

## South-Eastern Mediterranean Peoples Between 130,000 and 10,000 Years Ago

Elena A.A. Garcea (ed.)

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With this attractively produced, hardcover volume, Elena Garcia and sixteen other contributors succeed in providing a broad, but frequently detailed, overview of human endeavor in a region and during a time period that are fundamental to understanding some aspects of human anatomical and behavioral evolution. The authors communicate recent research progress made on understanding hunter-gatherer archaeology of the Upper Pleistocene in the south-eastern Mediterranean basin, encompassing Marine Isotope Stages (MIS) 5–2. The 120 ka, spanning 130 and 10 ka, delineate a period of remarkable cultural developments on the Afro-Asian landscape. It is germane to issues such as the ‘Out-of-Africa’ model, the dispersal of *Homo sapiens* into Eurasia, Neanderthal extinction, human adaptation to extreme environmental conditions, and transitions to semi-sedentary and sedentary lifeways. Drawing together the archaeology of northern Africa and the Levantine region in one volume may seem counterintuitive. Yet, the approach is utterly logical considering the highlighted issues, and the increasing evidence of episodes of human continuity, interspersed with discontinuity, on an ancient and uninterrupted landscape.

The book has eleven chapters, most of which are well-illustrated with maps and drawings, and some with informative photographs and tables. Chapters are presented in geographic and chronological sequence. The west to east geographic progression takes us from Morocco at the north-western tip of Africa to Libya, Egypt, and Sudanese Nubia, and then we are transferred to the Levant and Near East in south-west Asia. The time slices shift through the Middle Paleolithic/Middle Stone Age to the Upper Paleolithic/Later Stone Age, culminating in the Epipaleolithic/Upper Later Stone Age. In her introductory chapter, Garcea provides a synoptic correlation table of the different cultural units and relative chronologies, including their MIS associations. This table is especially useful for those of us who are not intimately familiar with the region or its cultural affiliations. It provides a simple, but informative overview that is easily comparable with the archaeological records of other regions. Another practical feature of some chapters is the listing of ‘further reading’ for those who want to delve deeper into either broader or more specialized topics.

The main body of work starts with Jennifer Smith setting the scene with a synthesis of paleoenvironmental conditions prevailing in most of the region during the late Pleistocene. She highlights the reality that, as a result

of environmental conditions, human habitability for vast stretches of North Africa and the Levant was highly variable during this time frame. Although the chapter would have benefitted from a summative table, it is nevertheless a comfortable read and well referenced. The first focus area is the Aterian cave sites on the Atlantic coast of Morocco. Based on the most recent stratigraphic and chronological results, Jean-Luc Schwenninger and his colleagues suggest a reassessment of the Upper Pleistocene occupation of the sites. They discuss four stratified cave sites south of Rabat (Dar es-Soltan I and II, El Mnasra, and Contrebandiers), providing new optically stimulated luminescence (OSL) dating evidence for the deposits. Stratigraphies of the sites are displayed in clear photographs with features graphically highlighted. Thorough interpretations of the complex cultural sequences are provided in table form. Their detailed approach is used to argue that—contra previous interpretations that placed the Aterian within the range of radiocarbon dating—an ‘early part’ of the industry might appear during the MIS 5 maximum. The authors also challenge the notion that technological, ecological, and social changes were largely in response to rapid climatic and environmental change at 80–70 ka. There can be little doubt about their prediction that the stratigraphic quality and integrity of these sites, together with a focused and meticulous approach to analysis and interpretation, will improve understanding of the archaeological record of the region, and of emerging ‘modern’ human behavior in this part of Africa. The well-stratified and systematically OSL dated sites from southern Africa demonstrated the validity of this approach.

The next two chapters were written by the book editor, and focus on the area in North Africa between the Maghreb and the Nile Valley. First, she reviews the period between ~130 and 40 ka, featuring the early Middle Stone Age and the later Aterian phase. It is argued that the North African human fossil and archaeological records impose a ‘conceptual revolution’ in the classic Middle Paleolithic pattern because the Levallois technique was produced by modern humans; not Neanderthals (this has been known for sub-Saharan assemblages for several decades, and it is not quite clear what is implied with ‘conceptual revolution’). The aim of the chapter is to investigate the spread of Aterian peoples in North Africa, but also provides useful environmental and chronological backgrounds. It is shown that the growing number of Aterian sites indicate that aspects of the tech-

nocomplex are not equivalent over time and space. The scattered human populations associated with the Aterian in the region were, however, able to deal with the challenges of surviving in arid environments. In the next discussion, Garcea summarizes what is currently known about the Later Stone Age of Libya, and focuses on topics such as cultural transition without biological replacement and coping with droughts. She sees Libya as a critical area in Mediterranean population history during the late Upper Pleistocene, and suggests that the peoples of North Africa had shared traditions with those of the greater near-coastal Mediterranean landscape.

