

HARPER KELLEY (1896–1962): A MODEST PREHISTORIAN

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ABSTRACT

Harper Kelley is a difficult individual to grasp. Little is known about his life and he published few papers. His career, spent mostly at the head of the Department of Prehistory of the Musée de l'Homme in Paris, is divided into two parts separated by the Second World War. In the 1930s, he devoted himself mainly to African Prehistory, while post-war publications deal mainly with the French Palaeolithic. Although he can be considered, in many ways, as a “disciple” of the Abbé Breuil, he showed originality of thought and above all a methodological rigour that anticipated concepts developed later, such as the variability of the Levallois method.

Full reference: Vallin, L. 2009. Harper Kelley (1896–1962): a modest prehistorian. In R. Hosfield, F. Wenban-Smith & M. Pope (eds.) *Great Prehistorians: 150 Years of Palaeolithic Research, 1859–2009* (Special Volume 30 of *Lithics: The Journal of the Lithic Studies Society*): 153–161. Lithic Studies Society, London.

Keywords: Harper Kelley, Alice Bowler-Kelley, Musée de l'Homme, African Prehistory, Palaeolithic, refitting, Levallois

INTRODUCTION

The scientific career of Harper Kelley presents some paradoxes. He occupied a central position in the set of French prehistorians (“*Maître de Recherches*” and “*Directeur de Recherches*” at the *Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique*; Head of the Department of Prehistory and Director of the Laboratory of Ethnology at the *Musée de l'Homme*) yet his list of publications is short and does not include any great synthesis that structures his work or develops a new theory. His friends themselves have acknowledged this deficiency, which they explained by the involvement of Harper Kelley in the organization, then management of the collections, of the *Musée de l'Homme*.

Indeed Harper Kelley was, above all, a collector concerned with the understanding of objects, as shown by his publications which are mainly devoted to the Typology.

At the end of his life, his own personal collection included more than 30,000 objects, divided between South Africa (Cape Province, Transvaal and the Orange state), equatorial Africa, the Near East, England, North America and France (north of the Paris Basin, and the valley of the Garonne). However, Kelley's precise observations allow current prehistorians to gather useful information and his work anticipates many modern concepts.

AN AMERICAN IN PARIS

The adventure of the *Musée de l'Homme*

We know very few circumstances of Kelley's life and we are unaware of the background of this American, beyond being born in the United States in 1896 and settling in France at the end of the First World War, in 1917. His first contacts with French

Prehistory were given by Dr Henri-Martin, who welcomed him in France (Kelley 1957a, 1958) and with whom he excavated at La Quina between 1927 and the Second World War. We know nothing of the events that got him into touch with Paul Rivet, Director of Ethnography at the Museum of Trocadéro in Paris, who in 1932 offered him a room at the Museum of Natural History [a separate institution, which however displayed its ethnographic collections at the Trocadéro] to house his prehistoric collection, which was already significant. From 1933 onward, Kelley was occupied with organizing the Department of Prehistory in the Museum of Trocadéro, which, under Paul Rivet, became the *Musée de l'Homme* in 1937 (Faublée 1962). The museum presentation, in the spirit of the time, was focused upon comparative archaeology and aimed to show main evolutionary trends from one continent to another. This work led in particular to Kelley carrying out a mission in 1935 to

major museums in the United States, to explore exchange opportunities with the Museum of Trocadéro.

Kelley's African career

Kelley's first publications, before the Second World War, were devoted solely to Africa, although he had already performed, alone or with Abbé Henri Breuil (cf. Davies, this volume), surveys in Picardie and Haute-Normandie. In 1929 Abbé Breuil made his first trip to South Africa, where he stayed with Harper Kelley and his first wife, Alice Bowler-Kelley; it was on this occasion that Alice led Breuil on the track of the "Brandberg White Lady" (Le Quellec 2006), and the couple also surveyed in Lesotho with Breuil and van Riet Lowe (Figure 1). Kelley was also one of the founding members of the French Society of Africanists, in 1930.



