

The Mediterranean from 50,000 to 25,000 BP: Turning Points and New Directions

Marta Camps and Carolyn Szmidt (eds.)

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Every so often an edited volume comes along that is a vital addition to one's library. In recent years, two such volumes spring to mind, both involving pan-continental discussions of the Middle and Upper Paleolithic: *The Early Upper Paleolithic Beyond Western Europe* (Brantingham et al. 2004) and *Transitions Before The Transition* (Hovers and Kuhn 2006). Following their high standard, *The Mediterranean from 50,000 to 25,000 BP: Turning Points and New Directions* will be required reading for any Late Pleistocene researcher due to the quality of its papers, its diversity of approaches, and the plethora of data. Marta Camps and Carolyn Szmidt are to be congratulated for assembling, editing, and contributing to a fine book. Such edited volumes always run the risk of uneven quality, but the papers in this one have benefited greatly from peer-review and are uniformly strong.

Roe (Foreword), Camps and Szmidt (Introduction), and Camps (Chapter 1) offer their personal interpretations of the rich research history of the Middle/Upper Paleolithic (MP/UP) Transition, and link it all to the genesis of this new volume. These papers are welcome and well-placed at the beginning of the volume as they bring the non-specialist reader up to date, while reminding the expert of major hypotheses, players, and references. Camps' paper is especially useful. Her account of MP/UP Transition research from the 1980s onward is digestible and lucid, and supports her call for researchers to address a number of methodological and terminological issues.

Brun-Ricalens, Bordes, and Eizenberg (Chapter 2) provide a comparison of bladelet technologies from Southern Europe (mostly Southern France and Northern Spain) and Southwestern Asia (mostly the Levantine corridor). They ambitiously seek an objective and neutral classificatory system that combines technological and typological attributes (no small endeavor!). While their innovative contribution is surely a progressive step, I found myself yearning for more details, attribute definitions, and numbers. For example, the authors (p. 21) state that "the boundary between small and long bladelets tends to occur between 25 and 30 mm in length." This suggests a subjective grouping of bladelets into small and long categories, rather than an objective definition of each size category established before analysis. Percentages of bladelet classes present in each geographic region would illustrate for the reader the asserted classificatory differences and similarities. Nevertheless, their quest for objectivity and a common language among researchers is surely the way forward, and should

be emulated. Their synthesis of bladelet terminology is particularly valuable (pp.16–18).

Close (Chapter 3) uses a thought-provoking "island" metaphor for describing the Northwest African Paleolithic between 50,000 and 25,000 years ago. Essentially, habitable areas possessing drinking water were few and far between the vast sands of the Sahara and the salt-water of the Mediterranean. This situation often isolated populations leading to extinctions or vast areas left uninhabited for long stretches of time. Close is also to be commended for confronting a number of "rumors" associated with the North African MP/UP archaeological record, and her assembly of Maghreb Aterian radiocarbon dates (Table 3.1) is very useful.

Like Close, Garcea (Chapter 4) presents a paper on Northwest Africa. The two papers go hand-in-hand, reinforcing the idea that climate, specifically aridity, severely limited prehistoric populations and influenced their behavioral adaptations. Among several interesting discussions, Garcea provides a concrete review of technological convergence and sea-faring (pp. 60–61) between Africa and Iberia, a valuable parallel to debates involving the Pleistocene colonization of the Americas. I was less convinced by her argument for indigenous development, rather than replacement, between the Aterian and Dabban. She may in the end be correct, but the evidence seems too scarce at this point to argue definitively one way or another. That said, I can certainly applaud the boldness of her innovative hypothesis and hope for a first test of it at the reopened Haua Fteah excavations.

Vermeersch (Chapter 5) presents the final chapter involving Africa, but focuses on Northeast Africa, predominantly Egypt. His contribution is a veritable encyclopedia of Egyptian lithic industries, described clearly and concisely. His choice to split his analysis into five geographic regions was probably the right one, as it permits bolder conclusions in regions where data are abundant, and tentative suggestions where data are scarce.

