Part IV - Typology

Frances Healy begins Part V with a critical three page introduction (179-181) which this reviewer has already used as a starting point for discussions with graduate students in lithic analysis classes. She is obviously a 'lumper' rather than a 'splitter' when it comes to classification and her critical remarks set the tone for the book's last section. Ashton and McNabb offer a radical reassessment of biface morphology, chronology and technology. They argue convincingly that archaeologists need to re-think their notion of the classic bifaces, and they flag up the importance of what they term non classic bifaces in lower Palaeolithic assemblages. Raw material as well as the knapper's 'mental construct' is seen as one of the major conditioning factors of biface morphology. As a non -Lower Palaeolithic specialist I found this chapter an interesting challenge to the traditional ideas I learned as a student.

Jacobi (192-198) produces a paper critical of some of his earlier interpretations of radio-carbon dates from Mesolithic sites in the north and south of England. This obviously has a bearing how we think about artefact development in the early and later Mesolithic periods, and his conclusions; that we should disregard most of the upland, northern, early Mesolithic radio-carbon dates, makes for chilling reading. But he is right to point out the problems of context, sample integrity and probability of human associations of some of the dates in question.

Michael Reynier (199-205) examines twelve morphological attributes of ten early Mesolithic microlith assemblages, applying discriminant and cluster analysis to the data in an attempt to identify stylistic components in the assemblages. Using available radiocarbon chronology, he confirms Jacobi and Pitts' earlier observations about the chronological relationship between 'Horsham' and 'Maglemosian' points and suggests that there is no radiocarbon plateau at 9,200 BP (but see Day and Mellars, 1994). He further suggests that the time span of Maglemosian assemblages should be greatly reduced. On the basis of stylistic aspects of his tribute analysis he suggests the existence of discrete territorial regions in the early Mesolithic of south east England. As such this work must be followed up and expanded upon. From et al.'s interim report on the Wavercott side XXX in the Kennet Valley (206-212) is a model of clarity and Woodman's attempt at a definition of early Neolithic lithic assemblages in Ireland has important implications for the Mesolithic - Neolithic Transition in Ireland (213-218).

To conclude then, this is an elegantly produced volumes, with good quality illustrations. It has a massive range and scope and there is, as I hope I have shown, something in it for everyone interested in British and Irish lithic studies. It illustrates the focused nature of a lot of current work and points the way to expanding the impact and overall contribution of lithic studies to wider issues of British prehistory. I look forward to the next ten years with great excitement and interest.

References


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LEARNING TO SWIM IN THE HEURISTIC TYPING POOL: A REVIEW OF DEBENATH AND DIBBLE, HANDBOOK OF PALEOLITHIC TYPOLOGY.


If I close my eyes I can still see it just as if it was yesterday. Three of us sitting in his office. He crossed the desk from me, irritated, and peering at me over the top of his glasses. I knew the signs only too well. Over the door Martin Bates sat quietly, sensibly taking no further part in the increasingly heated argument.

"I don't care what they say," he said sharply. He rose from his chair and strode over to the big four drawer filing cabinet. He pulled open the top drawer, reached into the very back, and pulled out a file.

"Charante Mousterian!" He threw a sheet of graph paper across the desk at me. "I was the first person to type the High Lodge assemblage using the Bordes method, and its Charante Mousterian. See?" I looked at the graph. Toward the top was a thin dark line like a flight of degraded river terraces.

"You see, Charante Mousterian." he said again.

"But it can't be, the geology is pre-Anglian." I'd just come back from working on the site. I'd been there when they had pieced it all together. High Lodge was a pre-Anglian site.

"Which do you believe, the geology," spoken derisively, "or the archaeology?" he said nodding toward the graph.

"The geology," He didn't say anything, just looked at me as if I'd stabbed him in the back.

By his own admission my old tutor was a Bordesian archaeologist, pure and
simple. But what is it about the Bordes method, and the categorisation it empowers that is so enduring? Debénath and Dibble emphasise this point. Since the typology was formalised thirty-five years ago, officially, there have been no new types added, despite Bordes’ provision for this.

