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STUDY OF THE MIDDLE PALAEOLITHIC ASSEMBLAGE OF SESSELFELS (GERMANY)

The cave of Sesselfels is located in the valley of the lower Altmühl River (Bavaria), an area that was frequently visited by prehistoric humans, as evident in many other valley sites such as Klausenhöhlen and Schulerloch. The Sesselfels cave yielded more than 100,000 artefacts of the Middle and Upper Palaeolithic, the remains of three Neanderthals (including teeth and foetus bones) and abundant faunal material (Freund 1998). Moreover it has provided the longest Middle Palaeolithic sequence from the last glacial in western Central Europe.

An important part of the sequence, ‘the G-complex’, comprising 13 lithic assemblages, has been radiometrically dated to MIS 3 (c. 58–24 kya BP; Richter 2002). The lithics of these G layers gave rise to a typological dilemma, since most of the assemblages could be equally attributed to the Micoquian or Mousterian, depending on the focus being on the bifacial or unifacial tools. This led Richter (1997) to propose the term Mousterian with Micoquian Option (M.M.O.) for these collections, indicating the close link between these two industries.

My doctoral research focuses on these links between the Mousterian and Micoquian in the last episode of the Middle Palaeolithic (MIS 5d–MIS 3). To understand these relationships it is important to overcome previous epistemological problems related to the research being conducted in different academic traditions. Therefore French MTA assemblages, German Micoquian assemblages and some so-called ‘mixed’ assemblages (Ruebens 2007) will be analysed using one uniform attribute analysis. The study of the lithics of Sesselfels is a first step in this research.

The used methodology is based on the principle of the *chaîne opératoire* and seeks to reveal the composition and character of an assemblage by studying both typological and technological features. Three of the assemblages of the G-complex (A04, A06 and A09) were studied this way. First results show that the large majority of the Sesselfels lithics have been made out of local chert and quartzite. Furthermore all the steps of the *chaîne opératoire* were conducted locally (raw material procurement–decortication–flaking cores–retouching into tools–resharpening–discard). Several reduction methods were used including discoidal and Levallois techniques. Blades are present but they are not the result of a volumetric blade technology. Besides the large amounts of unretouched flakes, many tools also occur. These are general Middle Palaeolithic types such as side scrapers, denticulates and notches, but end scrapers, piercers and microliths (<2cm) also occur (Figure 1).

An important feature of the G-complex assemblages is the presence of bifacially flaked tools. Remarkably, symmetric bifaces, which are the characteristic element of Mousterian bifacial industries, are absent here. The bifacial tools in Sesselfels are typical Micoquian types (Ruebens 2007) such as Keilmesser (backed bifaces), Faustkeilblätter, leaf-shaped scrapers and leaf-points (Figures 1–2). The frequent presence of backs on the bifacial tools can be explained by the use of tabular chert nodules which are rectangular in shape and only a few centimetres thick. The sections of these bifacial tools are most often plano-convex and the flake removals come from all directions. The various shapes and edge angles of these tools, ranging from very acute edges to more open edges, indicate that they were probably used for a variety of tasks.



Figure 1: Convergent scraper (1); denticulate (2); end scraper (3); piercer (4); transverse scraper (5)



Figure 2: Leaf-shaped scraper (1, 2 & 5); Klausennische Keilmesser (3 & 4); Ciemnamesser (6)



Figure 3: Faustkeilblätter

More information will be gained from this study after comparisons with other sites in Western Europe for which the data will be collected by the same methodology. That way it will be possible to add to the current debate about the relationship between the Mousterian and Micoquian and to the presence of macro-regional variability in the Middle Palaeolithic in more general.

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