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# Levallois points and triangular flakes during the Middle Palaeolithic in northwestern Europe: Considerations on the status of these pieces in the Neanderthal hunting toolkit in northern France

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## ABSTRACT

Over the past twenty years, during the course of programmed and particularly rescue archaeological operations, prehistorians in northern France have identified numerous sites attributed to the Middle Palaeolithic. Over twenty of these have been excavated and are part of one of the most reliable chronostratigraphic frameworks known in Western Europe. Northern France thus acts as a sort of test laboratory where the fusion of abundant archaeological and palaeoenvironmental data can now culminate in a general synthesis. The point is omnipresent in small numbers in these lithic assemblages, and is a universal element of the Neanderthal toolkit. Levallois points are often associated with triangular flake production. In this article we use various lithic assemblages come from 26 excavations represented 35 human occupation levels located in a geographic area covering the northeast quarter of France, from Normandy to the Flemish plains. Levallois points and triangular flakes are compared according to different disciplines: technology and use wear analysis. Chronology and environmental reconstruction allowed a better understanding of the Neanderthal subsistence behaviour. This article aims to provide new and original insights into point and triangular flake production, their functions and their mobility during the Middle Palaeolithic.

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## 1. Introduction

Today, in everyday language, a point is defined as the sharp and pointed end of an object. In daily life, the conception and use of this type of object has now become banal (the knife, for example), but the situation was undoubtedly very different for Middle Palaeolithic human groups. During that time, Neanderthals produced flakes, blades, points and at times bifaces, following different concepts and operative schemas. Points were produced according to different methods, resulting in the production of objects with very different shapes, dimensions and angles.

Earlier research carried out in northern France to Middle Palaeolithic focused mainly on the original character of this geographic area. It is common that in lithic assemblages, production of Levallois flakes, blades and point is attested. Thus,

knowledge about the different techniques of knapping identified in northern France was largely developed in the last twenty years. The research of A. Tuffreau and S. Révillion at the excavation of Seclin identified and characterized the Laminar knapping (Tuffreau and Révillion, 1984; Révillion, 1994; Révillion and Tuffreau, 1994; Locht *dir.*, 2002; Locht *et al.*, 2010).

Nevertheless, despite the large number of occupation levels uncovered for Middle Palaeolithic, studies of point production remain rare and poorly documented. The point was considered for a long time as an anecdotal element of the Neanderthal toolkit in Europe, but recent studies show that this object had special status among these populations (Knecht, 1997; Soressi and Locht, 2010; Goval, 2012; Lazuen, 2012). Numerous studies, most of which were conducted in the Near East and in Africa, demonstrate the use of points and triangular flakes as projectile points (Shea, 1988, 2003, 2006; Plisson and Beyries, 1998; Villa and Lenoir, 2006; Wilkins *et al.*, 2012), but in Europe, points and triangular flakes have been poorly studied. It is now widely acknowledged that Neanderthals were capable of hunting and consuming large

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herbivores. Although we know which species were hunted by these groups, the methods and tools used to hunt them are still often unidentified. It is difficult to accurately determine which tools were part of the hunting equipment, but it appears certain that the flint point was one of these components, as shown by studies confirming the hafting of these tools and the presence of impact marks (Boëda et al., 1996; Plisson and Beyries, 1998; Bonilauri, 2010). Conversely, other use-wear studies show that the point was handheld, like a knife, and that the sharp end was used as a tip (Beyries in Tuffreau, 1993; Moncel et al., 2009; Coudenneau, 2013). The status of the point during the Middle Palaeolithic remains enigmatic, as regards both its role and function, as it is produced in variable quantities and in different ways at the various sites.

If points are produced by prehistoric in the Middle Palaeolithic, we can assume that they had a special function in lithic

assemblages. Compared to other products, the first characteristic of this object is to have an apex. It is therefore essential to identify within lithic assemblages, objects whose production objective is to obtain a point and those obtained by flake production but have an apex. In this article, the latter are referred to as triangular flakes.

This article focuses on the point and triangular flakes as an object in the toolkit, but also on their production, role, mobility and use of these tools, or in other terms, its status. It aims to gain a better understanding of the Neanderthal hunting toolkit but also to enhance our knowledge of the function of Levallois points and triangular flakes during the Middle Palaeolithic in Europe. The question of the use of these objects as hunting tools needs to be addressed for the whole of the European continent.