Belfer-Cohen and Goring Morris (Chapter 6) cover the target period from the perspective of the Levantine Corridor. They suggest that the transition, or using their terminology, "intermediate phase," between the late Middle Paleolithic and early Upper Paleolithic shows continuity in terms of the lithic assemblages, and their descriptions are convincing and to the point. While I sympathize with their frustrations over current methods that combine the *chaîne opératoire* with quantified scientific approaches, it may be premature to dismiss the endeavor out of hand. Agreed,

many attempts to combine them have fallen short thus far, but I tend to remain optimistic about quantifying the complex relationships between technology and behavior (e.g., Tostevin 2000), and am not ready give up the notion of a scientific archaeology.

Due to the paucity (proportionally to other regions) of Paleolithic research in Turkey, Otte and Yalçinkaya (Chapter 7) present data on the Turkish Lower, Middle, and Upper Paleolithic. However, their comparisons of Turkey with the Levant, Black Sea, Balkans, and Central Asia yield appealing perspectives on the origin and spread of the Aurignacian. As they note, “The great advantage of Turkey at this period [50,000 B.P. - 25,000 B.P.] is that it lacked other transitional cultures, such as the Ahmarian or the Sungirian. The Aurignacian progression is thus much clearer and more rapid” (pp. 112–113). This observation only makes the reader yearn for more research from this important country.

Papagianni (Chapter 8) focuses on southeastern Europe—Thrace, Greece, Croatia, Albania, and Macedonia—examining landscapes, sites, industries, and migration routes. I applaud her critique of the “coastal connection” between the Italian Uluzzian and the Greek site of Klisoura (pp. 130–131), as well as her questioning the status of certain industries as “transitional” (p. 128) when stratigraphic mixing may actually be influencing their techno-typological appearance. Overall, Papagianni weaves together data and interpretations well for a solid piece of research on southeastern Europe.

Due to limited reportage of Romanian discoveries in the Anglophone literature, I found Horvath’s synthesis of Early Upper Paleolithic research in Romania (Chapter 9) to be the most riveting contribution of the whole volume. Not only does she delve into the history of Romanian Paleolithic research, but she describes how and why the political climate affected past research agendas (for example, see her fascinating discussion of the Szeletian, p. 143). Her paper meticulously presents and critically analyzes the archaeological record, and having left no stone unturned, Horvath delivers an instant classic. It will surely be the basis of future foreign research in Romania, and an invaluable source for English-speakers regarding this increasingly important country. We can all look forward to seeing more of Horvath’s current research in northeastern Romania (p. 138).

Riel-Salvatore and Negrino’s paper (Chapter 12) raises intriguing new interpretations of what constitutes behavioral “modernity” by examining the raw material procurement patterns of the Italian Mousterian, Uluzzian, and Aurignacian. They are laudably critical in the selection of sites included in their survey. Because of this, they draw innovative and fresh conclusions—raw material procurement patterning is not a useful marker of behavioral modernity; and, the Uluzzian may have developed independently of the Aurignacian, whose spread may not have been a simple North-to-South march through Italy. Their paper, which focuses and depends exclusively on lithic raw material identification, would have benefitted from a discussion about the limitations of toolstone identification errors or an

additional table describing how raw materials were identified at each of the sites included in their analysis (visually, neutron-activation analysis, x-ray diffraction, etc.).

Szmidt (Chapter 13) questions *what* we know about the MP/UP Transition in Mediterranean France by assessing *how* we know it. Her extensive review of sites in the region demonstrates that while there seems to be a transition in the use of non-lithic raw material use between the Mousterian and Aurignacian, the extent of this transition is perhaps not as great as originally thought. Additionally, Szmidt shows that excavation methods and taphonomic biases are often unknown or unaccounted for in many assemblages. This leads to further doubt on whether the patterns researchers see in the archaeological record reflect cultural or behavioral reality.

The data-rich chapter by Arrizabalaga et al. (Chapter 14) systematically presents the preliminary results of a number of recent excavations in Cantabrian Iberia and the North Pyrenees. There are bountiful artifact illustrations and the photographs are excellent. By focusing primarily on recent excavations, they have ensured that their interpretations are not haunted by the doubts arising from earlier field methods. As more modern fieldwork is undertaken, we may look forward to seeing more regional syntheses like this one.