Figure 1: Kelley during a field survey near Pretoria in September 1929; from left to right: Abbé Breuil, Mrs Hoerne, Harper Kelley, van Riet Lowe and Mrs A. Kelley [© Musée d'Archéologie Nationale de Saint-Germain-en-Laye, Breuil Fund, Album n°2]

Kelley's contributions to the African Prehistory are conceived on the same pattern and in the same spirit as most of his later publications; the point of view is purposely descriptive and analytical, and the plan of the article is often the same: two or three pages of text followed by many figures where artefacts are precisely captioned, with the topic usually deriving from the collections of the Museum of Trocadéro, including Kelley's own material, subsequently bequeathed to the Museum. So Kelley published: a series of Neolithic bone harpoons collected in Niger (Kelley 1934); Tumbian lithic series collected in the Belgian Congo (Kelley & Doize 1934); some Acheulian bifaces found in Mali and gorge-axes from sub-Saharan Africa (Kelley 1935); lithic series of the Middle Stone Age and Late Stone Age collected by the Mission du Bourg de Bozas in Abyssinia (Breuil & Kelley 1936); an Acheulian settlement in Tassili des Ajjers which was prospected by Henri Lhote (Lhote & Kelley 1936); and lithic series from Congo (Droux & Kelley 1939). Just one publication on African material was produced after the 1930s (Kelley 1951), but it is a supplement to his paper of 1935.

The role played by his wife Alice in Kelley's career should be mentioned. Curiously, they had similar careers and comparable lists of publications; she presented several papers about lithic typology of African Prehistory during the French Prehistoric Congress at Périgueux in 1934 (Bowler-Kelley 1935) and some notes, in collaboration with Breuil, about the Quaternary of the Somme Valley in 1939 and 1947 (Breuil *et al.* 1939; Breuil *et al.* 1939, 1947). Divorced at an undetermined date, both Harper and Alice subsequently re-married. Alice Bowler died on 25th July 1956 in Bar Harbor in Maine.

THE INTERLUDE OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR

Kelley's bibliography shows a gap between

1939 and 1951, primarily due to the Second World War, which forced him to take refuge in the United States. We know that the *Musée de l'Homme* was at the heart of a Resistance network fighting against German occupation and, even if Kelley was not part of the "*Groupe du Musée de l'Homme*", his position in occupied France would probably have been difficult. Once in the United States, a passport to return to France or England was repeatedly denied to him during the war. During the years 1941–1942 he was looking for temporary situations, and in 1942 he set up the Hall of Prehistory in the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard University (letter to Paul Rivet, 15th December 1942, archives of the *Musée de l'Homme*, serial number 2AP1C, held in the *Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle*). Kelley was able to return to France once the war had ended, and took up his duties again at the *Musée de l'Homme*; in 1946 he was dignified with the rank of Chevalier of the French Legion of Honour by the Vice-President at Arcy-sur-Cure, at the same time as Breuil was raised to the rank of Officer.

THE SECOND CAREER OF KELLEY

The influence of Breuil

The dominant position of Abbé Breuil on French Prehistory for several decades was based on a well-established network (cf. Davies, this volume). The Kelley couple, Harper and Alice, was part of this network. The roles of Harper Kelley at the *Musée de l'Homme*, and the Assistant Manager Louis Pales, another friend of Breuil, gave to Breuil access and control over some key collections (notably, amongst many others, those of: Vayson de Pradenne, obtained by the *Musée de l'Homme* in 1948; Marquis de Vibraye; and Dubus, from Normandy). Kelley trusted Breuil greatly and remained loyal to him; after the war, the Kelleys' lived at 52 Avenue de la Motte-Picquet in Paris, at the same address as Mrs Marguerite de

Mallevoüe, sister of Breuil.

This influence is reflected in Kelley's publications, where he always supports Breuil's viewpoint concerning such diverse topics as: the lack of Levallois débitage during the Acheulian (Breuil & Kelley 1956) and the origin of pedunculate points in the Spanish Solutrean (Kelley 1955a). Some topics were also suggested to Kelley by Breuil, such as the article on leaf bifaces (Kelley 1960a). Kelley was the co-author chosen by Breuil for his synthesis on the Lower Palaeolithic, on the occasion of the Fiftieth Anniversary of the French Prehistoric Society (Breuil & Kelley 1954). Breuil and Kelley also made a number of surveys together, not only in Africa as previously mentioned, but also in France, particularly in the northern Paris Basin, including, amongst others: in Aisne in 1930 (quarry pits of Pommiers, Pont d'Arcy, Presles-et-Boves); in the quarries of the Somme Valley (Cagny-Cimetière, Cagny-Garenne) between 1932 and 1938; and in Montières-Etouvie in 1957. By an amazing coincidence, Harper Kelley survived his mentor by only a year; suffering health problems since at least 1960, he died in 1962 (Field 1963).

