

## Fit for purpose? Taxonomies for the Palaeolithic reconsidered

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Thursday 4<sup>th</sup> December, 5pm, John Wymer Room, Avenue Campus (wine will be served!)

### Abstract

The fundamental nomenclature of the periods into which the Palaeolithic is sub-divided, for instance (in Europe) "Lower, Middle and Upper", have a long and venerable history. However it is becoming increasingly questionable whether the current taxonomy is fit for purpose, and if not how might it most usefully be updated. Clearly the key question for such a taxonomy must be what questions we want to answer. This seminar will review the way we divide the Palaeolithic into named periods and reconsider the rationale/basis for doing so, considering what might be more suitable approaches to sub-division, and possible revisions to names and date-ranges.

### 1. Resolving the Early, Lower and Middle Palaeolithic, and sub-divisions

The current period framework (**Att 1**) shows "Lower Palaeolithic" as from -500,000 to -150,000, and "Middle Palaeolithic" as from -150,000 to -40,000. Besides the fact that the start date for Lower Palaeolithic needs to be pushed back, this raises the questions of (a) how to distinguish Lower from Middle Palaeolithic, (b) what date best divides the two, and (c) whether a revised framework with more than two sub-divisions is required for the current Lower/Middle Palaeolithic.

If we agree that it is still worth attempting to maintain a discourse of dated cultural periods for the Palaeolithic [and for the past in general], then the earlier "Lower/Middle" part of the Palaeolithic now looks very different to when these terms were first conceived in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In particular, we now [in Britain] have:

- intermittent episodes of occupation well before the Anglian ice-age [MIS 12 in geological terms - to be discussed later, item 1.5] characterised by flake/core industries
- episodes from shortly before (or perhaps during) the Anglian characterised by handaxe manufacture (eg. Boxgrove), and perhaps also the flake-tool industry of High Lodge (although the dating of this latter occurrence is currently under debate)
- Britain is then thought to be uninhabited (and uninhabitable) at the peak of the Anglian glaciation
- a period of periodically intense occupation, post-Anglian through to perhaps MIS 6, characterised by a wider variety of lithic technological approaches, including

handaxe-making, non-handaxe-making (Clactonian) and Levalloisian (of various types). Handaxe-dominated industries persist through to c. 250,000 BP, within MIS 8 (eg. Harnham). The best-dated occurrences of Levalloisian occur between c. 300,000 and 230,000 BP [from MIS 8 and early MIS 7], but isolated instances of material that is technologically Levalloisian may occur much earlier.

- Britain is currently thought to be unoccupied from the cold episode of MIS 6 through to at least the end of the warm interglacial episode of MIS 5e (the Ipswichian, c. 130,000-115,000 BP).
- Then after that there are intermittent "later Middle Palaeolithic" episodes of Neanderthal occupation in the last glacial period, through the period from (perhaps as early as) MIS 5d to MIS 4/3, including episodes characterised by use of *bout coupé* handaxes (eg. Lynford).

The conventional distinction between Lower and Middle Palaeolithic is based on the appearance of Levallois technology, but this ceases to be useful [if one is trying to describe a period, rather than merely a technological approach] if Levalloisian technology may occur earlier than thought, and handaxe-making occurs later, and there is substantial overlap between the two. It may therefore be worth trying not just to redefine "Lower" and "Middle" Palaeolithic, but instead to develop a new framework.

There are therefore at least three main issues

- to establish a rationale for period separation/grouping
- to try and agree on useful period ranges
- to agree sensible preferred period names

The focus of the seminar will be to provide an academic lead on these issues, although practical considerations in terms of the use of period names in HERs and museum cataloguing need also to be considered. The wording of the current EH definitions leaves a lot of scope for improvement, but there's no point in going to town on revising current definitions of "Lower" and "Middle" Palaeolithic [and many of the other terms] if we are going to revise the framework with new periods.

As a starting point for discussion, three new periods are proposed for the period prior to the occupational hiatus of MIS 5e [the Ipswichian interglacial], and a fourth new period is proposed to cover late Middle Palaeolithic occupation of Britain after MIS 5e.

- 1.1** - "Early Palaeolithic", an umbrella term covering from the first occupation of Britain [-850,000] up to MIS 5e [-125,000];
- 1.2** - "Lower Palaeolithic" or "Early Lower Palaeolithic", covering from the first occupation of Britain [-850,000] up to the occupational hiatus of the major Anglian glaciation, MIS 12 [-450,000];
- 1.3** - "Late Lower Palaeolithic", "Lower/Middle Palaeolithic" or "Early Middle Palaeolithic", covering from MIS 12 [-450,000] to MIS 5e [-125,000].
- 1.4** - "British Mousterian" or "Late Middle Palaeolithic", covering from after MIS 5e [-115,000] to the start of the Upper Palaeolithic [-40,000].

There is also of course the additional issue of how to deal with material (eg. Beedings) that could be construed as transitional between "Middle Palaeolithic" (*sensu* current) and Upper Palaeolithic.

Finally, just in case it becomes relevant to discussion, it is useful to bear in mind that it has been officially agreed that specified date ranges for defined periods CAN overlap. For instance, one could have "British Mousterian" from -115,000 to -30,000, and Upper Palaeolithic from -45,000 through to -9,500. [NB - at this later point of course we have to start being concerned with C14 calibration, and the difference between BC and BP, which is negligible/irrelevant for earlier parts of the Palaeolithic due to dating imprecision]

## **2 - Upper Palaeolithic - divide or not, and if so, where?**

The current EH period framework fails to sub-divide the Upper Palaeolithic. As pointed out by contributions on the HER Forum following the meeting of 9<sup>th</sup> July earlier this year, this could very usefully be subdivided into "Early Upper Palaeolithic " and "Late Upper Palaeolithic ". The main boundary should probably be the Last Glacial Maximum, between c. 24,000 and 18,000 BP, when Britain was unoccupied, so one could have an Early UP between c. 40,000 and 22,000 BP, and a Late UP between 18,000 and 10,000 BP [or perhaps up to 9500 BP, or -9500, bearing in mind the subsequent item concerning overlap between Mesolithic and final Upper Palaeolithic].

It is also perhaps worth considering whether further sub-divisions of the Early or Late Upper Palaeolithic might be useful/feasible.