Neanderthals in the Levant:

Behavioral Organization and the Beginnings of Human Modernity

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The Levant has provided some of most intriguing and crucial data for understanding the cultural dynamics of the Middle Paleolithic in Eurasia. Historically, work has concentrated in the area of modern-day Israel, where some of the impressive, hominin-bearing cave sites—e.g., Tabun, Skhul, Qafzeh, Kebara, Hayonim, and Amud—were discovered alongside a number of important open-air occurrences—for example, Rosh Ein Mor, Quneitra, and Far'ah II. Additionally, some work was conducted in Lebanon and, as recently as the late 1960s, also at sites in Syria such as Douara Cave (Akazawa 1979, 1988, 1996; Nishiaki 1989). Given the physiogeographic diversity of the Levant, where ecological conditions change rapidly and dramatically over very short distances as one goes from west to east (and to a lesser degree also on a north-south gradient), this research clearly did not encompass the full picture of Middle Paleolithic adaptations and lifeways in the region. The intensive work on Middle Paleolithic sites, conducted throughout the last two decades on the high plateau east of the Jordan River, fills in some crucial gaps in our knowledge of the Levantine Middle Paleolithic. Several sites have been reported from the south part of the plateau—'Ain Difla, Tor Sabiha and Tor Faraj—and the northwest part of the Jordan Rift Valley—Ar Rasfa (Shea 1999). This edited volume is a detailed study of one such occupation, the rock shelter of Tor Faraj, and a welcome addition to the literature on Middle Paleolithic sites outside the traditional core area of prehistoric research.

The monograph is oriented towards identifying the organization of human behavior and elucidating its implications, its emphasis being on *spatial* patterns that reflect such organization. Out of ten chapters, nine deal with specific aspects of the site. These focus on regional geology and paleoenvironment and site stratigraphy. Henry takes the opportunity to rectify (pp. 60, 62) some inaccurate stratigraphic designations that occurred in earlier publications (Henry 1995a, 1995b; Henry et al. 1996, 2004). Three detailed chapters focus on lithic technology as seen from an attribute analysis augmented by refitting studies and a detailed study of small chips. In the absence of faunal remains from the shelter, phytolith studies provide the only means of gleaning the subsistence behavior of the site's Middle Paleolithic occupants, whereas detailed spatial analyses of lithics (including chips), phytolith type distributions, the (unreported) results of use wear studies, and chemical signatures are used to establish that spatial features at the site are overwhelmingly anthropogenic and reflect the behavior of the site's inhabitants. The various authors, most notably Hietala and Henry, capitalize on the fact that Tor Faraj is a site of low occupation intensity, which does not show the "smearing" of spatial features typical of high intensity redundant occupations. In fact, using exhaustive analyses of internal patterning within various categories of finds and features (though diagenetic processes, for example, were not considered), Hietala practically endorses a "Pompeii premise" for Tor Faraj. Arguably it is this uncommon combination of site characteristics that allows a horizontal (i.e., anthropological) analysis of spatial patterns of human behavior at the site. And within this anthropological approach, it is understandable and justified that the focus is on hearth-related features and (by extrapolation) behaviors.

The various analyses were conducted within a conceptual scheme of two occupation floors, defined by arbitrary excavation spits. The latter presumably correspond to the bedded ash lenses that were used (together with laminae of decomposed sandstone tablets and of carbonate precipitates) to identify the existence of bedding planes in the site's stratigraphic record (p. 57). Based on numerous lines of evidence, floors I and II (10 and 15 cm thick respectively)—separated by another 10 cm of less intensive find concentrations—represent three occupational episodes of short duration, and span a short time interval. Inter-floor comparisons of the occurrences, densities of finds, and the internal compositions of lithics and phytolith assemblages and of use wear patterns indicate that ways of organizing behavior in the site's space cross-cut occupational episodes. What the different episodes have in common is what Henry defines as "complex site structure," where diverse activities are patterned clearly in the confined habitation space. Based on comparisons with ethnographic case studies, Henry sees many similarities between these patterns and the spatial behaviors of modern hunter-gatherers, which in turn convince him that the Middle Paleolithic occupants of Tor Faraj organized their behavior along modern lines (p. 269).

While the interested reader will learn practically all that there is to know about the site of Tor Faraj, there is not much that this book can tell us about Neandertals, for the simple reason that no Neandertal (or other human) skeletal remains were found at the site. The volume's title requires some deliberation because it stems from a highly schematized, even rigid view of the Levantine Middle Paleolithic, elaborated on by Henry in the introductory chapter. According to this view, a lithic classification system based on the three Mousterian variants seen in the stratigraphy of Tabun Cave encompasses lithic variability throughout the Mousterian and is clearly patterned in time. Moreover, it is assumed that there are certain biocultural entities, so that cultural (in this case lithic) variants are associated with a specific hominin taxon—e.g., late "Tabun B-type" assemblages with Neandertals—apparently to such a degree that it is not necessary to find the skeletal remains—it is the lithics that tell us who the producers of the assemblages were (and see, for example, Foley and Lahr 2003; Wood 1997).

Initially the lithic assemblages of Tor Faraj were viewed as "a late representation of the Tabun D-type industry"(with which no hominin remains are associated). Revisions of the assemblages led to the recognition that these are "Tabun B-type" Mousterian assemblages (p. 61), hence the assumption that Neandertals were their authors. But the increasingly recognized lithic variability of Levantine Mousterian lithic assemblages (e.g., Goren-Inbar and Belfer-Cohen 1998; Hovers 1998; Meignen 1995) cuts across temporal boundaries assumed for the specific variants. Scholars who started out as believers in identifiable "Neandertal" as opposed to "modern humans" lithic signatures now accept that the classification of lithic assemblages according to a Tabun-based scheme is not clear-cut, and that particular characteristics of Levantine Mousterian lithics may not bear the chronological significance once associated with them (e.g., Shea 2004). A pertinent example is the reduction processes involved in manufacture of the target product "Tabun B-type" assemblages, namely, Levallois points. In Tor Faraj, refitting studies by Demidenko and Usik indicate that blades were largely by-products of the operational sequence leading to point production. But in the contemporaneous series of occupations in Kebara Cave relatively blade-rich and relatively point-rich assemblages were encountered in different stratigraphic units (XII-XI as opposed to X-IX; Meignen and Bar-Yosef 1991), suggesting that a different operational scheme played a role in lithic reduction processes resulting in the same end-products.

Whether site structure of the type described for Tor Faraj can be considered unequivocal evidence for modern behavior is clearly a question of opinion and worldview, and is an integral part of the larger theoretical and

analytical issues of defining and identifying modern behavior in the archaeological record (Henshilwood and Marean 2003; Wadley 2001). Regardless of one's views on this matter, Henry's edited volume is a valuable site report. The book presents and integrates the results of numerous analyses, some of which are not the staple of archaeological research on the Middle Paleolithic. Accompanying graphics are usually of high quality and are useful for illustrating the points underscored in the texts. Scholars interested in Levantine prehistory certainly should consult this book not only for its results, but also as a guide for implementing new analytical and methodological procedures in Middle Paleolithic research.

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