I do not believe there is one all-encompassing answer, but part of the answer lies in the timing. The archaeologists of the 1950s and early 1960s inherited the common assumptions of their predecessors, but not their techniques and methods of inquiry. Bordes played a large part in this. His system, concentrating on all the retouched component of an assemblage, was seen as more scientific than the type fossil approach of Breuil which it deliberately set out to replace. Its objective credentials were assured by its simple descriptive character; it therefore allowed for comparisons and contrasts to be made on an intra-site, inter-site, intra-regional and inter-regional basis. This lent the method enormous power. It provided what was seen as the first real opportunity to read the patterning in the past, rather than impose it as the old system had done.

But there was a hidden, and probably largely unconscious, agenda to all this, one which linked the new generation of objective typologists with their predecessors. A belief that the human mind habitually sought order and regularity, and through this that all human action is patterned. Bordes believed, and his type list reflects, the fundamental concept that the tools as described were intentional designs (Debénath and Dibble clearly show how Bordes was carrying over the belief in ‘type’ embodied within the ancien régime.). The new approach was the key to unlock the patterned action that surely structured the Palaeolithic world, as it did ours. I believe that this is one of the principles reasons behind the success of the Bordes system in its early years. It was this that lay at the heart of my teacher’s unquestioned belief in Bordes’ system, and more importantly its potential through objective comparisons to reveal the structure and order that would be present in the actions of prehistoric people. What is the alternative? Remove the structured character of human action, the cornerstone of the type list, and you have an anarchic past and no system by which it could be read.

Through our modern eyes it seems curious now to look back. The more you read many of the earlier reports at least, the more you become convinced that many of these new typologists believed that once an assemblage was typed, and its cumulative graph drawn up, then that was that; all was revealed. The recognition of cultural identity was the goal of Palaeolithic archaeology; or to put it another way, to have described the past was to have understood it. Whether you love or loathe Binford, his slant on the so-called Mousterian debate was much more of an attempt at behavioural archaeology for the Mousterian than Bordes’ ever was.

So my first reaction to this book was a gut one; what was the point? The authors present the usual reasons themselves. The system provides a means of common communication, and it is still the most widely used classification. As many people have pointed out to me it is in English, an important point if, like me, you are one of those people who have little skill with their own language let alone others. All good and true reasons. Perhaps the most convincing justification presented is that the patterning in the lithic data observed through the Bordes system can be tested against other kinds of data. Not only does this enable any patterns present in the stone tool data to be independently scrutinised, but it also helps in assessing the contribution of the lithics to the overall understanding of a site.

The book is divided into two parts, each further subdivided. Part one has three chapters. The first gives an overview of the pros and cons of the Bordes system, and outlines the aims of the authors in writing this book. It is neither a defence nor a condemnation of the Bordes system, or its so-called tool types, it seeks merely to describe both. As a handbook it sets out to simplify the method and make it more accessible to new or unfamiliar users. It is on this that the book must be judged.

The next two chapters describe technological and typological concepts, as well as an all important overview on the orientation of tools so essential (and bizarrely so to modern eyes) to identifying tool types. Much of the information here is available elsewhere, and in more detail. Although it is necessary to outline Bordes’ own views on technology, retouch, core classification, as well as introduce important new concepts like the chaîne opératoire, I felt that much of the necessary information could have been conveyed through the illustrations. Descriptions of crested and core tablets and butt morphology are not strictly necessary to the Bordes typology, and might confuse through information overload.

Also there are some concepts retained that ought by now to have been buried with the type fossil. So-called Clactonian anvil technique and Abbevillian core working techniques are no longer valid. They perpetuate embedded concepts of progressive development that have been long since demonstrated to be inadequate explanations of variability in the archaeology of pre-modern humans.

But it is not until the reader comes to the second part of the book, and the typology itself that the strengths of this work appear. Eight chapters, seven on flake tools and related types, and one on bifaces, cover the range of Bordes’ tool categories. In general the descriptions are clear and well-written, and numerous illustrations are presented. The authors have deliberately chosen a range of examples to illustrate, not concentrating on the modal or stereotypic examples. This reflects their concern with making the typelist simpler to use, and stems from a conviction that it is at the limits of a type’s definition that the most ambiguity will be found. This approach is a good one and does go far to achieving the stated aims of the handbook.

