

Reconstructing Late Pleistocene Human Behavior in the Jordan Rift Valley: The Middle Paleolithic Stone Tool Assemblage from Ar Rasfa

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The Ar Rasfa site is in NW Jordan, and was excavated by John Shea and Patricia Crawford in 1997 and 1999. The collection was analyzed by Ahmad for his M.A. dissertation at Stony Brook University. The site is an “open air” site on elevated limestone bedrock overlooking the Lisan formation. The Lisan formation consists of Pleistocene lake deposits so the site might have been close to water at the time of the Middle Paleolithic occupation. Ahmad and Shea, however, do not mention the exact age of the Lisan formation sediments outcropping near the site. Four 1 x 1m test pits were dug down the slope of a small depression revealing a cemented conglomerate overlying limestone, which is in turn overlain by 2m of silty sand. This silty sand is pinkish grey in the upper levels and reddish brown in the lower levels. Artifacts were recovered throughout the profile but peaked in abundance at the base of the silty sand where two ash-like lenses also occurred. The area of excavation was very limited and no dating was possible. This book analyses the lithic assemblage which consists of around 1,800 pieces (289 cores, 1,427 debitage, and 95 retouched tools).

The depositional setting during the Middle Paleolithic seems to be quite different from today., although no model for the sediment deposition is offered. The conglomerate is of cobble and boulder size and the flint released from it was utilized for making the tools. The artifacts are found on the surface of this conglomerate and in the sandy silt above it. The conglomerate predates the artifacts. What period does it belong to? How did the almost 2m of sandy silt accumulate? The presence of ash-like lenses within it would indicate rapid rather than slow accumulation. The tools are weathered but not abraded. One refit was found in the collection which seems fairly good given the very small area of excavation.

The book is organized into five chapters. In the introduction, a very brief background to the Middle Paleolithic in the Levant is given with a table listing the sites in Jordan. The second chapter gives the background of the site, its setting, the excavation, and a very nice presentation of the methodology used in analyzing the artifacts. I particularly appreciated the good illustrations of the different types of platforms, distal and medio-lateral symmetry, flake dorsal surface morphology, and flake measurements which made the terminology used unambiguous to the reader. The third and fourth chapters present the lithic analysis (description followed by analysis). The final chapter compares

the assemblages with other Middle Paleolithic assemblages in the Levant and draws together the conclusions arrived at from the analysis.

Ahmad and Shea consider that the Ar Rasfa assemblage has closest similarities with the Middle Levantine Mousterian. It differs from Early Levantine Mousterian in the lack of any significant laminar component or “Upper Paleolithic” types like endscrapers, burins, and elongated convergent scrapers/points. It also lacks evidence for systematic Levallois point production which is a key feature of the Late Levantine Mousterian. Levallois cores are the most common core type in the Ar Rasfa assemblage, most of which feature bidirectional-opposed and radial centripetal surface preparation. Cores on flakes and choppers are also present. Scrapers are the most common retouched tool type and retouched Levallois points, backed knives, and awls are rare.

The conglomerate at the site provided abundant raw material for the Middle Pleistocene hominins. In fact, all the artifacts appear to be made on the locally available flint. All stages of tool manufacturing are present including core preparation, core exploitation, and core rejuvenation.

The Ar Rasfa site is in the Levant, a region with a rich and comparatively well studied Paleolithic record. It is also one of the most complex. The Levantine Mousterian spans a time of 245–45 kyr, and during this time both Neanderthals and modern humans occupied the region. One of the big surprises of absolute dating was that some modern humans predate the Neanderthals. The relationship of the human species to the lithic technology is extremely unclear, as the Middle Levantine Mousterian is associated with both modern humans (at Qafzeh and Skhul) and Neanderthals (at Tabun C1 and C2) (p. 72), making this particular phase in the Levantine sequence especially difficult to interpret in terms of hominin dispersals. Shea suggests that the “least problematic” explanation is that at this time both hominin groups lacked “modern behavior,” an idea discussed in more detail earlier (Shea 2006).

The Levantine evidence plays a large role in present discussions of human dispersals. However this region appears to be particularly complex, with clear evidence for expansion and contraction of biotic zones in response to Pleistocene climatic changes, and hominins appear to have been part of these biotic shifts. While the distinctiveness of Neanderthals from modern humans on a biological level is supported by genetic and fossil data, behavioral differences

are less well supported. The complexity, importance, and high quality and quantity of work in the Levant make it a key region for Paleolithic archaeologist to understand, while at the same time these very features make it somewhat baffling for the non-Levantine specialist.

This book is not highly ambitious. It does not attempt to deal with these larger issues, which Shea has discussed elsewhere. It is a study of a small assemblage from an interesting region of the world which makes it of interest beyond the local region. Its analysis is straightforward and I am grateful for the large number of artifact illustrations in addition to the analytical data. It fulfills its limited objectives admirably.

BAR publications have a number of advantages for the authors, such as rapid publication and decent circulation.

However, the prices are high. This <100 page book costs the equivalent of a week of Indian fieldwork. Online publication and open access is an obvious way forward and the Paleoanthropology Society is taking a lead in this direction. As an article in *PaleoAnthropology*, the society's electronic open access journal, perhaps even wider circulation could have been achieved.

REFERENCE

- Shea, J.J. 2006. The Middle Paleolithic of the Levant: Recursion and Convergence. In: Hovers E. and Kuhn, S.L. (eds.), *Transitions Before the Transition*. Springer, Netherlands, pp. 189–209.