The Cutting Edge, Bifaces in the Clactonian.

John McNabb and Nick Ashton

Introduction

At the Lithic Studies Society recent conference held at Oxford, we presented a paper on bifaces (Ashton and McNabb in press). The paper suggested that current views on British Lower Palaeolithic bifaces are a result of focusing on only one end of a larger continuum in biface morphologies. At the opposite, and previously unrecognised end of the continuum, are artefacts which retain the concept of a biface and its use, but do not have any of the features more commonly associated with the more classic looking forms; for example morphological regularity often expressed through bilateral symmetry, or extensive thinning over most or all of both faces of the artefact. We coined the term 'non-classic biface' to describe these artefacts. We also presented evidence to show that non-classic bifaces occur in assemblages which contain their more classic looking cousins, as well as from contexts traditionally interpreted as producing 'Clactonian' or 'non-biface' assemblages (in particular from the Lower Gravels at Barnfield Pit, and the Lower Gravels at Rickson's Pit, Swancombe).

A lively and wide ranging discussion followed our paper and we would like to thank all those who commented on our ideas. During the discussion, the question of a small number of bifaces recovered from so called 'non-biface' sites cropped up and was, as ever, dismissed on the grounds of insecure provenance for these pieces. The purpose of this paper is to set the record straight, and very briefly outline some of the more theoretical implications for the interpretation of 'non-biface' assemblages in Britain which arise out of the secure provenancing of these pieces.

Lower Gravels, Barnfield Pit, Swancombe

The deposits at Barnfield Pit, Swancombe have long been recognised to consist of Lower Gravels, overlain by Lower Loams, and in turn by a long series of deposits from Lower Middle Gravels to Upper Loams (see Wymer 1968 for the history of the site). The Lower Gravels and Lower Loams were argued to contain a 'non-biface' industry, whereas the overlying deposits contained 'Acheulian' or 'biface' industries.

In 1979, Milla Ohel published an illustration of a biface from the base of the Lower Gravels at the Barnfield Pit, Swancombe. The artefact was recovered during the Waechter excavations of 1968-72 (Ohel 1979, 696: fig. 11.4). Newcomer, in replying to Ohel, corrected the provenance to the top of the Lower Gravels, and indicated that Waechter believed the artefact to have fallen in during excavation from the overlying Lower Middle Gravels (Newcomer 1979). The artefact is marked "Sc70, A2, LG, 0-20", indicating that it was found in 1970 from square A2 in the top 0.20m of the Lower Gravels (see Waechter et al. 1970). This is the only artefact from the whole site for which such an explanation was created. In terms of condition (degree of rolling, staining and patination) the biface is identical with other pieces marked in a similar way. We have always maintained that this explanation was generated because the biface contradicted Waechter's typological expectations of the Lower Gravels.

In preparing the data on the Waechter excavation for publication (Conway, Ashton and McNabb in prep.), further evidence for accepting the provenance of this piece as the Lower Gravels, was identified. There is only one patch of Lower Middle Gravel above the A2 square, and it is clearly stated by Waechter to be sterile. This patch is on the northern face of the square at the A2/A1(A) interface.

"On the north face the weathered Loam has slumped into a hollow (see geological report) the hollow on the surface of the Loam is filled with a pocket of well washed and undisturbed Lower Middle Gravel; this gravel was sterile."

Waechter 1969, 83.

The adjacent square to the east (A1 (=A)), was in 1970, already excavated to below the level of square A2; section drawings from the south and west faces of A2 show that the Lower Middle Gravel had already been removed by quarrying. The only patch of Lower Middle Gravel that the biface could have come from was on the northern face, and this was explicitly stated by Waechter to have contained no artefacts.

We hope that this clears up the doubt about the provenance of this piece once and for all. The reason for the persistence of disbelief in the real provenance of this maligned little biface was simply belief in the traditional framework. The climate of interpretation in the 1970's - 80's refused to accept the existence of bifaces in supposed 'non-biface' assemblages. The existence of the non-classic biface as a tool form, and their occurrence in both 'biface' and 'non-biface' assemblages (Ashton and McNabb in press), now creates a background of credibility which allows artefacts, such as that described above, to be better understood in terms of the contexts from which they were recorded.

