores.

The second part of the book contains a detailed list and description of all the Egyptian Paleolithic artifacts in the Pitt Rivers Museum. Each collection is briefly introduced with information on the collectors and the location and circumstances of collection, when known. In addition to the brief description and dimensions of each artifact, there are numerous excellent illustrations. At a time when good illustrations are becoming increasingly scarce, it is refreshing to see their importance in this book.

One point of contention concerning the Pitt Rivers Museum Paleolithic collections is the degree of collection bias they may reflect. Milliken correctly points out that most of the collections are indeed highly biased samples. For Seligman's collections from Abydos and Thebes, however, she claims they were "neither selective nor biased" (Milliken 2003: 95). This I believe to be problematical. To make such a claim, there is a need for demonstration that it is correct, and the presence of a few broken pieces does not suffice. Comparing what I consider the most complete of the collections (the "hut circle") with other components of the Seligman collection it becomes clear that most of this collection is selective and thus biased. The percentage of tools, for example, from the "hut circle" is 2%, whereas tool frequency from the remainder of the Abydos collection is 43%! When contrasting the size of the material from the "hut circle" with materials collected in the Abydos area in 2002/2003 by the Abydos Survey for Paleolithic Sites (in which I participated), it is clear that sizes are very comparable. This indicates that the material from the "hut circle" comes close to, if not is, unbiased, while this cannot be said of the other collections described in the book.

A second point relates to the desirability of publishing information on every artifact from collections that are mostly over 100 years old. While it is fantastic to have a published record for the collections that a museum houses, there are alternatives to a publication in book form. One increasingly popular option is to create a CD to accompany the book; another would be online publication of the collections. Milliken's book does provide a link to the museum website which gives people the opportunity to scroll through and look up items in the

collection. Unfortunately, the data made available in the book is much more detailed than what is available online. Given the very limited archaeological value of the collections, the alternatives to full publication in print might have been better.

It is commendable to see archaeological collections published, although I think it is fair to say that the time during which these collections could have made an impact on Paleolithic research in general, or for Egypt in particular, is over. Rather, the value of the book lies in its contribution to the history of early prehistoric research in general, and Egypt in particular. Further, the summaries on the status of Paleolithic research in Egypt make the book a good starting point for the serious student interested in Paleolithic research in Egypt.

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