As well as in the Levant as worldwide, the handaxe is one of the most fascinating artefacts of prehistory. In Europe “handaxes” played a major role in authentication of prehistoric humans. The first discoveries date back to 1679 when John Conyers unearthed the first known handaxe together with elephant bones in Britain. Already before the approval of “antediluvian man”, handaxes have been identified as man made tools of great age. In 1797 John Frere declared for the famous Hoxne handaxe belonging to “a very remote period indeed”. In the nineteenth century handaxes were the keystones for the acceptance of the antiquity of the human race. Since that time handaxes became an icon of the Palaeolithic, particularly for its beginnings. It deeply imprinted in the minds of scientists well into the twentieth century attributing a deep, but one-sided interest to these tools declaring them of particular importance. However, the perception of prehistoric people assuredly was different from that of prehistorians.

Considering the lower Palaeolithic of the Middle East, there is a wealth of publications reflecting a long-standing research. There are several hundred Acheulean sites reported from that area, suggesting an extremely rich legacy of that period. Many local and regional syntheses tried more or less successfully to structure this phase. Although there are an impressive number of papers dealing with the lower Palaeolithic in the Levant, clear information about that period is modest. Well excavated and documented sites producing substantial numbers of artefacts are rare, and stratified sites with multiple occupations from different periods of the lower Palaeolithic are scarce. Available data from the few excavated Acheulean sites disallow to establish an unambiguous chronological and cultural framework valid for the whole Levant. Besides the Nadaouiyeh Stratigraphy only in the cave of Umm Qatafa an analogous succession of varied Acheulean levels was excavated. For all other sites (e.g. Tabun, Revadim) information is limited. A further pending issue is chronology, as for all late lower Palaeolithic sites there are no precise datings.

Despite the rich heritage attributed to the lower Palaeolithic in the Levant, the question of the Acheulean is still difficult to apprehend. First, there is a widespread confusion in terminology. The expression “Acheulean” may express a chronological term or be a cultural attribution in a strict or a wide sense, or even allude to technological and typological approaches. In many cases just the presence of the archetype of the handaxe was sufficient for an attribution to the Acheulean. Hence, numerous isolated discoveries labelled “Acheulean” contribute to a severe overestimation of that period, comprising prehistoric manifestations of diverse nature. Indeed the term “Acheulean” comprises an inconsistent entity suggesting a shared identity.
Add publication

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