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Leave at the height of the party: A critical review of the Middle Paleolithic in Western Central Europe from its beginnings to its rapid decline

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ABSTRACT

The German Middle Paleolithic is marked by two stages with abundant archaeological sites: The Eemian Interglacial (MIS 5e) and the Weichselian Interpleniglacial (MIS 3). On the other hand, several stages were seemingly void of any human population (the second half of MIS 6 and MIS 4) and two long periods (MIS 8-6 and MIS 5d-5a) delivered very few archaeological sites, so far. The majority of all assemblages seem to belong to the latest part of the Middle Paleolithic, during the first half of MIS 3. Concerning this period, the layer G stratigraphic complex ("G-Komplex") of Sesselfelsgrotte yielded the longest cultural sequence of late Middle Paleolithic unifacial-plus-bifacial industries (Keilmessergruppen, Micoquian in the sense of a "Mousterian with a Micoquian option", MMO) in Central Europe. Information from this sequence permitted a reconsideration of the internal structure and the dating of the MMO. Evidence is presented for an earlier MMO stage with almost no Levallois technology (MMO-A) and a later stage (MMO-B) with Levallois technology, both occurring at the very end of the European Middle Paleolithic, between 60,000 and 43,000 (cal.) B.P. The vast majority of all Middle Paleolithic sites in Germany belong to the MMO-B which was, in Southern Germany, rapidly followed by the Upper Paleolithic Aurignacian from 42 ka (cal.) B.P. onwards without any Proto-Aurignacian interlude.

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1. Introduction

For a long time, the Central European Middle Paleolithic appeared as a confused period in the history of mankind which was difficult to split up into temporal and regional cultural units. In the middle of the 20th century, three different cultural units had been identified, the Mousterian, the Levalloisian and the Micoquian, but chronological separation of these units remained impossible (Zotz, 1951, 277).

In his attempt to separate chronological units during the 1950s, Müller-Beck underlined the effects of dramatic environmental changes (Müller-Beck, 1956) which, according to him, must have caused gaps in human occupation and resulted in discontinuity of the cultural record. In his analysis of the southern German Middle Paleolithic assemblages, he applied a standardized typological system (including tools and blanks) resulting into a descriptive overview and a chronological scheme with five distinct "occupations". These were to be understood as separate time windows allowing for human occupation with long gaps in between (Table 1).

The next decade saw an extension of the typological approach including all Middle Paleolithic assemblages of Germany (Bosinski, 1967). In his dissertation, Bosinski compiled a type list which he subsequently applied to each assemblage resulting into four *Formengruppen* (morphological groupings): *Jungacheuléen, Micoquien, Altmühlgruppe,* "*Moustérien*" (in quotation marks because the term was used in the sense of a more strictly defined variant of the Middle Paleolithic as set up by Bosinski, 1967, 64). The extensive catalogue section with ample illustrations made this work the broadest overview whenever information about the Middle Paleolithic typological variability is needed. On the other hand, the notion turned out as too optimistic that the *Formengruppen* would be units in time and space defined by non-functional differences (Bosinski, 1967, 84) – of the same "cultural" nature as the *Leitformen* (indicative types) used by Oscar Montelius to set up his Bronze Age periods.

Consequently, much of the technical and typological characteristics of the assemblages available have since been confirmed, but their attribution to spatial-temporal units had

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Table 1
Chronological overview of the German Middle Paleolithic. Stratified assemblages and important fossil-bearing sites (in capitals).

Time Scale	Glacial/Interglacial Interstadial MIS	Archaeological Sites & Natural Hazards	Archaeological Periods
10.000	Holocene		
18.000	Late Glacial		Late Upper Paleolithic
	2nd Glacial Maximum MIS 2		void of humans
25.000 28.000	Denekamp Hengelo		Early to Middle Upper Paleolithic
	Interpleniglacial MIS 3	*38.000 Campanian Ignimbrite eruption*	
	Moershoofd Glinde Oerel	NEANDERTHAL, LEBENSTEDT Lichtenberg, Buhlen, Bockstein — **SESSELFELS-GROTTE, G-layers** MMO-B MMO-A	Late Middle Paleolithic
50.000 60.000			
70.000	1st Glacial Maximum MIS 4	*71.000 Toba volcanic eruption*	void of humans
	Odderrade		
	Early Weichselian Glacial — Amersfoort Brørup MIS 5a MIS 5c	**Sesselfels-Grotte, lower layers**	Early Weichselian Middle Paleolithic
100.000		Tönchesberg 2B, Wallertheim	
115.000	Eem Interglacial MIS 5e	Lehringen, Gröbern Neumark-Nord, Taubach, Weimar, HUNAS	Eemian Middle Paleolithic
130.000			
	Warthe Drenthe	*Maximum extension of Scandinavian Ice Sheet*	void of humans
150.000	Saale Glacial MIS 6	Ariendorf 2 Tönchesberg 2A Markkleeberg? — Schweinskopf WANNEN	
192.000		*190.000 Jamaica Event*	
200.000	Schöningen-Wacken-Dömnitz-Interglacial MIS 7	Rheindahlen B1	Early Middle Paleolithic
		Rheindahlen B3 *220.000 Wehr volcanic eruption*	
240.000			
250.000	Fuhne Glacial MIS 8	Ariendorf 1	void of humans?
300.000	Holstein Interglacial MIS 9	Schöningen 12, BILZINGSLEBEN, Kartstein, Cannstatt, STEINHEIM	Lower Paleolithic

seemingly been premature in many cases. The German *Jungacheuléen* has since turned out as containing both MIS 6 or MIS 8 (Markkleeberg: Schäfer et al., 2003) along with MIS 3 assemblages (Lebenstedt: Pastoors, 2001), the German "*Moustérien*" occurs in both MIS 8/7 (Ariendorf: Turner, 1997; Rheindahlen: Schirmer, 2002) and MIS 3 (Kartstein: Bosinski and Richter, 1997; Balve IV: Jöris, 1992), and at Kartstein III and Balve IV the "*Moustérien*" occurrences combined with Micoquian/*Keilmessergruppen* and Altmuehlian attributes (see Richter, 1997). New excavations and especially radiometric dating of ice advances, volcanic events, soil formation and loess accumulation phases, along with the improvement of the radiocarbon record led to independent geo-scientific dating of many archeological assemblages. These dates have since contradicted many temporal attributions based alone on the hypothetic rule of "similarity equaling contemporaneity".

Moreover, typological and technological analysis have since been refined by the introduction of statistically supported multi-attribute surveys of the central European Middle Paleolithic (Schäfer, 1993) and by the *chaine opératoire* approach (Bourgignon, 1992; Richter, 1997; Jöris, 2001; Pastoors, 2001). All these approaches led to better understanding the importance of functional variability and of production and reduction sequences, all influencing the present occurrence of a given assemblage. At the present moment of research, formal metamorphosis of artifacts (Fig. 5) virtually appears as the principal idea of the Neanderthal's technological paradigms compared to more stable tool concepts among Upper Paleolithic humans.

Recent excavations have underlined such intra-site variation thus provoking the general impression that previous research has dramatically underestimated small-scale complexity (annual cycles, mobility cycles, functional cycles, intra-group, intra-site, and even intra-tool-class variation) and over-interpreted large-scale variation: the notion turned out to be wrong that all of the observed variations would be due to distinctiveness in time and space (Richter, 2014).

The vast majority of Middle Paleolithic finds from Germany come from surface collections, and stratigraphical contexts are

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