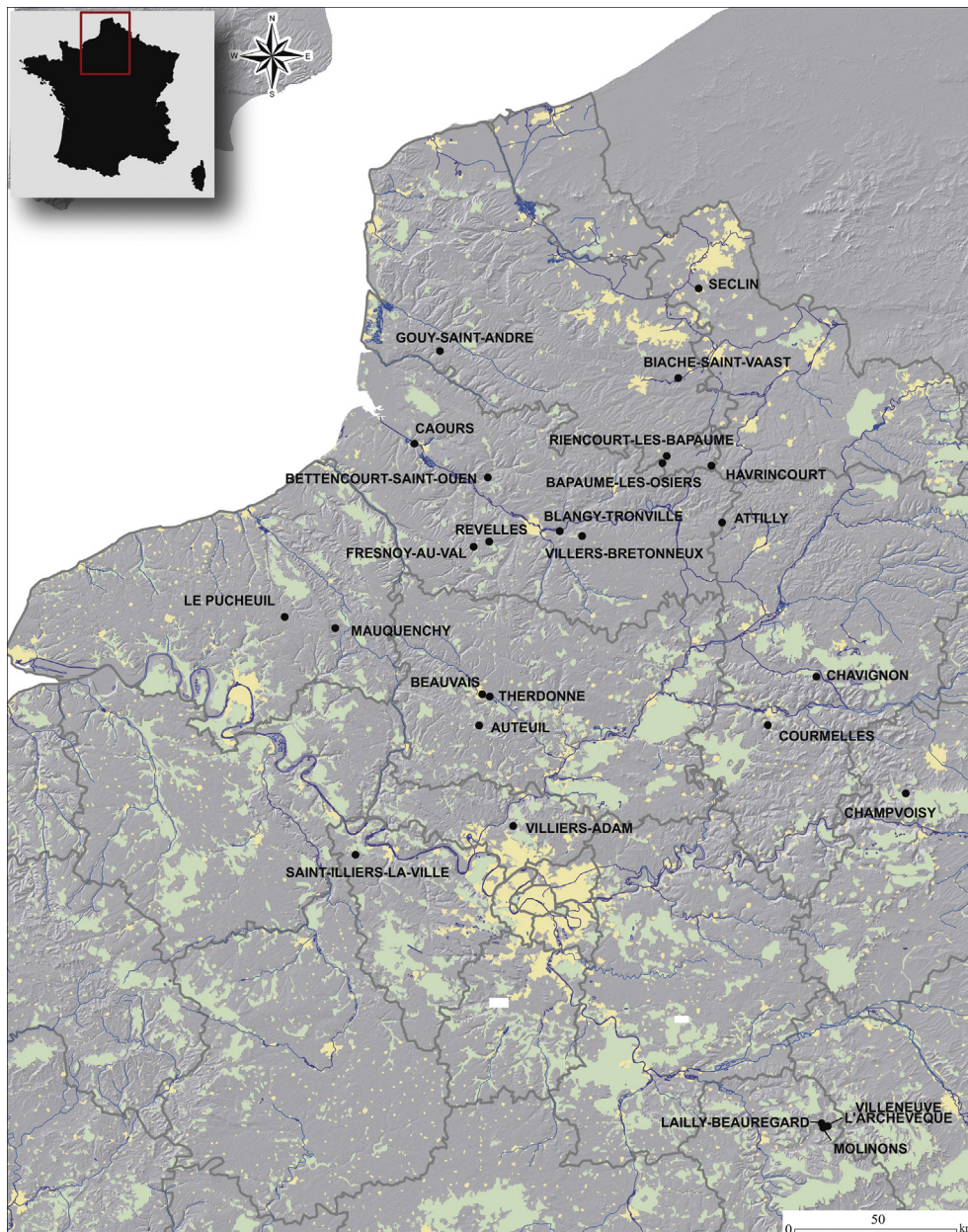


Fig. 1. Location of all the sites from MIS 7 to 3 in northern France with Levallois points and triangular flakes (one site may include several occupations levels).

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