

# More Than Meets The Eye. Studies on Upper Palaeolithic Diversity in the Near East

A. Nigel Goring-Morris and Anna Belfer-Cohen, Editors

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*More than Meets the Eye...* is a stimulating book that contains a number of very strong studies likely to be cited heavily in the years to come; its layout and well-edited text further combine to make it a pleasure to read. The wealth of analytical approaches included in the volume will undoubtedly prove fertile analytical breeding ground for any scholar interested in the issues raised in the book's various chapters, and I would highly recommend it as important reading to all researchers with an interest in Late Pleistocene prehistory as a whole.

The volume comprises the proceedings of a symposium held in 2000 at the 65th annual meeting of the Society for American Archaeology in Philadelphia. It consists of 23 chapters, including an introduction (with a series of regional maps) and an epilogue by the editors, as well as three commentaries by noted scholars of the Levantine Paleolithic (Copeland, Marks, Bar-Yosef). Also included is an appendix listing all currently available radiometric dates for Levantine Upper Paleolithic deposits, which is bound to be highly useful for any researcher interested in the topic. The remaining 18 contributions focus on the Upper Paleolithic archaeology of the region and are divided into five sections.

The first ("Environment and Resources") includes the three contributions of the volume that do not focus on chipped stone assemblages. The lines of evidence explored in those chapters include micromorphology (Goldberg), climatic reconstruction (Bar-Matthews and Ayalon) and faunal analysis (Rabinovich). Individually, these chapters are excellent overviews of their given field of inquiry but, more importantly, it is together that they highlight the wealth of evidence archaeologists currently working in this and other regions ought to be considering when conducting fieldwork and analysis. Most of the chapters in the volume that deal with lithics do not, for various reasons, include extensive discussions of such complementary lines of evidence; those that do, however, come across as some of the book's most convincing interpretive efforts (e.g., Olszewski).

The following section ("The Middle to Upper Palaeolithic Transition") is the first of four focusing mainly on lithics. In chapter 5, Chazan proposes a distinction between 'generative' and 'expressive' *chaînes opératoires*, describing them as those suites of actions that modify and express social structure, respectively. While interesting, his argument ultimately rests on the tacit assumption that the Aurignacian and the Ahmarian are well-defined "cultural" entities that can be diagnosed on the basis of their *chaînes opératoires*, which might be a risky supposition in light of the arguments presented by many of the volume's other contributors. Further, as Tostevin cogently argues in the subsequent chapter, many researchers have only too happily substituted the type fossils of decades past with *chaînes opératoires*, displaying a disregard for behavior in favor of reconstructing alleged "cultures" in the Paleolithic record. As an alternative, Tostevin proposes an interesting attribute-based methodology to highlight differences between lithic assemblages through time,

leading him to posit a Levantine origin for the earliest European Upper Paleolithic. But as Marks makes clear in his commentary, this methodology is not without its own problems, which perforce affect some of Tostevin's interpretations of the patterns he detects. The next chapter, by Sarel and Ronen, presents new technological data from the site of Raqefet in order to clarify variable lithic manifestations of the "Transition" in Israel. They conclude that there are different transitional "cultural entities" in the northern and southern parts of the country, but they do little to address the potential impact on their conclusions of the high degree of post-depositional damage and taphonomic disturbance evident in the Raqefet assemblages. Since these assemblages account for half of their sample of northern sites, this may somewhat hamper their conclusions. In chapter 8, Fox expands our understanding of the Middle-Upper Paleolithic interface by describing in detail the important transitional sequence from the Tor Sadaf rockshelter in Jordan, which he argues represents a gradual *in situ* developmental sequence from a presumed Middle Paleolithic base to the early Ahmarian, comparable to that documented at Boker Tachtit and Ksar Akil. The study of the Tor Sadaf assemblages includes a number of analytical levels, insuring that researchers will be able to profitably incorporate these data in future syntheses.

