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The Mousterian with bifacial retouch in Europe: The fundamental historical error

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ABSTRACT

The Central and Eastern Paleolithic often contains artifacts with flat retouch in the lithic assemblages that are very different from that observed in Western Europe. These traditions persist throughout the entire Middle Paleolithic and are the precursor to the Early Upper Paleolithic, typically European.

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1. Introduction

The historical error in interpreting the Mousterian with bifacial retouch in Europe is due to the ignorance of the German literature by French researchers between the two wars. The French interpretation was based on the excavations at the site of La Micoque (Dordogne) where a collapsed rock shelter trapped an enormous mass of éboulis. Within these deposits are found archaic industries (Tayacian) with thick flakes, clearly destined to process wood (Oakley et al., 1977). Archaeologists expected to find the Acheulean in this region of the world, but it turned out to be a Middle Paleolithic industry unique to Central Europe (Keilmessergruppe) which also has bifacial pieces but produced in a mode entirely different from the Acheulean. These tools include knives, points, sidescrapers and asymmetric foliate pieces, all with flat retouch covering the surfaces but with no underlying conception of shaping a block of raw material as were the true Acheulean bifaces (Fig. 1). The bifacial knapping in the German Mousterian was, however, unknown in the scientific community of French prehistorians.

Unfortunately, the illusory Acheulean interpretation, called the “Micoquian”, was preserved as such and was used to designate real Acheulean assemblages, where the bifaces had a pointed

extremity, a trait also found on the foliate points in Central Europe during the Middle Paleolithic! The most obvious example was provided by the Thames bifaces, where the most typical Acheulean had pointed tools that resulted in their inclusion in the artificial category of Micoquian (Bosinski, 1967). Each remaining isolated in their own part of Europe, the monumental error persisted and, a very early Acheulean with pointed bifaces in the west was confounded with a late Middle Paleolithic east of the Rhine, also called “Micoquian”.

This confusion was maintained in the study of the Middle Paleolithic (Fig. 2), where bifaces of the “MTA” were systematically confounded with the keilmesser in the true Micoquian, that is, the Middle Paleolithic in Germany. The first were oval and flat, the second have an asymmetric contour (these are literally “knives”) and in particular, their section has a back, one edge thicker than the other, which was never observed in the western “MTA”.

Conversely, the foliate pieces do not have a refined symmetry in the MTA. These are massive pieces shaped by hard percussion and evoke rough performs rather than finely achieved tools (Fig. 3). However, identical forms are found in the northern regions, in the Rhine and Meuse Basins, and are considered characteristic cultural traits. Belgium, and more rarely France, experiences episodic migrations during which originally distinct populations met. These bifacial foliate pieces are evidence of this, with a highly stylistic, and thus traditional, component.

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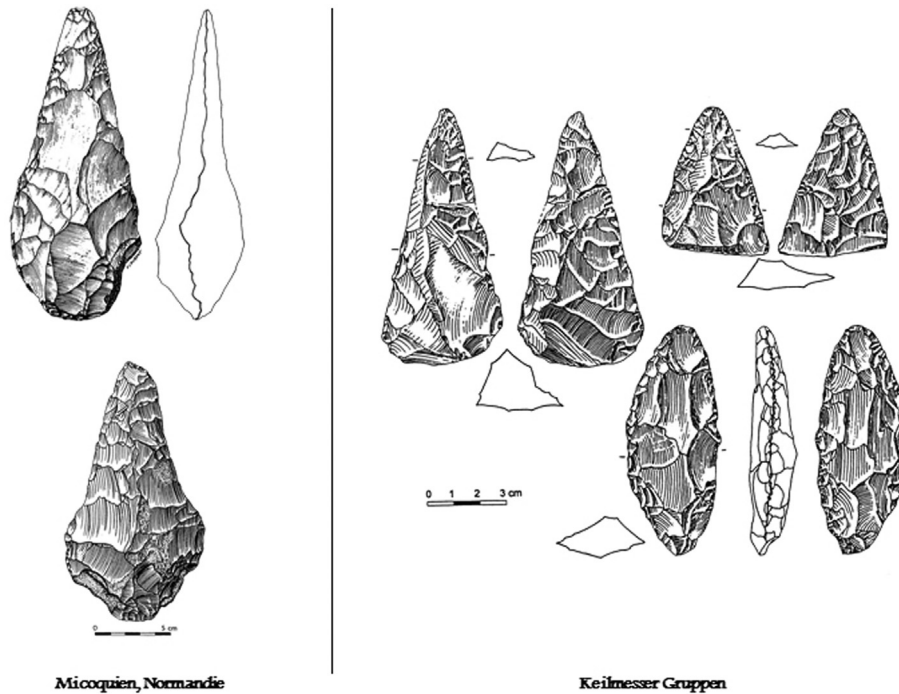


