
Deconstructing 'Tabun D' phase: a variable perspective into the Early Middle Paleolithic of Tabun Cave and the southern Levant

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Résumé

The Levantine Middle Paleolithic (MP) is commonly divided into three phases: early, middle and late, originally structured on Copeland's characterization of the assemblages from layers D, C and B of Garrod's excavations at Tabun Cave, Israel. While variability of the middle and late phases of the Levantine MP has been long discussed (1-2), the early phase – Tabun-D – is still perceived as a relatively homogenous techno-complex. It is conceived as focused on intensive production of blades, most often (though not exclusively) using unidirectional/convergent Levallois technology. Furthermore, sites of this phase are often reconstructed as short-term residential occupation. Although insights into its complexity were already provided by the work of Meignen (3) on different blade technologies and results from Misliya that indicate a high intensity of occupation (4), we are still lacking a perspective into patterns of change throughout this phase.

Preliminary notes on the variable character of 'Tabun-D' were first raised by Jelinek (5), following his excavation at Tabun, revealing it is composed of a long sequence, extending over 3m of sediments, divided into eight units (IX-II) and 43 layers (27-69), dated to 250-190ka (6). Nonetheless, ensuing research has focused on the best preserved Unit IX, while the other units of the early MP were ignored, mainly due to the presence of erosional channels in the upper part of the Tabun-D sequence. In our recent analysis of the Tabun-D assemblages we excluded units III-IV and VI, which are most affected by the erosional channels, but used units IX-VII (layers 69-50), V (layers 41-42) and II (layers 32-27) to examine patterns of change within the early MP. Results demonstrate a decline in the frequency of blades-the hallmark of 'Tabun-D' phase-through time. Fluctuations in frequencies of points and other technological elements, alongside changes in secondary modification, segmentation of reduction sequences and taphonomy of the flint assemblages indicate variation in exploitation of the landscape and the character of occupation at the cave. Micromorphological research completes the picture by tracing variation in the depositional environments. The bundle of evidence is employed to deconstruct the character of the end of the Middle Pleistocene at the cave, which we argue, forms an essential step in our understanding the mosaic character the MP of the Levant and the possible reoccurring waves of dispersal out of Africa.

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Mots-Clés: Middle Paleolithic, Levant, Tabun Cave, diachronic change, mode of occupation