The next section ("The Early Upper Palaeolithic") comprises six chapters, all of which deal, directly or indirectly, with the definition of the Early Ahmarian and of the Levantine Aurignacian—i.e., the so-called "Two Tradition Model" which lies at the center of many of the papers of this book, even in later sections. Philips and Saca make a case for attempting to contextualize lithic variability, again through the use of the *chaîne opératoire* approach, especially in terms of how it relates to other behavioral dimensions such as settlement and subsistence systems. The *chaîne opératoire* reconstructions are described only in broad strokes, but their pattern search nonetheless identifies large-scale groupings of certain assemblages, which they attribute to both cultural and contextual factors. Next, Kuhn and colleagues present a summary of their findings at Üça ızlı Cave, Turkey, that integrates basic descriptions of lithic characteristics, faunal remains, evidence for personal ornaments and structured use of space. Their focus on the Ahmarian component of the site provides useful new information on this industry in the northernmost part of the Levant where, they stress, typical generalizations about the early Ahmarian further south do not appear to hold. This leads them to highlight the question of regional contrasts and variability within Levantine Upper Paleolithic industries as a promising avenue for future research. In the following chapter, Monigal uses refitting to very good effect in reconstructing the reduction strategies employed by the early Ahmarian occupants of the site of Boker A. This enables her to revisit and critically reevaluate accepted wisdoms about Ahmarian technology and to present an innovative model that suggests that blades, bladelets, flakes, and core tablets can be part of a single reduction sequence and can all be desired lithic end-products depending on the context. The next chapter, by Becker, focuses on the spatial patterning of lithic debris at the Abu Noshra sites, a problem which he approaches through the use of refitting, use-wear analysis and intrasite spatial analysis, calling this combination of perspectives the 'Meer approach.' This strategy enables him to suggest convincingly the contemporaneity of some of these occupations, as well as to demonstrate the absence of the spatial organization usually encountered at forager sites. In chapter 13, Coinman presents an in-depth analysis of the Ahmarian as documented in the Wadi al-Hasa, suggesting that most of the differences observed between such assemblages, at least in this area, appear to be the result of different site-use patterns as opposed to different facies or traditions within that technocomplex (or lineage, to use Marks' nomenclature). Kerry and Henry close the "Early Upper Paleolithic" section by presenting new data from the site of Tor Fawaz (Jordan), which they argue does not fit into either category of the "Two Tradition Model," even with a more representative sample of the lithic assemblage than was previously published. They incorporate this observation into a thoughtful discussion of how sample size and excavation strategies can lead to confusion when assigning assemblages to different "cultures."

The third section (“Flake-Based Industries”) comprises only two chapters, both of which are concerned with highlighting the defining technological traits of the Levantine Aurignacian. Bergman argues that the lax definitions used in past studies have hindered contemporary research on the Levantine Upper Paleolithic. To clarify the present muddle, he suggests that twisted debitage be provisionally considered a hallmark of the Levantine Aurignacian in order to direct future research on the topic. Williams’ contribution focuses on the Levantine Aurignacian in what is termed the “marginal” zone of the Levant. Importantly, Williams demonstrates how it is crucial that assemblages recovered some time ago be periodically restudied in order to objectively incorporate them into contemporary discussion of archaeological variability. He focuses on carinated pieces, which he characterizes as being mainly twisted bladelet cores, and presents an explanation for the conspicuous absence of bladelets in most of the target assemblages based on the sites’ ecological and geographical setting (e.g., distance to springs). The resulting model of behavioral variability emphasizes site function, and provides a set of potential test implications for future studies seeking to refine the definition of the Levantine Aurignacian and other flake-based Upper Paleolithic industries.

