



The Middle Palaeolithic of Cyrenaica: Is there an Aterian at the Haua Fteah and does it matter?



Tim Reynolds

Department of History, Classics and Archaeology, Birkbeck, 26 Russell Square, London WC1B 5DQ, UK

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ABSTRACT

The work of Charles McBurney in the 1950s described the Middle Palaeolithic of Cyrenaica, Libya based upon fieldwork at several localities including the Haua Fteah. The deep stratigraphy of that site has been used as a measure of the Middle Palaeolithic for the area and is being re-examined by the Cyrenaica Prehistory Project. Middle Palaeolithic industries there include the Pre-Aurignacian and Levallois – Mousterian and the latter, at least, is associated with modern humans in the form of two mandibles. McBurney and subsequent workers have been ambivalent about the presence of Aterian assemblages at the site and given the association of modern human remains with Levallois–Mousterian material is this significant?

The nature of industrial succession at the Haua Fteah is discussed following analysis of the McBurney archive and further fieldwork at the site and in its landscape. There is no clear pre-Modern human presence yet demonstrated and so all the Middle Palaeolithic material at the Haua Fteah could be the product of modern humans. If this is so, why do the industries vary and does the reason for this variation explain the absence of the Aterian?

The Aterian is present in the surrounding landscape. The Aterian has a clear association with modern humans in the Maghreb and is increasingly seen as an indicator of modern human presence. The sequence at the Haua Fteah can assist in formulating appropriate hypotheses for the processes of modern human dispersals across North Africa and beyond.

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1. Introduction

The Haua Fteah was excavated in the 1950's by Charles McBurney (1967) and produced an archaeological sequence that has been used as a 'yardstick' for cultural succession in the region. The sequence was different from those described in the Maghreb and Egypt, and the lack of subsequent work in Libya until recently has meant that it is difficult to assess the status and significance of the Haua Fteah sequence in modern debates as to industrial and human type succession in North Africa and beyond. This paper presents a discussion of the area's Middle Palaeolithic with particular reference to the Aterian based upon a re-examination of the McBurney archive, and new work at the site and its surroundings by a team centred on the University of Cambridge. The Aterian is increasingly being seen as a possible indicator of modern human presence and so its presence in Cyrenaica becomes more significant than if it were simply another Middle Palaeolithic. Analysis of the Middle Palaeolithic suggests that the Aterian is

lacking at the Haua Fteah although present in the landscape but that caution should be exercised in associating stone tool industries with human types. In this article, the terminology follows that of McBurney as it is partly based upon his archive and so uses Middle Palaeolithic and Levallois–Mousterian rather than Middle Stone Age (MSA) despite the African context.

2. Geographical setting

Cyrenaica is the region of east Libya that borders the western desert of Egypt in the east and the Gulf of Sirte in the west. It comprises a continuation of the desert landscapes of Egypt but has a significant upland adjacent to the sea known as the Gebel Akhdar (Green Mountains) (Fig. 1). These limestone hills are made up by a series of escarpments facing north to the coastal strip, and extending parallel to the coast from east of Benghazi for some 250 km and another 200 km to the Egyptian border. There are a number of incised wadis, small intermontane basins and some perennial springs within the area, which has made it attractive to human settlement throughout the Holocene. The Gebel is linked to the landscape to the east by the coastal strip, but to the west the

E-mail address: te.reynolds@bbk.ac.uk.

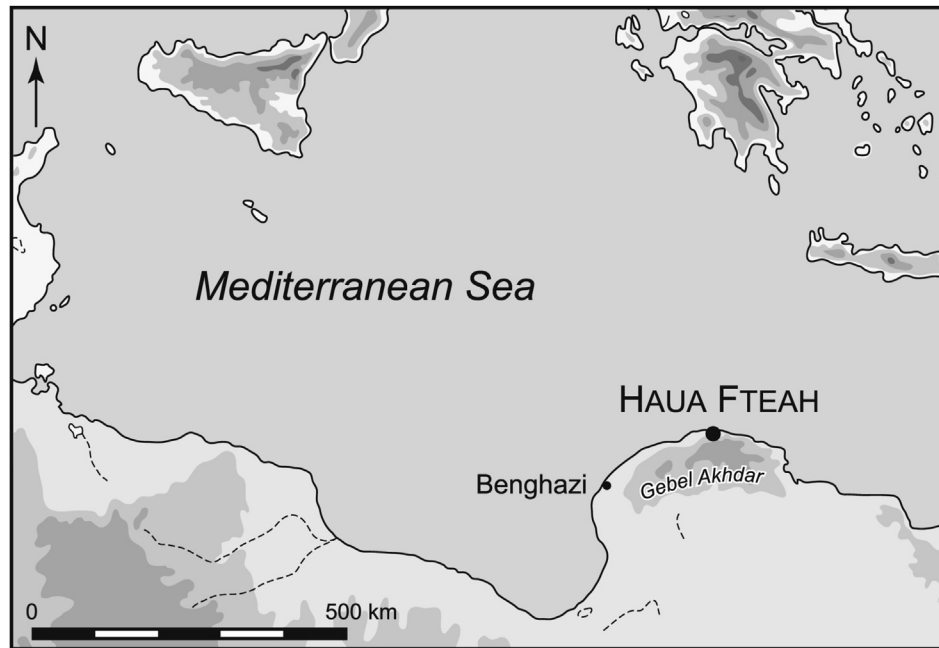


Fig. 1. Location of the Haua Fteah and Gebel Akhdar in Cyrenaica.

