

NOT SO MUCH HOW , BUT MORE WHY?

M.W. Pitts

(Alexander Keiller Museum, Avebury)

For many years, British archaeologists faced with lithic assemblages have, with very few exceptions, been at a loss as to what to do with them. The most obvious reason for this problem lies in the way the material arrives on the archaeologists' desks: by accident. A few 'flints' might be found during the search for a burial under a mound, and rather more in a ditch on a settlement. These assemblages or collections are duly presented to the specialist. Alternatively, a museum archaeologist may find him or herself face to face with an enthusiastic amateur peering over heaped boxes of stones from a field beyond his garden. The logical question follows, 'what shall I do next?'

The commonest answer has been 'find out how old it all is'. The less well preserved is an assemblage and the less devoid of diagnostic pieces, the greater is the opportunity for really making a meal of the chronology. The wondering typological confusions of workers like R.A. Smith suffered major blows in the inter war years, when archaeologists such as Clark and Piggott attempted to see the material in its wider context. Others, one might mention particularly Alfred Barnes and Sir Francis Knowles, started asking questions that could *only be answered by looking at prehistoric stonework*. With the advent of C14 dating, typological chronology began to look a bit hollow. Nonetheless, it is only very recently that others have attempted to go beyond this and continue in the spirit of men like Knowles.

Since the publication of three articles that were partly a review of previous work on flake debitage (Pitts 1978a and b; Pitts & Jacobi 1979) several people have come to me for advice about *their* flakes. The questions have all been of the 'what shall I do with these?' kind (sometimes, more plaintively, 'what shall I do with these 10,000 measurements?'), and never have I been asked a question that started 'why...?' These seems to me a cause for concern. My work on flakes, which exploited a large body of already published material, was, frankly, an attempt to conduct a piece of research on the cheap. I was searching for a technological framework for postglacial stoneworking. This framework was intended to contribute towards a general model of culture change in the Neolithic and Bronze Age in Britain, within which I could elaborate the details of the specific problems that interest me. It seems to me that by using only the techniques described in these three articles (i.e. by measuring lengths and breadths of flakes), the model can be taken little further. It follows that I would not recommend using these techniques in Britain, unless this is done as part of a more intensive technological and typological study. It might be said that the model has predictive power for dating purposes, and that this alone makes the measuring worthwhile. I would reply that in those few cases where even a vague date is not available a date is not always desirable or possible: the collection may be mixed or badly damaged, or sufficiently uninformative to make the utility of dating questionable.

Having said all that, there will always be times when one does have sound reasons for taking linear measurements, and clearly standard ways of

doing this should be agreed upon. Gillian Wilson justifiably complains of confusion; I attempted to clarify the situation in the articles referred to above, but apparently failed. However, Wilson is not free from confusion herself, for she seems to be suggesting a common standard for scrapers (with reference to the Hurst Fen report) and for unretouched flakes: something that would, frankly, be nonsense. Furthermore, the 'dimension along the bulbar axis' and the 'dimension at right angles to the striking platform' or flake butt are to all intents and purposes the same thing. Finally, both she and I appear to have fallen victim to a misunderstanding of Dr. Smith's description of her own method. It seems that by 'bulbar axis' she meant not 'axis of percussion', but only that dimension of the flake that is more or less in line with the percussion axis, normally the maximum dimension. This conclusion has been reached by Phil Harding and Chris Gingell on re-examination of the Windmill Hill assemblage.

Phil Harding has studied in some depth the technological aspects of debitage and tool assemblages from a series of sites in North Wiltshire. He has been measuring flake dimensions as part of this work, and has adopted the standard of measuring at right angles to the butt (length) and parallel to it (width). The standard ratio in Britain has for long been Breadth:Length rather than the other way round, and there seems no reason to change this, (*pace* Saville, above: in advocating an 'L/B index' rather than B/L ratios, he is in fact asking for actual flake measurements instead of the fitting of flakes to set templates; few would dispute the value of this suggestion but the system of measurement does not determine the way one calculates ratios).

Before concluding, a brief word on blades and cores. Both of these 'types' were defined by Palaeolithic archaeologists, who would be somewhat surprised by the use that we make of their terms in British archaeology. For, strictly speaking, there are very few of either of these pieces in British Neolithic or Bronze Age assemblages: the 'blades' are irregular and the 'cores' little more than haphazardly flaked down lumps. I would urge that sophisticated technological studies (of the kind being conducted by Harding and Gingell) are carried out before we think about how we define, still more classify, these items. If we cannot answer the question 'why classify?', then we shouldn't do it. There can be no such thing as an absolute typology, despite the convictions of R.A. Smith and contemporaries who erred and strayed as lost sheep. A good typology is designed to respond to specific questions: it is the questions that come first. A coherent research design is as scarce an animal now as it has ever been. This is what should really concern us both as individuals and as a Society. Methodological wrangles have their place; important, yes, but very secondary.

Pitts M.W. 1978a. On the shape of waste flakes as an index of technological change in lithic industries. *J. Arch. Science* 5, 17-37.

1978b. Towards an understanding of flint industries in post-glacial England. *Bull. Inst. Archaeology* 15, 179-197.

& Jacobi R.M. 1979. Some aspects of change in flaked stone industries of the Mesolithic and Neolithic in southern Britain. *J. Arch. Science* 6, 163-177.