Kelley's work on the French Palaeolithic

The Lower and Middle Palaeolithic was the favourite period for Harper Kelley. His field investigations, carried out mainly between 1932 and 1938, and between 1945 and 1954, consisted mainly of the exploration of Pleistocene loess of the northern Paris basin — Seine-Maritime (Saint-Jacques-sur-Darnétal, Mesnil-Esnard, Mont-Saint-Aignan), Oise (Allonne, Montguillain), Seine-et-Marne (Le Tillet) — and in the survey of the quarries of the Somme (Cagny-la Garenne, Cagny-Cimetière and Montières). Flint artefacts were mainly collected from the walls of the brickyards and quarries with little attention given to their chronostratigraphic context by Kelley (Joullié & Kelley 1961). Yet he also excavated a Typical Mousterian knapping floor, *in situ* in an Early Glacial (Weichselian) layer at Saint-Just-en-Chaussée (Oise), recovering 3586 lithic artefacts, including 237 cores, and achieved several refittings of Levallois flakes and blades onto their cores (Kelley 1954a). Although he did not publish this excavation, his observations remain useful in the present day (Tuffreau 1977; Figure 2).

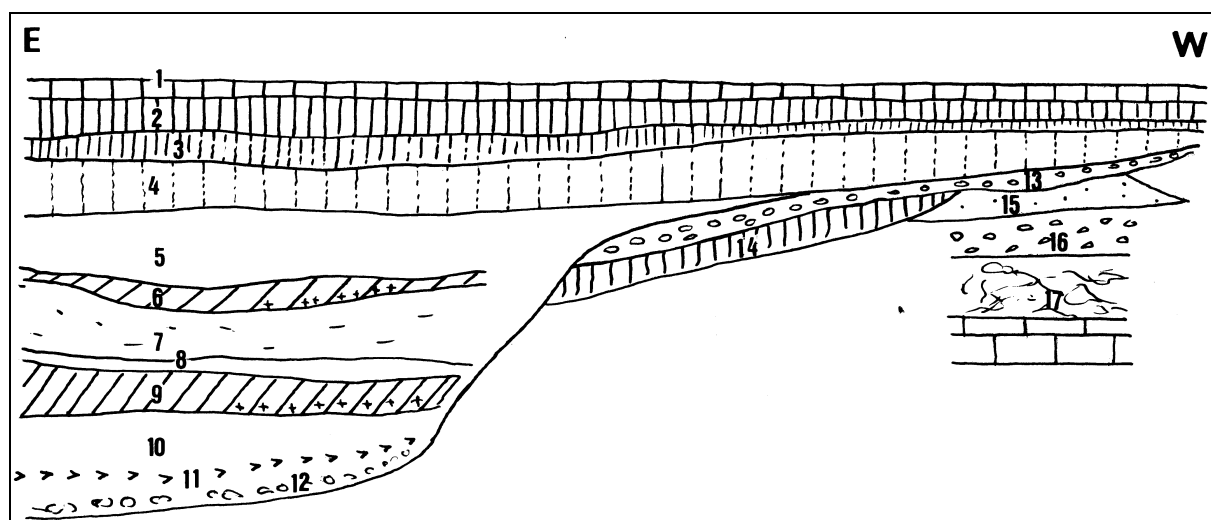


Figure 2: Stratigraphy of the Mousterian site of Saint-Just-en-Chaussée (Oise), based on a section drawn by H. Kelley (Tuffreau 1977)

The papers written by Kelley about the French Palaeolithic are like those that he produced on African Prehistory. The aim is very modest, they are mostly short notes, few hypotheses are proposed and the author restricts himself to descriptions, avoiding possible interpretations (except in articles written in collaboration). The text, often very short, is supported by numerous illustrations, which were very important to Kelley — thanks to grants from the CNRS and other foundations, he used the services of the best drawers of the time: P. Laurence, R. Humbert, C. Bouttier and E. Evrard. The viewpoint of the museum curator is always evident in his choice of topics; Kelley was attracted by the outstanding object: the biggest biface in France or in Europe (Kelley 1960b); the biggest ever flaked artefact (Kelley 1960c); the biggest Levalloisian blank (Kelley 1965) *etc.* He was also attached to aesthetics of the artefacts. Typological inventories (Kelley 1937, 1954b, 1955a, 1955b, 1956, 1957b) were then fashionable, see for example Gérard Cordier's papers about perforated tools (Cordier 1964), Louis Pradel's papers about burins (Pradel 1966), not to mention the seminal work of Bordes (1950a). Yet one can find in his publications the premonition of contemporary fields of enquiry: an article about leaf tools (*Blattspitzen*) refers to central European influences in the French Middle Palaeolithic (Kelley 1960a; Cliquet 2001); and the question of the appearance of Levallois débitage as early as the Middle Acheulian is raised about the levels of Cagny-la-Garenne (Kelley 1949; Lamotte 1995; Tuffreau 2001). Kelley shows some hesitation on the latter subject, probably under Breuil's influence. In 1947 he met François Bordes and asked for his opinion on this matter, publishing a short paper in the Bulletin of the French Prehistoric Society (Kelley 1949), before he changed his view in a joint paper with Breuil (Breuil & Kelley 1956), where the authors refute the "*Acheuléen de facies levalloisien*" brought forward by Bordes (Bordes 1950b).

