

What Is The Middle Stone Age? (A Proposal for a New Approach to Partitioning the Stone Age of sub-Saharan Africa)

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Over the last couple of decades, research concerning the Middle Stone Age (MSA) has emerged from relative obscurity to a position near center stage in African archaeology. Burgeoning interest in the MSA stems largely from its temporal links with molecular and paleontological evidence for the African origins of *Homo sapiens*, as well as questions regarding the origin of “modern” behavioral capabilities (Klein 2002; Henshilwood and Marean 2003; Bower 2004, 2005). Given the current prominence of research on the MSA, one might be tempted to assume “truth in packaging,” i.e., that the referents are well defined. That this is not the case was clearly demonstrated at a recent conference at the Kenya National Museum (July 17-19, 2005), where the question “What is the Middle Stone Age” was explicitly addressed.

The conference, organized by Alison Brooks with the help of numerous Kenya nationals, dealt with a wide range of issues in MSA research and was attended by an international assemblage of scholars actively engaged in MSA inquiry, including the author of this paper. When the question “What is the Middle Stone Age” was formally raised, it seemed reasonable to anticipate that it might be resolved, but this did not occur. While failure to reach a consensus stemmed partly from limited time for discussion, it largely reflected a broad divergence of views regarding typological and technological limits of the MSA at its temporal extremities. Thus, for example, if the presence of large bifaces is accepted as a defining characteristic of the Early Stone Age (ESA), the Sangoan industry (containing large bifaces) would have to be excluded from the MSA, despite its overall typological and technological fit with the general run of MSA industries. Similarly, the inclusion of geometric pieces (such as crescents) and blade technology among the defining characteristics of the Late Stone Age (LSA) forces the Howieson’s Poort industry (with crescents and blade technology) into the LSA despite its general MSA “look” and its stratigraphic position at Klasies River Mouth, where it is sandwiched between occurrences of unquestioned MSA character (Klein 1999:436-438).

Issues of the kind represented by the Sangoan problem are sometimes deemed open to resolution via the expedient of so-called “transitional ages” (Kleindienst 1967:827) such as the First Intermediate transition between the ESA and the MSA, to which the Sangoan has, in fact, been allocated, though this arrangement is by no means universally accepted. A more compelling case for recognizing “transitional ages” occurs at deeply stratified sites where MSA levels lie above, below or bracketed by ESA and/or LSA occurrences and there is no clear typological or technological break in the sequence. Such is the case, for example, at the Naseran and Mumba rockshelters of northern Tanzania, where Mehlman (1989) has noted that the Sanzako industry is “intermediate” between MSA and LSA industries but more similar to the former, while the Naseran industry, also judged to be “intermediate,” is typologically and technologically closer to the LSA. Taking such observations at face value, one is forced to conclude that any attempt to define the MSA as a culture-stratigraphic entity in northern Tanzania, if not generally in sub-Saharan Africa, must ultimately rest on arbitrary criteria, the selection of which is largely subjective and thus opens the door to endless debate and continuing failure to define the MSA.

This is not a new problem; recognition of its intractability dates back more than forty years, as is demonstrated in the proceedings of the 1965 Burg Wartenstein Conference on “Systematic Investigation of the African Later Tertiary and Quaternary” (Bishop and Clark 1967:866-868; Kleindienst 1967). Deliberations on the “age” framework for African prehistory (ESA/MSA/LSA and “intermediate” ages)

reached three broadly accepted conclusions:

1. The framework is intended to define culture stratigraphic units at a higher level of abstraction than “industries,” such as the Oldowan, Stillbay and Wilton industries, which would be contained by the ESA, MSA and LSA, respectively.
2. Culture stratigraphic units at such a high level of abstraction (i.e., so far removed from the primary cultural and stratigraphic observations from which they are distilled) cannot satisfy the criteria for constructing stratigraphic units.
3. The “age” framework for African prehistory should be discarded.

No kidding! Yet, here we are, nearly four decades later, still trying to produce a scientifically valid framework for the “ages” of African prehistory! From one point of view, we might take this as evidence of collective insanity, if we define insanity as endless repetition of something that doesn’t work. More charitably, though, we might take this as evidence that, however problematic the “age” framework may be, it has some kind of compelling utility. Assuming the latter is true, two questions arise:

1. What is wrong with our current approach to the “age” framework?
2. What purpose(s) do we intend it to serve?

As to the first question, the answer is implied by conclusion No. 2 above regarding the impossibility of defining culture stratigraphic “ages” that satisfy criteria for stratigraphic definition. A simple thought experiment points toward an inherent contradiction in any attempt at constructing cultural stratigraphy at high levels of abstraction, perhaps including not only “ages” but even “industries.” Suppose we identify an industry of indisputable Oldowan character with firm dates of about 10,000 years ago, do we then extend the upper time limit of the ESA to this date? The point is that culture does not stratify into the relatively tidy entities that can be recognized in organic fossil assemblages and lithology, which raises questions about the fundamental validity of any large scale culture stratigraphic scheme.