Clacton, Lion Point

In 1951 Hazzledine Warren published his definitive paper on the Clactonian based on Lion Point, Clacton. This locality and the collection is, therefore,
the type site and type assemblage for British 'non-biface' assemblages. The only detailed discussion on the archaeological and geological succession from this locality published by Warren was in 1933. This paper, along with the Warren notebooks held in the archives of the British Museum, indicate that Lion Point was a melting pot of different archaeological exposures.

As far as Warren's Clactonian assemblage is concerned, his notes make it clear that he divided the Lion Point foreshore into two main zones. Flintwork marked '4Gr' was found in situ in a gravel exposure. Warren believed this gravel to be a direct continuation of the celebrated Elephas antiquus gravels at the West Cliff foreshore exposure (Warren 1922), where he first defined the assemblage from Clacton, at that time calling it Mesvinian.

A second higher zone in which artefacts occurred is simply marked 'Clacton Lion Point' or variations of this notation. Warren's unpublished notes describe this zone as follows:

"Clacton  Found on the area of the above gravel (ie 4Gr), but washed out by the sea - some of those marked 's-b' on the top line were found drifted a little further away" Warren notebooks, British Museum archive [authors comment]

The implication is quite clear. Warren interpreted the material in this zone of the foreshore as being derived directly from the gravels (4Gr) described above. This view is also made clear by a close analysis of the artefacts that Warren figured in his writings. Table 1 shows Warren's artefact labels for the figured Clactonian material in the 1932 paper as well as the definitive 1951 paper. Of the 9 pieces illustrated in the 1932 publication, only 2 were marked '4Gr', and 6 were marked 'Lion Pt' (or variations of this notation; fig 5:3 is probably not from Lion Point). Of the 34 pieces that could be identified from the 1951 paper, only five are marked '4Gr', the remaining 29 being marked as 'Lion Pt' (or its variants; fig 24 is probably not from Lion Point, fig. 5 may not be from Lion Point but this is less certain). Warren was satisfied that the material he found on other parts of the beach was not only what he called Clactonian, but was also derived from the Elephas antiquus gravels.

Two bifaces from Clacton are marked 'Lion Pt' (Roe 1968, 59; three are listed but only two are present, also Roe pers. comm.), and both were, therefore, interpreted as deriving from this gravel. Examination of all the material marked '4Gr' (n=328) shows that there is a large variation in terms of condition, but the majority shows moderate rolling and staining. Much of the material from the foreshore, including both the bifaces, is in similar condition. This supports Warren's view that both bifaces were derived from the gravel (4Gr).

Table 1. Warren's artefact labels from the 1932 and 1951 papers on the Clactonian at Lion Point.
Further evidence of bifaces at Clacton can be found in the Warren archive. Three bifaces are provenanced to the West Cliff locality, and while the 'pseudo-chellean' form found by Warren, in May 1913, is not securely provenanced, the remaining two bifaces (found in September 1911 and August 1913) are clearly stated to be from the Elephas antiquus bed (Table 2). Unfortunately the whereabouts of these three pieces is currently unknown.

Methodological and theoretical implications

The indisputable fact is that bifaces have been found at both Swanscombe and Clacton in what are traditionally regarded as 'non-biface' assemblages and their presence cannot be explained by being attributed to the wrong context. Other explanations have also been put forward. It has been argued that the bifaces must have been derived by-fluvial action from other deposits. The theoretical implications of this argument have never been fully addressed, but they do highlight some profound weaknesses in the traditional biface/non-biface dichotomy used to explain the nature of the Lower Palaeolithic occupation of Britain.

Recent studies have shown that cores, core working techniques, flakes and patterns of retouch are similar in both 'biface' and 'non-biface' assemblages (McNabb 1992; Ashton and McNabb 1992). If this similarity is accepted (other than the supposed presence or absence of bifaces) then there is no independent means of assessing whether bifaces found in 'non-biface' assemblages are derived, except by study of condition. In the cases of Swanscombe and Clacton there are no differences between the condition of the bifaces and their associated assemblages. Although the assemblages are unlikely to be in situ, it cannot be argued that the derivation of the bifaces is any different to their associated assemblages.

