

Abstract ESHE

Title: Backed pieces and their significance in the Later Stone Age of the Horn of Africa.

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Abstract

Classic definitions for the Later Stone Age (LSA) in eastern Africa often include the presence of microlithic industries [1]. However, what can be considered “microlithic” is hotly debated [2]. If, particularly in eastern Africa, many researchers tend to use the definition of small backed pieces for microliths, there is no consensus for what ‘small’ means (varying from 25 to 30 or even 50mm in length). Backed pieces, considered without any indication of size, is a more inclusive category and corresponds to a type of retouch that can be objectively identified. The use of this broad category thus allows for more comprehensive diachronic comparisons of implements, regardless of their size. Backing is usually associated with a change in hafting solutions and the development of composite tools, which may be for a large part linked to projectile technologies. Although sporadically present at earlier periods, backing became a widespread technical process in the Late Pleistocene and Holocene, and this is why backed pieces are generally considered as a hallmark of the LSA.

However, the association of the LSA with backed pieces appear less clear in eastern Africa than in other regions. Backed pieces are present in assemblages with otherwise distinct Middle Stone Age characteristics and many assemblages attributed to the LSA (ca 50-2 ka) include a great diversity of backed pieces, along with other, more common types of tools. The homogeneity of the “backing phenomenon” in this region can thus be questioned: does it represent an innovation that subsequently spread? a series of independent innovations? expressions of functional or stylistic variability?

Here we present a review of the context in which these backed tools occur, with a focus on the Horn of Africa. We propose a comprehensive set of attributes and statistical methods to discriminate different groups within the backed tool population. Our classification system based on objective grounds allows us to get rid of equivocal terminologies and to make inter-site comparisons more operative in order to discuss some of the hypotheses for the variability of backed pieces in the Late Pleistocene and Holocene.

Acknowledgements: This research has received funding from the French National Research Agency (ANR) Project ‘Big Dry’ ID ANR-14-CE31-0023, from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie agreement no 655459 (grant to AL), from the Fyssen Foundation (grant to CM) and from the joint research project (PRC) CNRS-MOST (Israel).

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