desert meets the coast in the Gulf of Sirte (which is over 350 km east–west). The latter is a biogeographical barrier that is likely to have affected human movements from west to east. This is a significant factor when the Pleistocene human occupation of North Africa is considered, as the main centres of study have been the Maghreb (Raynal et al., 2001; Barton et al., 2007, 2009; Bouzouggar et al., 2008; Nespoulet et al., 2008; Schwenniger et al., 2010; Jacobs et al., 2011, 2012), the Nile Valley (Van Peer, 1998; Vermeersch, 2001), and the western desert of Egypt (Wendorf and Schild, 1977; Wendorf et al., 1987, 1990, 1993).

3. Background: the sequence from the Haua Fteah

Until recently, there was a notable lack of research in the region of Cyrenaica itself. The Cyrenaica Prehistory Project began in 2007 to re-investigate the excavations of McBurney and undertake further landscape studies (Barker et al., 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010). The most important site in the region is the Haua Fteah, which lies at 32.9060372 N, 22.0497752 E about 1 km from the coast in the Gebel Akhdar (Figs. 1 and 2). It was excavated by McBurney (1967) in the 1950s and a significant sequence of archaeological deposits described (Fig. 3). McBurney recovered a sequence of cultural deposits as follows: Phase A was termed a 'Libyan Pre-Aurignacian' and was then considered to date between 80,000 and 65,000 years. Recent work has suggested that the overlying early Levalloiso–Mousterian dates to ca. 80,000 years (Armitage et al., forthcoming). It used a significant number of blades, and burins were amongst the most common tool forms. A putative bone flute was recovered from these deposits (subsequently explained as the result of carnivore activity).

Phase B was subdivided into four subunits, I–IV. Each of the subunits was of a broadly Levalloiso–Mousterian form. BI was believed to be older than 60/55,000 years. It included a small number of foliate bifacial forms and some 'incipient tangs'. BII was thought to begin at ca. 55,000 years and was Levalloiso–Mousterian 'in a Levantine sense' (McBurney, 1967, p. 326). It is from this sub-phase that the modern human mandibles were

recovered. BIII was an industry of 'probable Aterian character' (McBurney, 1967: 326) but not clearly attributable to it. No dates were given to this phase, although it is bracketed by those above and below it to between 55 and 40,000 a. Phase BIV is a return to the Levalloiso–Mousterian that lasted until 40,000 a.

Phase C was dated between 40,000 and 15,000 BP and termed Dabban (after the type site at the nearby Wadi Khuf, Hagfet et Dabba; McBurney, 1950). It is a fully Upper Palaeolithic industry with blades, chamfered blades, end scrapers and burins. It was further divided into Typical and Late forms characterised by different frequencies of chamfered blades, end scrapers and burins.

Phase D was dated between 14,000 and 10,000 BP and termed Eastern Oranian. It resembled the Oranian of the Maghreb.

Phase E dated between 10,000 and 7000 BP. It is termed Libyco-Capsian, resembling the Maghreb sequence. Phase F is dated between 7000 and 4700 BP and is a Neolithic industry of 'Capsian tradition'.

Phase G was dated between 2500 to the present. It includes the stone-packed timber structures associated with a Graeco-Roman building. It had been burned in antiquity.

These investigations have provided a 'yardstick' by which the region's Pleistocene and early Holocene record is measured (McBurney, 1960, 1967). In addition to his work at the Haua Fteah, McBurney also worked at a number of other localities in the landscape, identifying a lakeside Middle Palaeolithic site in the Wadi Derna (Hajj Creiem) and an Upper Palaeolithic industry in the Wadi Kuf at the cave site of Hagfet et Dabba (Fig. 2). The latter industry was termed the Dabban after the site and is only known from the type site and the Haua Fteah, although some recent surface finds from further east in Cyrenaica have been claimed to be Dabban as well (Barker et al., 2010). The industries relevant to the issue of the Middle Palaeolithic are McBurney's phases A to C. The succession at the Haua Fteah was re-examined by Moyer (2003) who used evidence from sapropels in the eastern Mediterranean to suggest that the site may have been occupied significantly earlier than suggested by McBurney (MIS7). He also undertook some re-analysis of the McBurney industries.

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