In pursuit of simplicity, the authors have reorganised the order of the sixty three tool types identified by Bordes. The original lay out was designed to maximise the differences between the different Mousterian groups when these were displayed graphically. In Debénath and Dibbles’ new order there is an
emphasis on the logic of certain associations. For example the first descriptive section is on technologically defined tools and groups the Levallois (1-4) with pseudo-Levallois points (5), which are by-products of discoidal flaking, and naturally backed knives (38). Points, notches and denticulates, Upper Palaeolithic types, and scrapers each have their own sections. Within these the authors are careful to identify potential sources of confusion. In its original layout the typelist is a sprawling collection, and I felt this re-organisation a useful one, and one that should help to make the diversity of the original less daunting. This is an important aspect, especially for students new to typology. The inclusion of a flow chart to help order the decision making process is a useful addition.

It is difficult in a review on this subject to limit comment to the book alone, and not extend criticism to the type list itself. The non-judgemental stance is laudable, but it is difficult not to become quickly disillusioned with the type list as the authors are at pains to show ambiguities in Bordes’ own thinking. Some tools were defined on morphological grounds, others on technological ones, and some on Bordes’ subjective preferences. For example the primacy of endscrapers in all things, the failure to incorporate transverse scrapers with thinned backs into the category designed for the latter (technical) feature, and the sheer diversity of scrapers but paucity of sub-division in other tool groups.) A simple glance at the section on technologically-defined tools should convince most readers that the Bordes method is not a level playing field. But the point is, as flawed as it is, does it still contribute something worthwhile? Does this book go toward helping it work?

The answer to the first is a guarded ‘yes’. The method does reveal patterns in stone tool assemblages, and they must be somehow explained. In that sense the type list is a heuristic device. Here the book does score. In defining the ambiguity at both the level of recognising individual tool types, and at the higher level of recognising the inconsistent nature of tool definitions, the handbook goes a long way to achieving its stated aims. It would be nice to think that this would stimulate a revision of the system, but it probably will not.

One point of interest is the number of people who have expressed shock and horror at one of the authors involvement in this project. What does Dibble think he is playing at? This I find odd. Dibble is not anti-type or type list, never was; a brief reading of one of his Mousterian papers on the Near East serves to demonstrate this. Dibble is anti-template; there is a difference.

An area of the book that did disappoint was the all too brief section on how the type list was originally used, and how it is used today. I am surprised that this section, relegated to the appendix, was not developed further. Clear demonstration of continuing contribution, and the ability of Bordes’ method to generate dialogue, would have gone a long way to dispelling the misgivings some readers may develop.

I will not forget that far away day. For me it marked the beginning of doubt in much that I had been taught, and in those who had taught me. I sat in the bar that afternoon wrestling with the contradiction of a pre-Anglian Mousterian. Something was wrong, but I could not then divorce the archaeological pattern from its meaning. Time I came to solve that contradiction. Years later I was asked by Nick Ashton to collaborate with him on the lithic interpretation chapter of the High Lodge report. As I wrote the last sentence in that chapter I had that meeting in my tutor’s office in mind ‘Context before culture, and don’t put all your bifaces in one basket.’ These are patterns in human action but this is different from the premise that human action is patterned. A subtle but important difference. It is how High Lodge can be pre-Anglian and Mousterian at the same time.

I think Dénan and Dibble have written a good book about a very problematic system, I wish I had had it a decade ago. But, I can not help thinking it ought to be the last book about the Bordes system.

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**ANOTHER ONE BITES THE DUST**


Callow’s (1993) review of the recently published High Lodge volume (Ashton et al. 1992) ended with the somewhat forlorn hope expressed that High Lodge would be one of the last sites to be published over 20 years after its excavation had finished. Now the British Museum has produced another backlog volume, guided to completion by Ashton and McNabb, this time concerning the late Professor Waechter’s programme of excavations at Swanscombe carried out in the summers of 1968-72. Unfortunately there are no grounds for confidence that this in turn will be one of the last, since it seems that there is no mechanism to control the loose cannons who create the backlogs. One has to examine the road into the field – who gives permission and who pays money. There is scope for the exercise of more control at these stages. Committee-members who approve funds to those with “form” regardless of their eminent positions must share the blame, and could suggest that continuing funding is dependent upon publication of previous work.

The importance of Swanscombe for Palaeolithic research hardly needs reiterating to readers of Lithics. It was until the 1980s the only source in Britain of Archaic (ie, not anatomically modern) hominid material - now we are spilt with Pontnewydd (Green 1984) and Boxgrove (Roberts et al. 1994), and it contains deeply stratified sequences of fossiliferous and artefact-bearing deposits.