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Quaternary International

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/quaint

The central Levantine corridor: The Paleolithic of Lebanon

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 25 July 2016

Received in revised form

6 June 2017

Accepted 20 June 2017

Available online xxx

Keywords:

Neandertal

Modern humans

Lower Paleolithic

Middle Paleolithic

Upper Paleolithic

Lebanon

ABSTRACT

Throughout history and prehistory, the Levant has played the role of a land-bridge connecting continents and human populations and cultures. This role began with the early expansions of hominins out of Africa during the Lower Pleistocene and continued through the Middle and Upper Pleistocene when the region was occupied alternately (and possibly at times simultaneously) by Neandertals and anatomically modern humans dispersing from Europe and Africa respectively. At the end of the Pleistocene, the Levant formed a corridor through which modern humans crossed into Europe. Yet, even though the Levant is an extremely important region for paleoanthropological research, major gaps in such research in this region remain. Unlike its southern part, the Paleolithic record of an important area of its central part, i.e., Lebanon, remains virtually unexplored, with the exception of a handful of surveys and small number of excavated sites. In spite of their relative paucity, these surveys have identified hundreds of potential sites spanning all periods of the Paleolithic. Moreover, the few excavations illustrate the importance of Lebanese sites in enhancing our understanding of later human evolution. The site of Ksar Akil, for example, holds evidence for some of the earliest associations of modern human fossils with early – and possibly also Initial- Upper Paleolithic assemblages. This paper presents a summary of the Lebanese Paleolithic record.

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1. Introduction

Lebanon is situated in the heart of the Levant, a strategic region which connects Africa, Europe, and Asia. Over the course of more than a million years, the Levant formed a vital land-bridge for hominin migrations and dispersals across these continents. Levantine sites have documented the early migrations of hominins out of Africa (Hours, 1976; Vandermeersch, 1981; Jelinek, 1982), the dispersals of Neandertals into western Asia (Garrod and Bate, 1937; Bar-Yosef et al., 1992; Kimbel et al., 1995; Akazawa et al., 1999), and the eventual expansion of modern humans out of Africa (Stringer and Bergman, 1989; Hershkovitz et al., 2015). Thus, this region has the potential to provide valuable information on various milestones of later hominin evolution. Despite this potential, and despite the various attempts made to explore the Paleolithic record of Lebanon during the first half of the 20th century, relatively little is known about the early prehistoric occupation of this country. This paper provides a short overview of the geography and geology of Lebanon and summarizes the available information on the

Lebanese Paleolithic.

2. The geography of Lebanon

Lebanon is a small country with a surface area of 10,452 km² located on the eastern edge of the Mediterranean Sea. The Lebanese landscape can be divided into four NNE-SSW aligned zones. Moving eastward, these zones are: 1) the coastal strip, 2) Mount Lebanon, 3) the Bekaa Valley, and 4) the Anti-Lebanon Mountain Range (Fig. 1). The Lebanese coastal strip runs parallel to the sea with a coast line of 225 km (Walley, 1998). This strip is narrow with widths generally extending between a few hundred meters to a maximum of 5 km in the northernmost part. Lebanon has a very narrow continental shelf which has a maximum width of 10 km and then drops abruptly to depths of over 1500 m (Walley, 1997). The second zone is that of Mount Lebanon, a mountain range with elevations mostly between 1000 and 2000 m, but reaching up to 3088 m at Qornet es Saouda, its highest peak (Walley, 1997). To the east of Mount Lebanon is the Bekaa Valley. This interior plain is 8–10 km wide with an altitude above 850 m almost everywhere (Walley, 1997). The Bekaa is often considered to be a continuation of the East African Rift Valley; yet, this remains controversial. It seems

