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# New Excavation at Skhul Cave, Israel: contextualizing early *Homo sapiens* in the Middle Paleolithic Levant

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## R sum 

MIS 5 is regarded as a central interlude of *Homo sapiens* dispersal into Asia. Nevertheless, sites containing their diagnostic anatomical remains outside Africa from this particular stage remain extremely scarce. Qafzeh and Skhul are exceptions, and both demonstrate early symbolic behavior expressed in the presence of burials and the use of pigments and shells. Skhul was extensively excavated in 1931-1932 by McCown and reported to include two Middle Paleolithic layers, yielding ten hominins, some of which clearly represent intended burials. Due to the lack of systematic collection of finds and the coarse-grained excavation techniques typical of the early 20th century, our ability to extract behavioral patterns and reconstruct the site’s environment, is limited. In order to discern adaptive patterns of early *Homo sapiens* in the Levant, returning to Skhul seemed imperative. It was long believed that Skhul was excavated down to bedrock in 1931-1932, but careful reading of McCown’s text and figures suggests that the northern edge of the deposits remains intact and buried under the 1930’s excavation dump. After initial discovery of these deposits in 2016 and first season of excavation in 2017 we have identified in this locality a series of four superimposed layers with a total depth of ca. 1 meter. The two upper layers are rich with flint artifacts

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\*Intervenant

and faunal remains. The flint tools and waste are heavily white patinated as typical to the upper Middle Paleolithic layer (B1) of McCown's excavations. While the new excavation is limited to the northern edge of the site, it can still provide significant insights into the site's stratigraphy and its formation. The recovery of stratified, *in situ* assemblages enables a correlation between various disciplines of material culture, environmental proxies and chronology. Preliminary results of the new excavations of the *in situ* layers, primarily addressing the character of the lithic industry and faunal remains, demonstrate a more complex picture than previously reported. The nature of the material found within the 1930's excavation dump, which enables a complementary perspective over McCown's excavations, also provides insights into the extent of the missing elements within the 1930's published assemblages and a more comprehensive picture of the behavioral patterns of early *Homo sapiens* at the site.

**Mots-Clés:** Skhul Cave, Human Evolution, Middle Paleolithic, Homo sapiens