
A view from the East: assessing the variability of backed pieces in the Horn of Africa

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Résumé

Classic definitions for the Later Stone Age (LSA) in eastern Africa often include the presence of microlithic industries. However, what can be considered microlithic is greatly debated. If many researchers tend to use the definition of small backed pieces for microliths, there is no consensus for what 'small' means (varying from 25 to 30 and even 50 mm in length). Here, we consider backed pieces, without any indication of size. The use of this broad category, corresponding to a type of retouch that can be objectively identified, thus allows for more comprehensive diachronic comparisons of implements, regardless of their size. A critical review of the literature associated with a re-examination of major collections shows that: 1) the presence of backed pieces predating Marine Isotopic Stage 1 in the region is anecdotal, 2) during the Late Glacial, backed pieces are common but numerically not important, 3) backed pieces become widespread and represent a significant part of the assemblages only from the Mid-Late Holocene.

Given the absence of consensus on terminology and the absence of common typology in the region, we attempt to describe the variability of backed pieces using two complementary approaches: multivariate statistical analysis on a set of ~30 attributes and 2D morphometrics analyses, both based on data from ~200 artifacts coming from 8 securely dated contexts; the two approaches provided complementary results.

These methods allowed us to identify and discuss chronological trends (e.g. the apparent absence of miniaturization through time, the increase of geometric shapes during Mid-Late Holocene) without having to introduce names or to propose a new formal 'descriptive' typology.

Mots-Clés: Backed pieces, Horn of Africa, Later Stone Age

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