

Cultural transitions in the Middle and Later Stone Age records of North Africa : an overview from Morocco

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An intensely debated issue in human evolutionary research is the African origins and dispersal of *Homo sapiens* into North Africa. Significant uncertainty remains on the nature, timing and associated paleoenvironments with cultural differentiation of the North African Middle Stone Age (NAMSAs) and recent excavations and associated various dating techniques have spawned a new hypothesis that the NAMSAs groups appeared as early as 300,000 yrs ago in Jebel Irhoud, Morocco. Knowledge is highly limited on this MSA population expansion, particularly when these early hominids appeared initially, the duration of occupation and the palaeoenvironmental context during occupation. There is an especially rich archaeological record near Casablanca. However it is unclear when these dispersals took place in North Africa or how successful they were initially. Research in some sites in Morocco provides relevant results demonstrating exceptional potential covering the critical periods of the possible emergence of the blade technology, bifacial foliates, the persistence of some late Acheulean “archaic tools” and the precocious appearance of symbolic artefacts and other behavioural indicators of the cognitive complexity. It should also be possible to demonstrate whether Northwest Africa served as a refugium even during the most arid periods of the last interglacial-glacial cycle.

The transition between the MSA and LSA occurs between 30 and 20,000 years ago in Northwest Africa, but may not involve a simple and uniform process. In Morocco, the youngest age estimates for the latest MSA levels are in the range of ~29 ka cal BP based on several independent dating techniques. The Later Stone Age industry dominated by microlithic backed bladelets recorded at numerous sites from inland and coastal areas of the Maghreb (modern Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and parts of Libya). The chronology of the Later Stone Age has been the subject of intensive study in recent years and the dating evidence now supports the emergence of microlithic LSA technology in the Maghreb by at least ~25 ka cal BP