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<th>Table 2. Extracts from the Warren catalogue in the British Museum referring to bifaces found at Clacton West Cliff.</th>
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It has also been argued that because bifaces form a minor component of these assemblages, and with only exceptional evidence of biface thinningdebitage, that they must be derived from elsewhere. But this argument also flounders when two recently excavated 'biface' assemblages are examined. Only two bifaces were excavated from the in situ Upper industry at Hoxne (layer 7) (n = 597 pieces), and again only two from Waechter's excavations in the Lower Middle Gravels (n = 170 pieces). Nor did the assemblages contain more than a handful of biface manufacturing flakes. At Aridos it was only the presence of two broken biface tips and several thinning flakes that indicated the use of bifaces (Villa 1990). Theoretically, bifaces could have been brought onto a site, used and then taken away as curated items, without any trace in the archaeological record. Technically the site should be classified as a 'biface' site, but if cores and flakes had been knapped it would be characteristically a 'non-biface' site. Given the paucity of bifaces in some 'biface' assemblages, there are no grounds for assuming that when bifaces are found, however rarely, in 'non-biface' assemblages, it is due to derivation from elsewhere.

These arguments highlight the weaknesses of the traditional framework. As we have proved the existence of bifaces in 'non-biface' assemblages, exponents of the traditional view are now forced to rely on circular reasoning and theoretical contortions to justify their position. The belief in the biface/non-biface dichotomy determines the nature of the interpretation, as much as the interpretation is required by the framework.

If the variation in assemblages is studied in terms of local dynamics (e.g. raw material quantity and quality, the effects of changing environment, variation in function, or the influence of geological site formation processes), without reference to the assumptions of the traditional view, then it is no longer necessary to contrive explanations of mishaps during excavation or fluvial derivation. Instead the individual sites may be understood in their local setting, which must be the starting point for the painting of a broad canvas of the Lower Palaeolithic.

Conclusion

It has been argued that five bifaces from Warren's collections at Clacton and one biface from Waechter's excavations at Barnfield Pit, Swanscombe, have been found in 'non-biface' assemblages. They cannot be explained away by poor provenancing, nor are there grounds for arguing that their history of derivation is any different from the assemblages with which they are associated. These points clarify discussions made in other papers (McNabb 1992; Ashton and McNabb 1992; Ashton and McNabb in press) whereby variation within and between 'non-biface' and 'biface' assemblages are argued to be primarily due to raw material and functional considerations. Furthermore, it prompts the suggestion that we should no longer describe assemblages as simply 'biface' or 'non-biface', but rather
look at the composition of the whole assemblage in terms of the local dynamics that have influenced their formation.

References


Warren, S.H. Ms. in British Museum archives.


Lower Palaeolithic Finds at Wood Hill, East Kent: A Geological and Geomorphological Approach to an Archaeological Problem.

Julie Scott-Jackson

Background

Human occupation of the chalkland hilltops of southern England, with the cappings mapped as Clay-with-flints, provides a dimension to the Palaeolithic archaeological record which has yet to be fully appreciated. My previous research has led me to believe that hilltop areas mapped as Clay-with-flints represent the most ancient relatively stable landsurfaces in Britain (Scott-Jackson 1991a). These deposits seem not to have been directly affected by glacial or alluvial activity but nevertheless have been subjected to processes associated with both periglacial and temperate environments. With this proviso therefore, these deposits may be considered to have been stable since the late Cromerian (Catt 1986). An understanding of the processes acting upon and within the areas mapped as Clay-with-flints (which often includes brickerafs) and chalklands forms an essential part of my doctoral research on Lower and Middle Palaeolithic artefacts in relation to the deposits mapped as Clay-with-flints and the Chalklands of southern England.

One focus of my research is to record all the surviving patches of Clay-with-flints in southern England, and to note past finds of Palaeolithic artefacts certainly or possibly associated with them (Scott-Jackson 1991b, in prep). Another is to seek particular occurrences that might be followed up in detail to provide case-studies for archaeologists and other Quaternary researchers. These case studies are to be designed to address the following hypotheses:

1. Given the relative stability of the deposits, that more or less in situ Lower or Middle Palaeolithic sites should exist on some of the chalkland hilltops capped with the deposits mapped as Clay-with-flints;

2. That some of the current models used to explain patterns and levels of erosion and deposition of the Clay-with-flints on hilltops may require substantial adjustment;

3. That there are a number of factors that would indicate whether any given Clay-with-flints capped hilltop would warrant detailed survey or excavation. Some examples of these factors are: the presence or absence of sur-