In view of such problems, one might ask, why bother with an “age” framework at all? But this brings us to the second question, some insight on which can also be traced to the 1965 Burg Wartenstein Conference mentioned earlier, specifically, the discussions that followed Maxine Kleindienst’s paper on terminology (Kleindienst *op. cit.*:857-8). The conversation opened with the following question, posed by the paper’s author:

“The first points to determine are what are we looking *at* and what are we looking *for* in Stone Age industries.”

The ensuing comments touched on various aspects of this issue. For example Jacques Tixier addressed the question of priority, suggesting that “The only method is to look *at* first,” while Kleindienst noted that “What we are looking *for* may influence what we are looking *at*.” I believe these comments can help guide us toward a more useful, and ultimately more secure, rationale for the “age” framework.

What we are looking *at* is pretty straightforward; namely, the temporal limits of lithic industries that share a number of basic technological and typological characteristics. There is nothing problematic about this, so it can continue to hold our attention. What we have been looking for, consciously or not, is a partitioning of what we look at into cultural entities that are *consistent with geological stratigraphic principles*, an undertaking whose futility was recognized at least as long as forty-one years ago. It is time to stop trying to fit square pegs into round holes!

If we wish to seek an alternative to the essentially geological model of what we are looking *for*, I propose that we consider the historical model, as illustrated by such entities as the Dark Ages, Middle Ages, Renaissance and so on. These are somewhat arbitrarily and loosely defined *blocks of time* during which particular cultural forms prevailed in such domains as economic practices, clothing styles, art and social structures. The main purpose such “ages” serve (what historians are largely looking *for* in defining

them) is to focus attention on the cultural processes and historical events that have shaped an “age” from birth to transformation.

While I have nothing against geology, a subject in which I earned my BA, I am persuaded that the historians’ model for partitioning broad spans of culture history is inherently more compatible with archaeology than the stratigraphic model. In other words, I propose that we look *for* divisions of the African Stone Age that are defined by blocks of time during which a substantial ensemble of technological and typological characteristics prevailed throughout at least sub-Saharan Africa, if not parts of North Africa. Apart from the compatibility of such an approach with the nature of archaeological data and inquiry, it should also help channel our attention more forcefully toward the cultural dynamics of an “age,” instead of focusing on its boundaries.

This is, of course, a matter of emphasis, but it is a kind of emphasis that may be of special relevance to MSA inquiry, as I shall presently argue. First, however, I want to sketch a definition of the MSA based on the historical model. Very briefly, the MSA would refer to a *block of time* from about 200,000 to 40,000 years ago, during which various forms of prepared core technology (Levallois, radial, disc, etc.) and flake tools (assorted scraping and boring pieces, as well as points) are conspicuously evident in assemblages throughout most parts of sub-Saharan Africa. The precise temporal limits of the MSA would be somewhat elastic, contingent on future discoveries, but the definition is based on the prevalence of a certain *range of cultural content* over a reasonably clearly circumscribed *range of time*. What is defined in this way reflects an emphasis on *age*, rather than *stage*. It goes without saying that the same kind of definition would apply to the ESA and the LSA.

If this approach to defining the MSA is broadly acceptable in both principle and practise, we should at last be able to move confidently beyond questions about the nature of the MSA to much more interesting questions about *what was going on* during the MSA. This would open the door to a fresh look at some of the more vexatious, MSA-related issues currently drawing attention in paleoanthropological circles. Salient among these is a constellation of questions about the origins of “modern” human behavior—what are its defining characteristics, how can they be identified in the archaeological record, what is the spatio-temporal distribution of their first appearance in the record, and so on? While I have recently expressed reservations about the archaeological notion of “modern” human behavior and the investigation thereof (Bower 2004, 2005), this is not the time or place to air my concerns extensively. Suffice it to state a conviction that the “fresh look” I have mentioned should help steer inquiry on “modern” human behavior, whatever we mean by that, toward a more dynamic course.

The currently prevailing line of investigation is essentially a trait list approach that is focused on tracking the occurrence among LSA and MSA cultures of what are judged to be first instances of “modern” behavior, including non-lithic tools (e.g., bone points and harpoons), objects marked with patterns that may have symbolic meaning and food debris that reflects a high level of foraging competence. At the risk of oversimplifying, the underlying purpose of this approach is to sort out the relationship between the origins of *Homo sapiens* as an organism and the emergence of “modern” behavior as a central feature of human culture (Vanhaeren et al. 2006). The presence of “modern” behavioral traits in the MSA suggests a temporal, if not causal, connection between the basic morphological and mental conditions of the living human species. If, on the other hand, “modern” behavioral traits are confined to the LSA, the mental condition of the living species would require an explanatory scenario that looks well beyond the paleontological and molecular evidence regarding the emergence of *H. sapiens*.

It seems to me that the current research agenda for the MSA has an essentially static character, yielding a series of disconnected cultural snapshots without revealing much about *what was going on* during the MSA and the transition to the LSA. Ultimately, *what was going on* is probably what we are looking *for* in any particular “age” in African prehistory. I also believe that the static character of the present MSA research program is, in some measure, related to the culture stratigraphic model that

underwrites the existing “age” framework for Africa prehistory. Thus, I am persuaded that the substitution of an historical model would not only resolve the long standing question, “What is the MSA?”, but would also tend to encourage a more dynamic perspective in MSA research.

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