Pierre Vermeersch tackles the cultural sequence of the Egyptian Nile Valley. He starts his discussion with the Middle Paleolithic and moves onto its transition into the Upper Paleolithic, also touching on the Late Paleolithic. The text is well-illustrated, and interspersed with attention-grabbing 'windows' such as the relationship between Egypt, 'modern' humans and the 'Out-of-Africa' model; the burial of the dead by perhaps 75 ka; and flint mining by 40–35 ka. The main upshot in the chapter is that the recording of archaeological remains, associated with the Middle and Upper Paleolithic in the Egyptian Nile Valley, is severely restricted as a result of changing desert climate and the sedimentation history of the region. Nonetheless, where sites are preserved they provide remarkable, and at times surprising, glimpses into past human behaviors. Staying in the Nile Valley, Romauld Schild and Fred Wendorf introduce us to the Late Paleolithic hunter-gatherers of Nubia and Upper Egypt. This is another beautifully illustrated text with a flowing narrative. The authors provide historical and environmental settings before fitting people and their associated material cultures onto the landscape. They present a schematic 'tentative chronology' of Late Paleolithic taxonomic units. For the Sudanese and Egyptian Nubia, between the Second and First Cataracts, six units are identified; five are associated with the Egyptian Nubia and Upper Egypt, between the First Cataract and Dishna. Other topics include adaptation to difficult environments, warfare, cattle domestication, and human burials.

John Shea's contribution is the first to focus on the Near East, more specifically, the Levant. He meets his audience head-on with one of the most controversial and persistent debates in paleoanthropology—the relationship between Neanderthals and early *Homo sapiens*. Also, he asserts that Levantine prehistory is not merely 'an appendix' to European prehistory nor a 'suburb' of Africa, but that it provides a unique record to be situated in the broader evolutionary context of our species. The piece is succinct, yet packed with data and illustrations that support the descriptive frameworks and interpretations of human behavior. The latter include aspects of settlement, subsistence, technology and sociality. The Levantine late Middle Pleistocene and early Upper Pleistocene cultural stratigraphy is presented in a convenient table (but, short definitions for the archaeological complexes in the table would have made it even more user-friendly to the general reader). Notwithstanding the academic rigor of the text and data, the author

succeeds in creating a backdrop against which we can easily envisage a Neanderthal person coming, perhaps for the first time, face-to-face with a wo/man like ourselves.

By ~ 50 ka, the transition from the Middle to the Upper Paleolithic can be observed in the Levant. It is on this topic that Ofer Bar-Yosef and Anna Belfer-Cohen focus their combined attention. For them, the Upper Paleolithic and early Epipaleolithic can shed light on two key issues: a) the transition from the Middle to the Upper Paleolithic; and, b) the first farming communities in the region. They summarize current archaeological knowledge relating to the transition, the initial Upper Paleolithic, and discuss the Ahmarian, Aurignacian, late Ahmarian, and the Epipaleolithic phases. Attention is given to subsistence behaviors in a separate section where it is shown that the human presence on archaeological sites was dominant over that of other predators during the Upper Pleistocene, and that changes in the faunal record occurred during the early Neolithic. The authors conclude that, because the Levant was a narrow, terrestrial corridor between Africa and Eurasia, it played a crucial role as 'highway' during different phases in the chronicle of human evolution. In his brief contribution, Brian Boyd sketches a historical background of the later Epipaleolithic, or so-called Natufian, of the Levant. He discusses the discovery of the 'culture', and proceeds to introduce changes to the traditional interpretations of the Natufian; first thought to represent Mesolithic hunter-gatherers who practiced some cultivation and domestication, but later labeled as 'Epipaleolithic' to demonstrate economic and technological continuity with the Upper Paleolithic. According to Boyd it is again time for a shift in the narrative—a shift towards theory. Dare I say that this seems somewhat after-the-fact? Today, most archaeologists understand the interplay (subtle or not) between theoretical underpinning and empirical research, even though they do not always address the topic explicitly. The mostly excellent contributions to this volume, and the authors' ability to situate their work within the larger discourse of humanity, serve as illustration.

With the final chapter, Garcea aims to bring together the latest discoveries, interpretations, and discussions relating to the peoples of the region between 130 and 10 ka. She fluently touches on key issues raised in the volume, focusing on those she considers useful in 'bridging the gap between in and out of Africa.' Brief summaries and comments are thus provided for the Out-of-Africa 2 movement, the Middle to Upper Paleolithic transition, cultural changes at the end of the Pleistocene, and the ultimate food production 'revolution.' Although the editor does not claim that the book covers 'every aspect of the south-eastern Mediterranean prehistory of 130 to 10 ka,' I am convinced that most readers will find it a considerable contribution. She succeeds in her aim to collate detailed information, often hidden away in specialist or regional journals, yet she was able to produce a cohesive body of work. As always, reviewing an edited book is challenging and a single reviewer can hardly ever do justice to the variety of focus areas and approaches. Any emphases, criticisms, or omissions

are therefore subjective. I hope, however, to have provided a reasonable reflection of what readers can expect.