ABSTRACT

Understanding of human behavioral changes during the later Middle to earlier Late Pleistocene, encoded in the rudimentary record of stone artifacts, is impeded by problems of communication among archaeologists. For example: continued use of broad-scale developmental stage terms, such as “ Earlier” vs. “Middle Stone Age” impedes understanding because of the multiplicity of implied meanings; continued widespread application of the term “Acheulean” to almost any unit containing large, bifacially trimmed “tools” impedes the understanding of subtle design changes. Nomenclature devised for content units from Dakhleh and Kharga Oases, Western Desert, Egypt, is a modification of recommendations made in 1965, which were aimed at greater flexibility and precision in naming cultural stratigraphic units.

BACKGROUND

I was recently bemused by finding passionate arguments about whether or not something is “Middle Palaeolithic” or even “Acheulean” (cf. Ronen and Weinstein-Evron 2000). What such arguments denote is that archaeologists are not communicating (cf. Clark 2002:50):
It was, as such things go, “successful”—socially enjoyable, intellectually stimulating, and so forth. What struck me most about this conference, however, was what was not said. It became evident, just below a thin veneer of informed and sophisticated debate, that there were enormous differences in the biases, preconceptions, and assumptions that the participants brought to the resolution of problems thought to be held in common. At times, these differences were so great that there was literally no common basis for discussion [original emphasis].

Such arguments usually occur because the underlying assumptions and interpretations embodied “in a name” are not objectified. And in general they reflect common archaeological practice—to begin defining and naming things from the “top down,” or the most general, rather than beginning with, and naming defined, basic analytic content units. That practice results in terms such as “Acheulean” becoming so over-extended, bearing so little precise meaning, that they are only the equivalent of the broad “developmental stage terms”: the “Earlier”, “Middle”, and “Later Stone Age”, or the “Lower”, “Middle” and “Upper Palaeolithic” terms.

An example is the following exchange of views (in Ronen and Weinstein-Evron 2000:229):

Romauld Schild: I agree. It [the Bockstein material] is Middle Palaeolithic. However, there are two sealed Late Acheulean sites at Dakhla, certainly before Stage 7, that contain classical Klausenischemesser and Prodniks together with unifacial side scrapers and hundreds of handaxes from amygdaloids through cordiforms, and Levallois technology. I think that they are three hundred thousand years old if not more. They also show the resharpening scars of Prondniks.

Gerhard Bosinski: I agree, if you admit that this is Middle Palaeolithic.

Romauld Schild: No. To me it is Late Acheulean. We published it as Late Acheulean. You can not change it.

NOMENCLATURE

If one cannot change the referent, how does one disagree with the original ascription and name? Must one always go through long discussions of who called what, by what term and when, in terms of field units and their ascriptions? Might it be advantageous to have some system of nomenclature that refers to content or evidential units without implying assignments to such broad-named entities as “Middle Palaeolithic”, or “Late Acheulean”? It seems that whenever someone finds a large, bifacially worked lithic artifact in the Sahara they call it “Acheulean” (e.g., Siirainen 1999; Hill 2001). In my opinion, many of these do not “fit” any precise definition of African Acheulean, including the material originally excavated at Dakhleh (contra Schild and Wendorf 1977; Wendorf and Schild 1980; Kleindienst 1985). In order to refer to that material, as originally described, and to similar aggregates found by members of the Dakhleh Oasis Project, I introduced the term