Kelley also showed a modern approach to analysis of Levallois débitage, exemplified by his interest in experimental flint knapping (it is the reason why he sought the advice of Bordes in 1947, and Coutier in 1954) and his use of refitting, to support and develop technological understanding. His most interesting paper is probably the one he produced about the "*étude de la technologie levalloisienne*" (Kelley 1954a). As he himself pointed out, few previous publications had been devoted to refitting of Palaeolithic artefacts, apart from the pioneering Spurrell's work about Crayford (cf. Scott & Shaw, this volume), Worthington Smith's work about Caddington (cf. Roe, this volume), de Munck's work at Spiennes (Arts & Czesla 1990) and a few refittings published by Victor Commont (1910). Prehistorians had not yet appreciated the benefits of this method, not only for spatial analysis, but also for recognition of *schémas opératoires*, in which the reconstruction of the succession of gestures allows us to perceive the knapper's mental processes. Harper Kelley was probably the first one who started on this work thanks to high quality material from several rich sites in the loess deposits from northern France, notably: Fitz-James (Oise); Saint-Jacques-sur-Darnétal (Seine-Maritime); Mont-Saint-Aignan (Seine-Maritime); Saint-Just-en-Chaussée (Oise); and Arras (Pas-de-Calais) — these last three sites are particularly worthy of attention because they are probably *in situ* flint-knapping workshops. Furthermore, Kelley's paper is the only significant publication on the prolific sites of Mont-Saint-Aignan and Arras, although the site of Mont-Saint-Aignan is briefly discussed in a later publication (Kelley 1957b). The descriptions of refittings by Kelley are accurate and pertinent, they show a full understanding of lithic technology and they are supported by excellent illustrations (Figure 3). They came several decades before the work of Eric Boëda on the variability of Levallois débitage, who was the first to rehabilitate Harper Kelley's work:

“il est surprenant que cet auteur soit très peu cité en référence alors qu’il nous semble être, avec F. Bordes, l’un des préhistoriens à avoir le mieux cerné pour son époque le schéma opératoire Levallois”

(Boëda 1994: 4)

The lithic collection from the brickyard Peuleboeuf in Arras, which was visited in 1939 by Kelley’s assistants (including his wife Alice) and the discoverer of the site Jean Joire, was re-examined in 1992 at the *Musée de l’Homme*. This was the site, now disappeared, where the most extensive refitting sequences were found by Kelley, showing several Levallois *schémas opératoires*: recurrent centripetal (Kelley 1954a: Fig. 3); recurrent bipolar (*ibid*: Fig. 10 & Fig. 11–12); unipolar convergent (*ibid*: Fig. 7, no. 2); and lineal bipolar (*ibid*: Fig. 7, no. 3). Supplementing the refitting sequences described by Kelley, we added four other more partial sequences, which remain unpublished to date (Figure 4). The most complete refitting includes eight flakes conjoined on the core, plus two decortification flakes which Kelley failed to refit, and which can be replaced, as we established, on the proximal portion of the Levallois surface — “surface of débitage” (cf. Boëda 1995). Another incomplete refitting, showing the same *schéma opératoire* (recurrent bipolar) is represented by seven conjoined flakes, supplemented by two not refitting but identified as part of the same sequence. Kelley’s conclusions show that he had fully understood the Levallois concept, and already classified the various methods:

“...c’est l’ensemble de la préparation du bloc destiné à livrer un ou plusieurs éclats ou lames qui caractérise l’industrie levalloisienne... On voit que les sens d’enlèvements de cette préparation ont été dirigés, soit vers le centre, soit parallèlement en partant d’une ou des deux extrémités, soit souvent de manière convergente en partant d’une extrémité... La question la plus importante n’est pas la présence ou

l’absence de facettes, mais l’angle du plan de frappe par rapport au plan d’éclatement de l’éclat.”