The last data-based section of the book (“The Late Upper Palaeolithic and the Transition to the Epipalaeolithic”) comprises three papers. In the first, Kaufman again deals largely with the Ahmarian/Levantine Aurignacian dichotomy, reiterating that the Aurignacian is a late, and apparently intrusive, phenomenon in the region. Kaufman combines indices of tool class richness and evenness with ratios of debitage to tools and of blanks to cores in order to characterize the Levantine Aurignacian as a mainly logistically organized “culture,” compared to the mainly residentially-mobile strategies practiced by the “Ahmarians.” This model is also bolstered by a discussion of raw material exploitation patterns, which show that differences between the two industries crosscut geographical considerations. The next chapter, by Nadel, is a detailed discussion of the lithic assemblages from the site of Ohalo II, Israel. It is aimed at illuminating the distinction between the site’s late Ahmarian and early Epipaleolithic components, reflected typologically by the presence of backed microliths in the latter. While his contribution does not resolve the issue, it does point to the importance of considering as wide a range of evidence—including organic remains, when available—when trying to reconstruct prehistoric lifeways and “cultures” or, in his words, partitioning the continuum of prehistoric behavior. The last analysis-based contribution of the volume is by Olszewski who presents a discussion of five sites from the Wadi al-Hasa that overlap chronologically but have been assigned differentially to the late Ahmarian or the early Epipaleolithic. By combining lithic data with geographic and, especially, ecological information, she proposes that the distinction between the two “cultures,” at least in that area, is likely due to seasonally distinct activities and occupations at the various sites. This suggests that the traditional nomenclature probably reflects two sides of the same coin as opposed to distinct Upper Paleolithic facies.

The last section of the volume opens with Copeland’s commentary on the papers it includes. She focuses mainly on issues of analytical terminology, while reiterating the need for better chronological and paleoenvironmental controls in contemporary and future Levantine Upper Paleolithic studies. Marks’ in-depth and sharply-worded commentary critically evaluates a number of the studies included in the volume (notably Tostevin’s). He provides explicit definitions for a number of industries, facies and lineages whose lack he argues has hampered the last 20 years of research in the region. He also makes a strong case for technological continuity between the Middle and Upper Paleolithic in the Levant and takes a number of colleagues to task for what he characterizes as their sheepish adherence to an ‘Out of Africa’ perspective. Bar-Yosef concludes the commentaries by reiterating his well-known stance on why the Upper Paleolithic, in the Levant and elsewhere, represents a true revolution whose ultimate roots probably lies somewhere in Africa.

Perhaps the one shortcoming of the volume, alluded to by both Marks and Copeland in their commentaries, is the continuing tendency of many, though by no means all, researchers to cling to labels defined in the first part of the last century. There still appears to be a widespread implicit acceptance that, by virtue of having been given a name, a thing like the 'Levantine Aurignacian' is inherently real as opposed to an analytical tool developed in the context of a very specific research problem (i.e., partitioning the variability discerned by the pioneers of the disciplines into discrete, more manageable parts). While there is no doubt that, much like rules, definitions of Paleolithic cultures are made to be broken, or at least 'played with' (to use Bar-Yosef's expression, as reported by Marks), this does not mean that labels must be preserved at all costs as the history of research of a given region progresses. That being said, many of the studies in the volume attempt to provide clear definitions of these "cultures," although it is interesting to note both where they intersect and diverge across researchers. Despite this quibble, the range of perspectives and interpretive standpoints manifest in the volume stand as a worthy tribute to the vitality of contemporary Levantine Upper Paleolithic studies, which in itself makes the volume a worthwhile read for prehistorians of all stripes.

Goring-Morris and Belfer-Cohen are to be congratulated for putting together a remarkable volume that combines such a staggering range of perspectives and, especially, for managing to integrate them into a coherent, highly readable and intellectually stimulating end-product. This is most evident in the approaches taken to analyze lithic assemblages, which range from typological to technological (in the Americanist sense), while passing through refitting, use-wear, spatial analysis, attribute analysis, typometry, and *chaîne opératoire* reconstruction. The editors have also done a wonderful job of including in the roster some of the biggest names in the field as well as less-established 'up-and-comers,' something which injects a dose of analytical vigor into many of the studies presented in the volume. By giving equal importance to previously unavailable information on key sites in the Levant (e.g., Üça ızlı, Tor Sadaf), to renewed studies of old sites (e.g., Boker A, the Abu Noshra sites) and to syntheses based on reviews of previously published data, Goring-Morris and Belfer-Cohen have assembled a diverse, thought-provoking, and extremely valuable compendium that is bound to become a key reference for prehistorians in the years to come.