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.quaint.2017.06.047>

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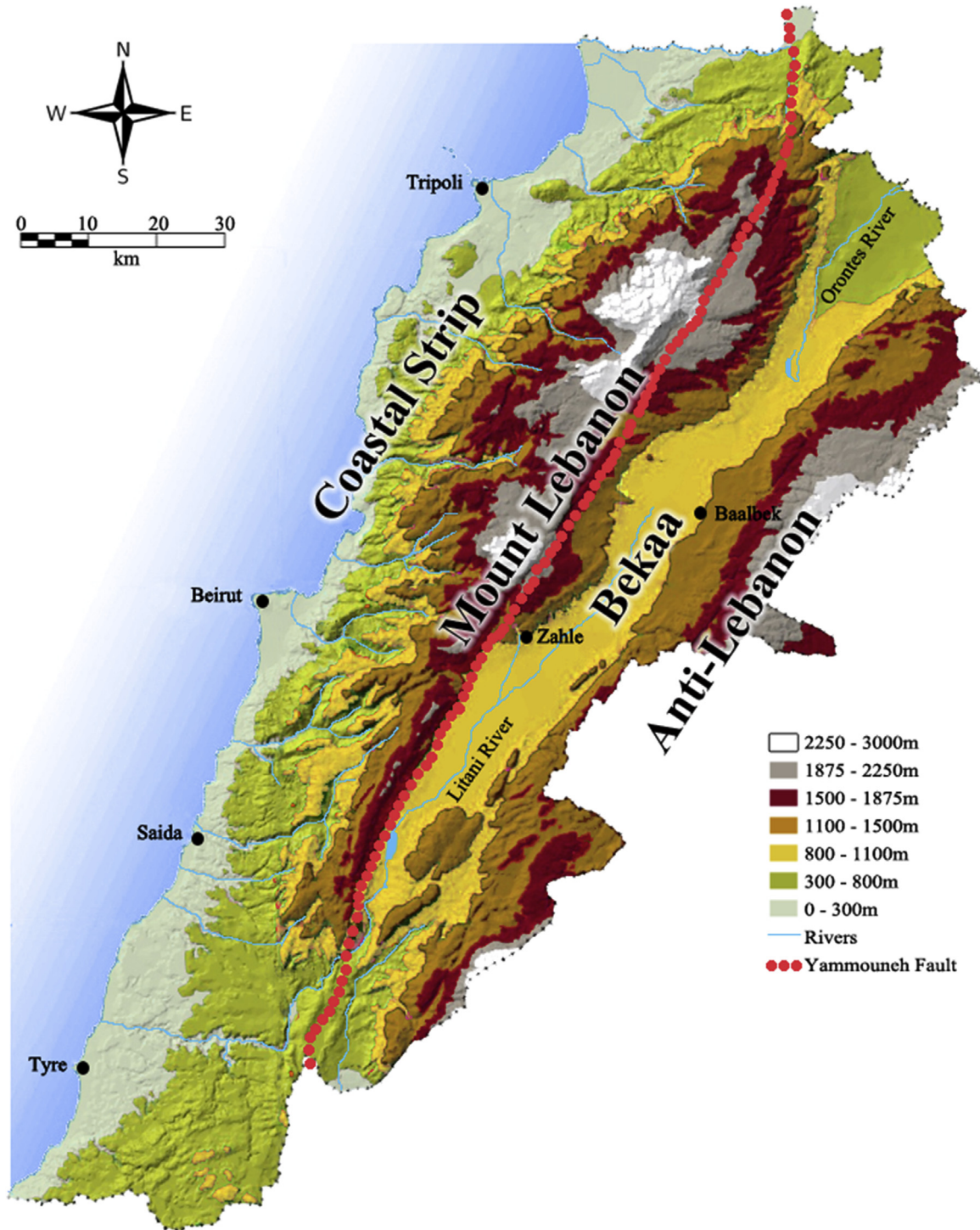


Fig. 1. Geography of Lebanon.

that in Lebanon, the Dead Sea Fault, i.e., the northernmost part of the Great Rift, is divided into several branches, with the main branch being the Yammounh Fault which runs along the western margin of the Bekaa (Daëron et al., 2004). Thus, even though the Bekaa Valley has not really been formed by faults like a true rift, it has been greatly modified by faulting and represents a strike-slip valley. The fourth and easternmost zone is the Anti-Lebanon Mountain chain which forms the nation's natural and political boarder with Syria. Mount Hermon is this chain's highest peak

reaching 2814 m (Walley, 1997).

Another important geographical feature of Lebanon that should be mentioned is its numerous springs and rivers which give the country its abundant forests. The rivers of Lebanon can be divided into two groups. The first consists of the rivers in the Bekaa, the biggest rivers of Lebanon. These are the Litani River, which flows south and eventually cuts through to the Mediterranean Sea close to the city of Tyre; and the Orontes (Al Assi) River which flows northwards into Syria (Fig. 1). The second group consists of the

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