



The beginning of the Upper Paleolithic in the Iranian Zagros. A taphonomic approach and techno-economic comparison of Early Baradostian assemblages from Warwasi and Yafteh (Iran)



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ABSTRACT

Southwest Asia is a key region in current debates surrounding the appearance of the first cultures attributed to anatomically modern humans, particularly the Aurignacian and preceding cultural units of the Iranian Zagros, Levant, and the Balkans (Baradostian, Ahmarien, Kozarnikien, etc.). The Zagros mountain range encompasses an immense territory that remains understudied with regard to the Upper Paleolithic as well as the first bladelet industries traditionally presumed to be the work of anatomically modern humans. Concerning the emergence of the Aurignacian, the sites of Warwasi rockshelter and Yafteh cave in the central Zagros are considered to show evidence of in situ evolution of the Upper Paleolithic from the local Mousterian. This hypothesis is tested by way of a taphonomic, techno-typological and economic approach applied to the Upper Paleolithic levels of Warwasi (spits LL–AA) and Yafteh (the series from the lower part of the sequence). A comparison of the techno-economic features of both assemblages demonstrates a conceptual bond with contemporaneous techno-complexes from Levant and Europe (Ahmarien, Protoaurignacian, etc.). The techno-typological Middle Paleolithic character of the Warwasi lithic assemblage permits a discussion of a possible in situ dependence/continuum from the Mousterian or perhaps particular activities linked to the type of the occupation of the site. However, bladelet technology cannot be considered as rooted in the Zagros Mousterian. Consequently the origin of the Aurignacian *sensu stricto* has to be reconsidered.

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Introduction

Europe and Western Asia witnessed significant cultural and biological change in the early phase of the Upper Paleolithic (UP) period, between 40 and 35 ky BP (thousand years before present). The final Neanderthal populations associated with the Mousterian became extinct with the arrival of anatomically modern human (AMH) populations from Africa via the Levant, according to the archaeological data (Goring-Morris and Belfer-Cohen, 2003; Mellars, 2006), or via a southern route through Arabia according to new genetic studies (Mélé et al., 2012). In Europe, the Aurignacian¹ is

associated with the full development of art objects, personal ornaments, and graphic representations, which are original expressions of the new AMH population and indicate an ability to store symbolic information outside of the human brain, a behavior associated with behavioral or cultural modernity (e.g., Klein, 2000; McBrearty and Brooks, 2000; d'Errico, 2003; Henshilwood and Marean, 2003). In Western Asia and also in the central Zagros, the UP is associated with the appearance of new projectile bladelet technology at Warwasi (Olszewski, 1993) and at Yafteh and also with the appearance of personal ornaments (Otte et al., 2007). The original name given to the UP of the Zagros, the 'Baradostian', is named after Mount Baradost (Iraq) where R. Solecki excavated Shanidar cave (Solecki, 1958). Later, Olszewski and Dibble (1994) renamed the Baradostian assemblages in the Zagros as Aurignacian based on a typological comparison between European and Levantine Aurignacian assemblages. Based on the studies of Olszewski and Otte, the central hypothesis for the origin of the Baradostian is that it emerged from the local Middle Paleolithic (MP) (Olszewski and Dibble, 1994; Otte and Kozłowski, 2004). The sequence from Warwasi, a rare case where a Mousterian is succeeded by rich Baradostian levels, is the primary reference for this hypothesis (Olszewski, 1999).

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¹ Paleolithic culture or tradition from the beginning of the Upper Paleolithic first discovered and defined in Southwest Europe and related to the arrival and development of anatomically modern humans in Europe. The earliest chronological phases of the Aurignacian in Southwest Europe, the Protoaurignacian and Early Aurignacian, are characterized by different stone technologies (rectangular versus curved bladelets) produced according to distinct chaîne opératoire along with different bone industries. They have different techno-typological definitions and chronology (e.g., Bon, 2002; Teyssandier et al., 2010). The Aurignacian phenomenon is no longer considered as a homogeneous culture across Europe.

The importance of the Zagros for debates concerning the emergence of the UP and cultural modernity is thus based on the following:

- a) It is where Africa meets Eurasia and is one of the probable sources for the colonization of Eurasia by AMH (Fig. 1). The Zagros has been considered as a hub for the formation of new technologies that continually functioned as an ethnic ‘reservoir’ (Otte and Kozłowski, 2007).
- b) One of the principle lines of support for the replacement model is anchored in the Zagros, this region having been put forward as the origin of the Aurignacian. This has been the case ever since the first research was undertaken in the region (Garrod, 1937).
- c) This interpretation has been refuted (Garrod, 1953; Smith, 1986) or reaffirmed (Olszewski and Dibble, 1994, 2006; Olszewski, 1999, 2001; Kozłowski and Otte, 2000; Otte and Kozłowski, 2004) on numerous occasions.
- d) Finally, the possibility of mechanical mixing of the Warwasi sequence rather than secure stratification (Braidwood et al., 1961), given the lack of taphonomic studies (Soriano, 2007), has been well noted by Otte and Kozłowski (2007). However, these authors note that a mixing of Mousterian and Early Baradostian levels will be difficult to explain by sloped layers and bioturbation because of the thickness of these ‘transitional’ Baradostian levels of between 1.5 and 1.8 m (Otte and Kozłowski, 2007).

