



Original article

Diversity and multiplicity in the Asian Acheulian

Diversité et multiplicité de l'Acheuléen asiatique

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Abstract

The emergence of the Acheulian Techno-Complex in Asia appears to have occurred quasi-concurrently in the Levant, South Asia, East and South Africa. Throughout many parts of the huge geographical expanse of Asia, as elsewhere, this genesis was followed by the rapid diffusion of Acheulian techno-behaviors. This phenomenon of cultural radiation is attested in the archeological record throughout the Old World by an increased number of occurrences documenting growing demographic trends of Acheulian peoples, into the latter phases of the Middle Pleistocene. The “Homogeneity to Multiplicity Model” (HMM) is used here to provide a window for understanding the mechanisms behind the evolutionary changes observed throughout the very long duration and extensive geographical context of the Asian Acheulian. Since the beginning of the 19th century, Asia has continuously provided archeological evidence that is vital to our understanding of the “Acheulian revolution” and the plausible links it may have had with the appearance and evolution of *Homo erectus s. l.* The emphasis traditionally put on handaxes as hallmarks of Acheulian culture has falsely led many archeologists to propose models of cultural diffusion that have masked the true nature of the Acheulian as a worldwide phenomenon in which Asia has always played a key role.

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Keywords: Acheulian; Multiplicity; Stone tools; Asia; Technology; Typology

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Résumé

L'émergence du techno-complexe acheuléen en Asie semble s'être produite presque simultanément dans le Levant, en Asie du Sud, en Afrique de l'Est et en Afrique du Sud. À travers de nombreuses régions de l'immense étendue géographique de l'Asie, comme ailleurs, cette genèse a été suivie par la diffusion rapide des techno-comportements acheuléens. Ce phénomène de radiation culturelle est attesté dans les archives archéologiques de l'Ancien Monde par un nombre croissant d'occurrences documentant les tendances démographiques croissantes des peuples acheuléens, dans les dernières phases du pléistocène moyen. Le modèle « homogénéité à multiplicité » (HMM) est utilisé ici comme une fenêtre à travers de laquelle nous tentons de comprendre les mécanismes qui sous-tendent les changements évolutifs observés tout au long de la très longue durée et du vaste contexte géographique de l'acheuléen asiatique. Depuis le début du XIX^e siècle, l'Asie n'a cessé de fournir des preuves archéologiques qui sont essentielles à notre compréhension de la « révolution acheuléenne » et des liens plausibles qu'elle a pu avoir avec l'apparition et l'évolution des *Homo erectus s. l.* L'accent mis traditionnellement sur les bifaces comme marqueurs de la culture acheuléenne a faussement conduit de nombreux archéologues à proposer des modèles de diffusion culturelle qui ont masqué la véritable nature de l'Acheuléen, en tant que phénomène mondial, dans lequel l'Asie a toujours joué un rôle-clé.

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Mots clés : Acheuléen ; Multiplicité ; Industrie lithique ; Asie ; Technologie ; Typologie

1. Introduction

This paper investigates the emergence and evolution of the Asian Acheulian, highlighting structural relationships in the nature of the material culture of *Homo erectus sensu lato* throughout this vast territorial expanse. We develop hypothesis based mainly on data from the now abundantly published records of Acheulian sites in East, Southeast and South Asia, focusing on China, Korea, Indonesia and India. This geographical area is delimited mainly by oceanic margins and presents wide range of climates and landscapes that have evolved through time in pace with the cyclical climatic changes of the Quaternary. We also consider data for the Acheulian of Western Asia, a sub-region whose boundaries tend to fluctuate with the vicissitudes of historical and political events. Its geographical situation, however, at a crossroads between Africa, Asia and Europe, make it an obvious keystone in the search for answers to questions about early human migrations and the diffusion of culture over time and space. The topic covered here therefore pertains to an immense geographical area with hugely divergent paleoecological settings and a very long timeframe of cultural manifestation, lasting nearly 2 million years. Overall, Asia represents an extremely consequential source of information about ancient human culture that bears witness, from the late Lower Pleistocene, to the first major cultural turnover: the Oldowan-Acheulian transition. Ever-increasing archeological evidence from the different lands of the Asian complex allows us to follow the radiation of the consolidated Acheulian cultural complex into the Upper Pleistocene.

Asia comprises a number of countries whose explorations of Early Paleolithic archeology are still in their infancy and others whose political situation has or does not permit the undertaking – or continuation of – systematic archeological investigations. In contrast to Europe, where the Acheulian was defined for the first time towards the end of the 19th c. (De Mortillet, 1872), its

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