(Kelley 1954a: 150–151)

The conclusion of Kelley’s paper signposts the direction for subsequent scholars of lithic, and particularly Levalloisian, technology:

“il y a lieu d’espérer que des essais de taille, plus poussés que ceux qui ont été pratiqués jusqu’à présent, nous renseigneront plus exactement sur les méthodes qui furent employées pour dégager les éclats levalloisiens de leur nucléus.”

(Kelley 1954a: 169)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to Arnaud Hurel, *Ingénieur de Recherche* in the *Institut de Paléontologie Humaine* (Paris), for information, and to Mrs Alice Lemaire, from the Central Library of the *Muséum National d’Histoire Naturelle* (Paris) who gave me easy access to the archives of the *Musée de l’Homme*; I am indebted to Mrs Agnes Billy for her help to consult the archives of the *Musée d’Archéologie Nationale de Saint-Germain-en-Laye*. I thank also Francis Wenban-Smith who suggested to me the idea for this contribution.

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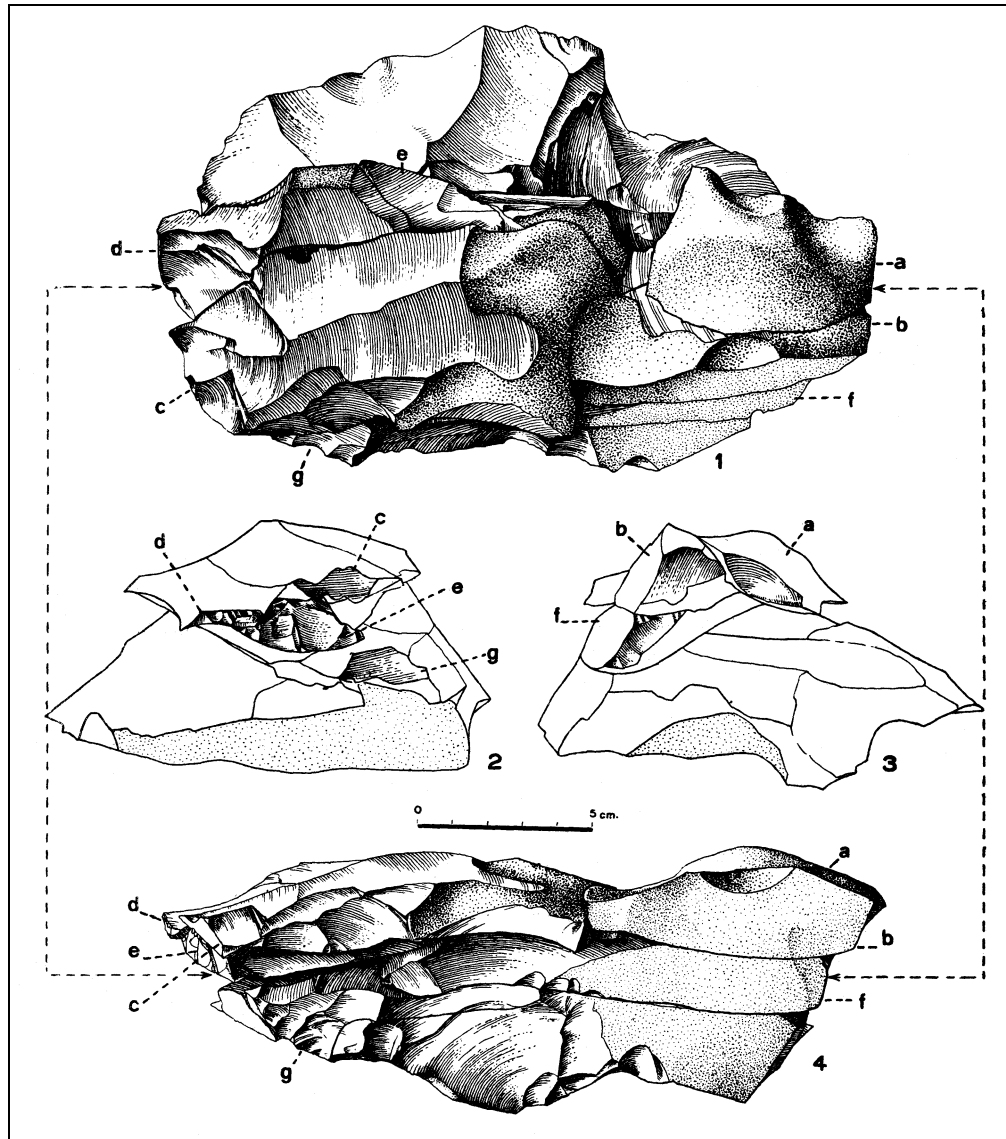


