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Original article

Garden of Eden or Desert Exile: The Mousterian of Hummal in context

*Jardin d'Eden ou exil dans le désert :
le Moustérien de Hummal dans son contexte*

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Abstract

Our view of MP cultural variability is blurred by site-specific problems as well as inadequate research concepts. The former are inherent in current fieldwork methodology and in the archaeological record itself. Excavation of Palaeolithic sites generally catches only parts of the entire archaeological record and thus leaves us with the sample size problem. Moreover, resolution of the archaeological record is often limited by the palimpsest problem which is especially given in spatially restricted sites (e.g. caves) coupled with a low sedimentation rate. Many research concepts not only neglect the resolution problem but also lack the consideration of scale when it comes to archaeological interpretation. Our aim is not to reinterpret the Levantine Middle Palaeolithic in the light of these challenges as this is outside the scope of this paper. Archaeological resolution and scale are nevertheless taken as guidelines for the integration of the Hummal Mousterian in a broader context. In doing so, we give a short review of current knowledge and show how a scale-sensitive approach can inform us about various aspects of the Levantine Middle Palaeolithic.

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Keywords: Levant; El Kowm; Hummal; Syria; Middle Palaeolithic; Mousterian; Cultural variability; Archaeological interpretation

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Résumé

Notre connaissance de la variabilité culturelle du Paléolithique moyen est brouillée par les problèmes spécifiques au gisement auxquels s'ajoutent des concepts de recherche inadaptés. Les premiers dépendent de la méthodologie actuelle utilisée sur le terrain et dans l'enregistrement des données archéologiques. En général, la fouille des sites paléolithiques ne permet de capter qu'une partie de l'ensemble des données archéologiques et nous laisse ainsi confrontés au problème de la taille de l'échantillon. En outre, la résolution de la documentation archéologique est souvent limitée par le problème de palimpseste qui est particulièrement important dans des gisements spatialement restreints (par exemple, les grottes) associés à un taux de sédimentation faible. Lorsqu'ils en viennent à l'interprétation, non seulement beaucoup de concepts scientifiques négligent le problème de la résolution, mais ils omettent également de prendre en compte l'échelle. Notre objectif n'est pas de réinterpréter ici le Paléolithique moyen du Levant à la lumière de ces défis, cela est en dehors de la portée de cet article. La résolution archéologique et l'échelle sont néanmoins considérées comme des lignes directrices pour l'intégration du Moustérien de Hummal dans un contexte plus large. Ce faisant, nous donnons un bref aperçu des connaissances actuelles et montrons comment une approche sensible à l'échelle peut nous renseigner sur divers aspects du Paléolithique moyen levantin.

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Mots-clés : Levant ; El Kowm ; Syrie ; Paléolithique moyen ; Moustérien ; Variabilité culturelle ; Interprétation archéologique

1. Introduction

With their deep sedimentary sequences, the El Kowm springs offer unique archives of Palaeolithic culture history as well as Pleistocene landscape evolution. Already a lot has been written about the Lower, Middle and Upper Palaeolithic sites of this region, however, the current volume proves that still much is to report. The more than four meters deep succession of Mousterian layers in the well of Hummal offers the rare opportunity to study technological change over a considerable period of time at one locality. It is possible to reconstruct a multitude of adaptive solutions as likely responses to changing environmental settings, subsistence requirements or social constraints. The challenge is now to differentiate between local and broader scale signals in the material record. In other words, the question is which cultural variants are of local significance in contrast to cultural variants which are the outcome of macro-evolutionary trends or signs of large-scale cultural systems affecting the entire Levant. In the present paper, the significance of the Mousterian of Hummal will be discussed in its local, regional and supraregional context.

Given the fact that the Hummal record is strongly biased by an underrepresentation of organic remains, this challenge is all the more difficult to accomplish. The preservation bias is the reason behind our strong focus on lithic technology in the discussion that follows. The idiosyncratic signature of the Hummal Mousterian has already been described including a first glimpse at a possible landscape approach for the entire El Kowm region (Hauck, 2011a, 2013). Recent advances in Palaeolithic research, including the discovery of new Middle Palaeolithic (MP) sites in the Levant, necessitates a calibration of former models and ideas about the Mousterian of Hummal in a micro- and macro-evolutionary perspective (Hauck, 2011b).

A look at the map in Fig. 1 shows that the MP record in the Levant is still largely dominated by cave and rock-shelter assemblages. This distribution pattern is certainly not a representative

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