The main purpose of this paper is to describe the archeological context and to characterize the lithic collections from the earliest Upper Paleolithic assemblages from Warwasi and Yafteh. What are the archeological features which permit us to discuss the appearance of behavioral modernity in the central Zagros and when did these occur? How is the regional diversity of the Early Baradostian bladelet tradition expressed? Is there in situ evolution from the Zagros Mousterian? Finally, could the central Zagros be the origin of the Aurignacian? Inter-regional comparisons allow us to discuss the spread or influence of the Baradostian tradition toward the north in the Caucasus.

History of research

D. Garrod conducted the first Paleolithic research in the Middle East (Iranian Kurdistan and coastal Levant) during the 1920s. Garrod’s investigations led her to comment on the origin and in situ development of the Aurignacian with diffusion from east to west (Garrod, 1930, 1937). After excavating the Levantine sites of Ksar ‘Aqil and El-Wad, Garrod modified her position on the origin of the Aurignacian. She discussed the latest appearance of the Aurignacian in the Levant and a possible European origin of this culture with diffusion from west to east (Garrod, 1953). Garrod’s work in Iraqi Kurdistan was continued in the 1950s by Ralph and Rose Solecki with the excavation of Shanidar Cave (Solecki, 1955, 1998). Neanderthal remains discovered there were associated with Mousterian industries thought to date to ca. 44 ky ¹⁴C BP (Solecki and Solecki, 1993). The Baradostian, dated to ca. 34 ky ¹⁴C BP in

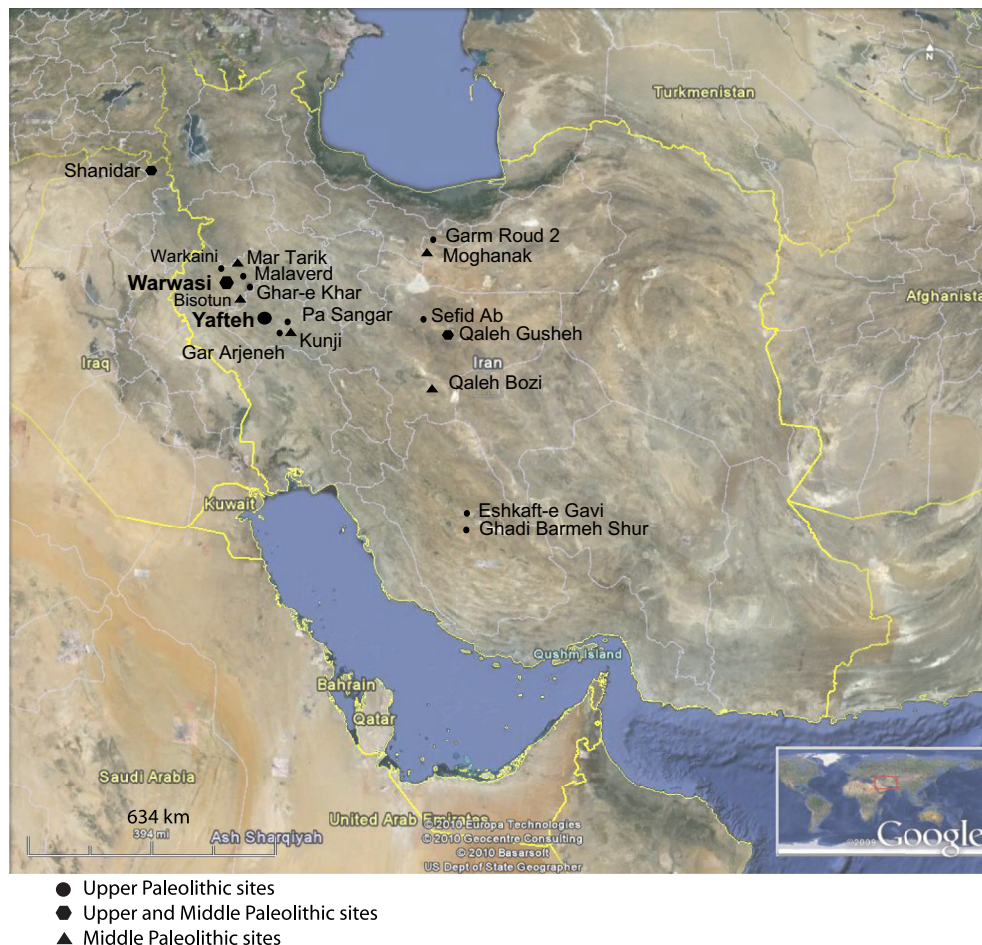


Figure 1. Geographical position of the main Baradostian and Mousterian sites in Iranian Zagros.

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