Figure 3: Refitting from the Middle Palaeolithic site of Arras (Kelley 1954a)

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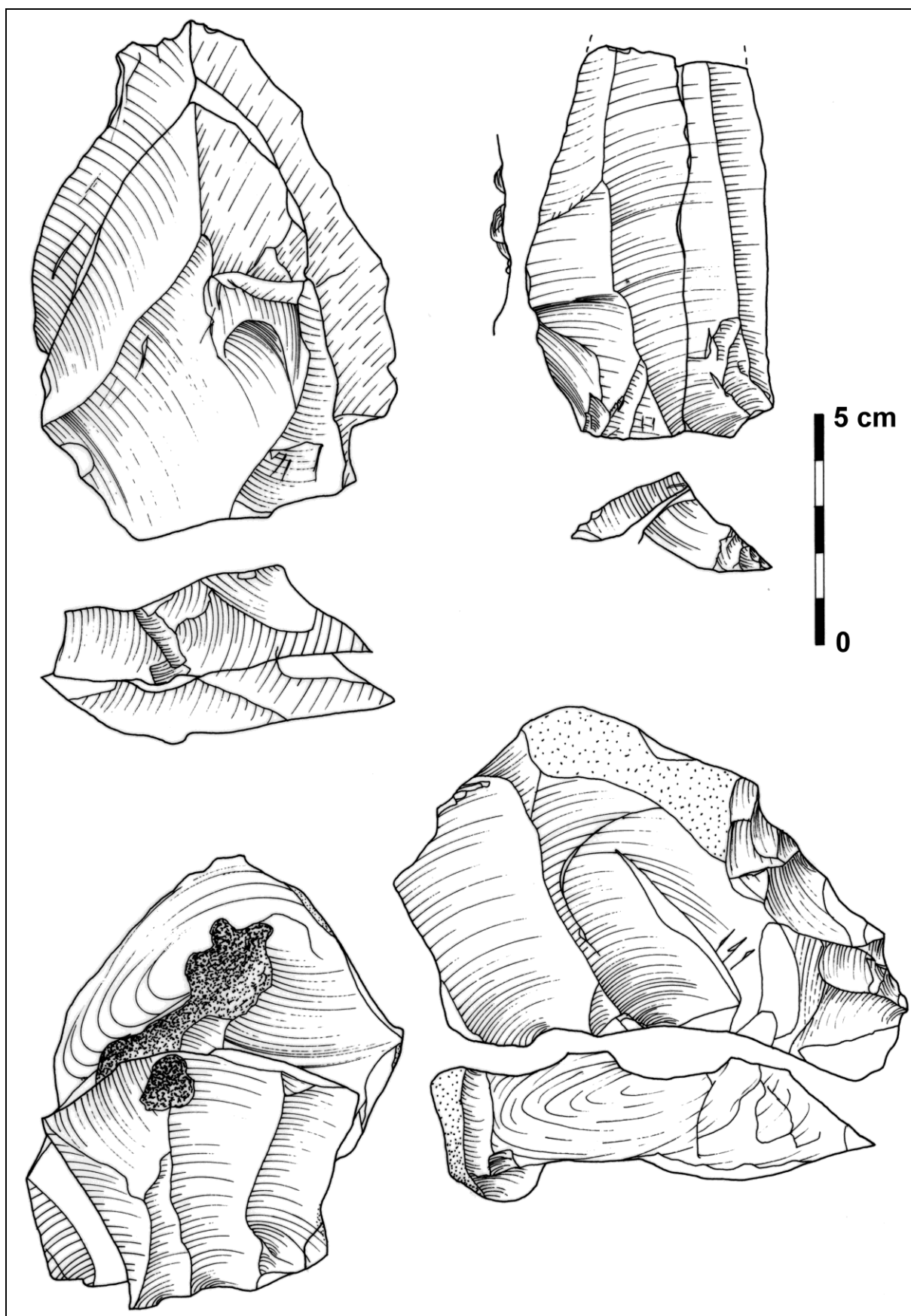


Figure 4: Refitting sequence from the Middle Palaeolithic site of Arras, unpublished by Kelley [Coll. Musée de l'Homme, drawing by L. Vallin]

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