Zilhão (Chapter 15) makes a staunch defense of the Ebro Frontier model and places the burden on skeptics to falsify his claims. Perhaps the most striking aspect of Zilhão’s contribution is that he does the work of skeptics for them—he constructs a table (Table 15.1, p. 295) of potential findings that could challenge his model. He then reviews recent data, systematically addressing each challenge in his table. Like many of the other authors in the volume, Zilhão gives the (praiseworthy) impression of commitment to data, rather than theory—he seems willing to reformulate his ideas if the data demand it.

Three papers in the volume differ from the others in that they focus on one or two sites, rather than present a regional synthesis. Karavanic’s paper (Chapter 10) presents a detailed report on lithic assemblages from two lesser known sites (Mujina Pećina and Šandalja II) found on Croatia’s Adriatic Coast. The paper is well-placed, for if one reads the entire volume cover to cover, Karavanic’s report is a welcome change of pace. The site descriptions, artifact counts, and data tables will be useful for other researchers’ understanding and analysis of the region. Another focused paper is Blackwell et al.’s dating and paleoenvironmental analysis of the Slovenian site Divje Babe I (Chapter 11). After reassessing the site’s history and finds, including the famous “flute,” the authors present exhaustive ESR and sedimentological analyses that help contextualize the hominid occupations into a larger environmental perspective. Finally, Pinto-Llona et al. (Chapter 16) discuss preliminary results from excavations at Sopena Rock-Shelter in northern Spain. Very clean stone tool illustrations, artifact counts, and preliminary taxa identifications are concisely reported and help accentuate the importance of Sopena’s “long and probably intact sequence of Middle and Early

Upper Paleolithic deposits" (p. 320).

The last two papers in the volume focus upon the Aurignacian concept. Clark and Riel-Salvatore (Chapter 17) provide an inspired discussion of whether the Aurignacian is a unified whole. It is hard to disagree with their reasons for undertaking such an analysis—archaeologists create analytical units like any scientific discipline (including biologists, cf. p. 334). Thus, it is important to review whether or not those constructed units are (1) capable of answering the types of questions we wish to ask; and, (2) internally consistent. The authors go on to show that the frequency of Aurignacian typological diagnostics drastically varies across 52 levels (from 16 sites). While this is an important observation, it would be interesting to see their analysis coupled with site function (kill site, camp site, etc.), estimated site size, or the square-area of site excavation, all factors that strongly influence the frequency, or even presence, of particular artifacts.

Mellars' discussion (Chapter 18) of the so-called "Classic Aurignacian" versus the "Proto-Aurignacian" (Fumani) supports Clark and Riel-Salvatore's argument that the Aurignacian may not indeed be a unified whole. What these different facies mean, however, remains a mystery. Mellars' discussion of authorship, dispersal, chronology, and exchange supplies a number of testable hypotheses that only future fieldwork and innovative methods can evaluate.

Overall, a number of inter-related, themes jump to the fore. All authors in the volume appear to agree that the common language offered by a single objective classification system is vital for better understanding the MP/UP Transition around the Mediterranean. Because of this, there seems to be a conscious and overt awareness that a detailed understanding of different research histories/traditions, and their influence on current concepts, be required and explained. When researchers understand how history can

color their interpretations, they are better equipped to rigorously test their own assumptions. Most impressive about the volume is its lack of theoretical piousness and alpha-type personalities, and instead the collective attitude that it is more important to contribute than it is to be "right." Thanks to this, we can all look forward to collaborative advances in coming years.

A number of positive details make this volume especially worthwhile. First, the references for each paper can be found at the end of their respective chapters, rather than lumped together at the end of the book. Camps and Szmids' remarkable editing skills are to be commended—there are very few misspellings or grammatical errors considering the number of non-native English speakers who participated. Most of the figures are clear and intelligible and the tables are easy to understand.

One thing the volume lacks is an index. This deficiency may actually turn out to be a strength. "This is a book of contributions that need to be read carefully and in full, even in days where there seems so little time to read books" (Roe, p. ix). Denied the ability to quickly find the minutiae one is seeking may hopefully encourage researchers to digest the entire contents of the volume, cover to cover.

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