Fig. 1. The fundamental confusion is made between the Acheulean with pointed bifaces (left) and foliate points in the German Mousterian (right): all were designated “Micoquian”.

2. Central Europe

In general, the pieces found in Central Europe are made with an asymmetric contour and have a working edge opposite a massive

backed edge. This morphology is similar to “knives” in the technical sense of the term. This function was accentuated by the frequent sharpening episodes on the working edge, especially by a long, flat and beveled removal that crosses the entire edge of the piece

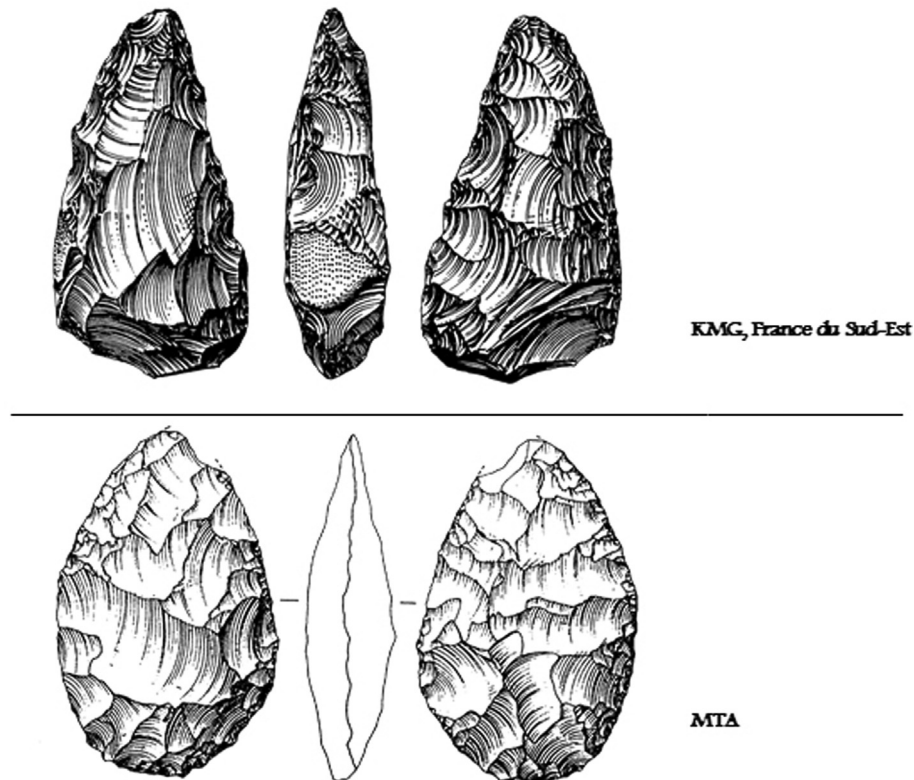


Fig. 2. Distinction to be made in the Mousterian: the eastern “keilmessergruppe” (KMG) (knives with bifacial retouch) and the western MTA, contemporaneous but technological distinct.

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