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New Light on the Palaeolithic Landscape Around Mount Nebo

Between 1992 and 1998 an intensive archaeological survey was carried out in the Mount Nebo area by a group of Danish archaeologists from the University of Copenhagen and the Danish Institute in Damascus. This survey, which was followed by excavations between 2000 and 2005, was begun at the invitation of Professor Michele Piccirillo and conducted under the auspices of the Department of Antiquities and the Franciscan Archaeological Institute at Mount Nebo (Mortensen and Thuesen 1998 and 2007; Thuesen 2004). Centered around Şiyāgha, the survey covered an area of approximately 35 square kms. The main topographical features are the escarpments of the Transjordanian plateau, which drop away into the Jordan valley, and the two large wadi systems of Wādī Jadidah and its continuation as Wādī Kanisah to the south of Şiyāgha and Wādī ‘Uyūn Mūsā to the north.

The purpose of the survey was to locate, describe, register and map the archaeological sites around Mount Nebo, so that the most important might, in the future, be protected from destruction caused by building development, road construction or agricultural activities involving the use of tractors and bulldozers.

Furthermore this type of intensive survey, within a limited area, can yield important information regarding changes in settlement patterns and the exploitation of natural resources throughout time.

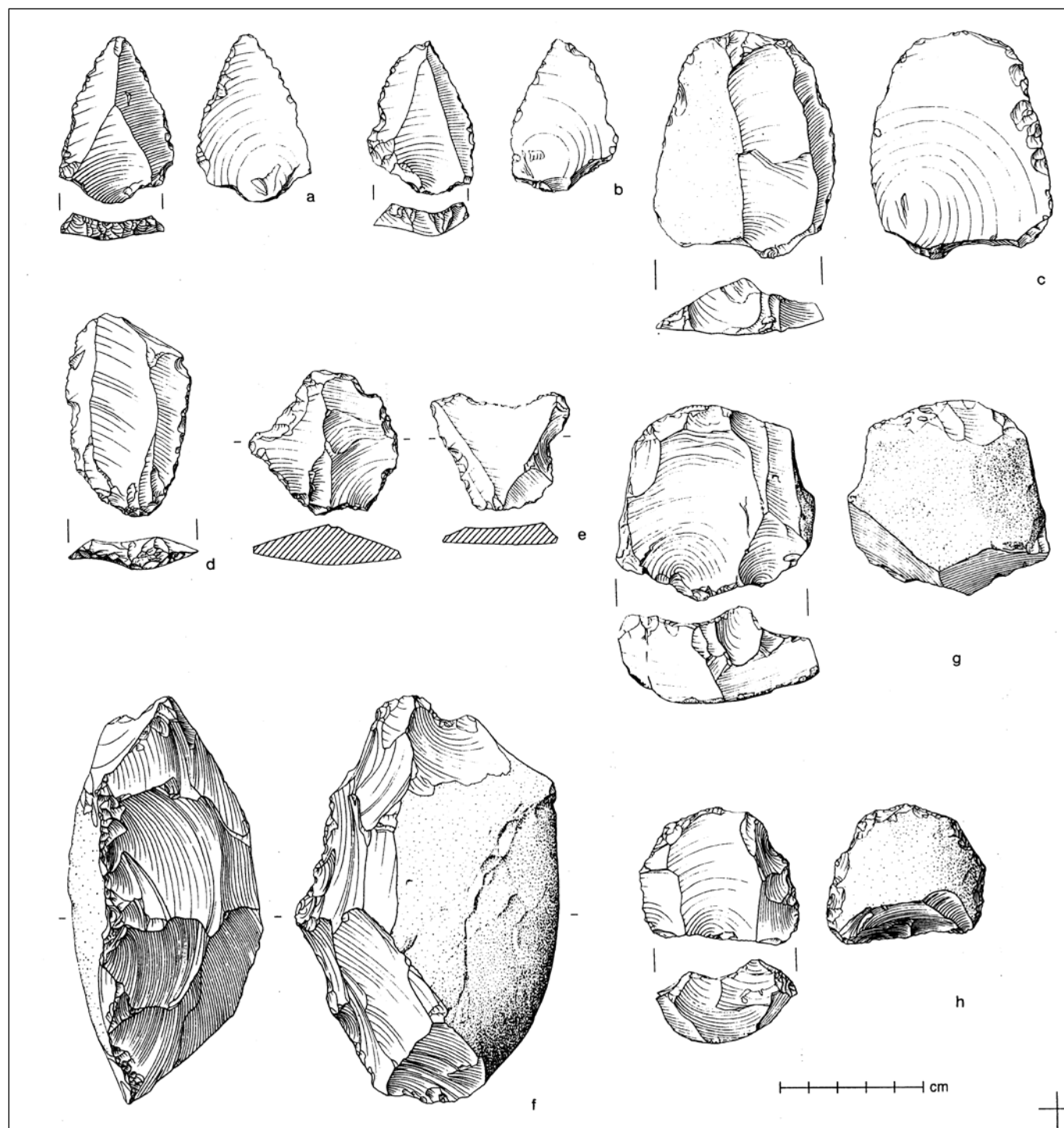
During the survey 747 locations, including sites, monuments and single finds, were registered, ranging in date from the Lower Palaeolithic — more than 400,000 years ago — to the early 20th century. The publication of the Mount Nebo Survey is now in progress, and the first volume will cover the 108 Stone Age locations we recorded. One of the problems facing us in this context is the apparent lack of Upper Palaeolithic occupation in the region.

The Pleistocene terraces along the wadi systems are rich in Palaeolithic flint artefacts. They are often found on slopes in formations of clay or sand that were secondarily deposited during alluvial periods. However, there are also examples of Lower and Middle Palaeolithic open-air sites with artefacts found *in situ* on re-exposed Pleistocene terrace surfaces (FIGS. 1-2). It should be noted that although we found a few hand axes and several Middle Palaeolithic artefacts, e.g. Mousterian and Levallois points near caves and shelters, we have not been able to document any Lower or Middle Palaeolithic occupation in the caves of the Mount Nebo region. One reason may be that most of the caves face north, a direction, which Near Eastern Neanderthals may not have found attractive for permanent or even seasonal settlement.

Before dealing with the problem of the apparent lack of Upper Palaeolithic sites, it should be noted that in two cases traces of Epipalaeolithic occupation were found at tiny south-facing shelters north-



1. MN 360. A Middle Palaeolithic open-air site found on the surface of a Pleistocene terrace along Wādī Jadidah, 560-580 metres above sea level. The artefacts are still *in situ*, alongside nodules of flint (September 1994).



2. Middle Palaeolithic artefacts from MN 360, including Mousterian points (a-b), retouched flakes made on a prepared platform (c-d), two scrapers with a concavo-convex edge and two end scrapers (e-h), and a core with chop marks along one edge (f).

east of 'Ayn Jadidah. However, like the Neolithic settlements, most of the Epipalaeolithic open-air sites were located in the hilly landscape above the wadis not far from the springs of 'Ayn Kanisah and 'Ayn Jadidah.

Looking at the Stone Age sites found in the

Mount Nebo region it is understandable that the Middle Palaeolithic and Epipalaeolithic periods dominate with 43 and 25 locations respectively (TABLE 1). But is the Upper Palaeolithic completely absent? The only two possible candidates seem to be: 1) nine pieces of grey flint found below

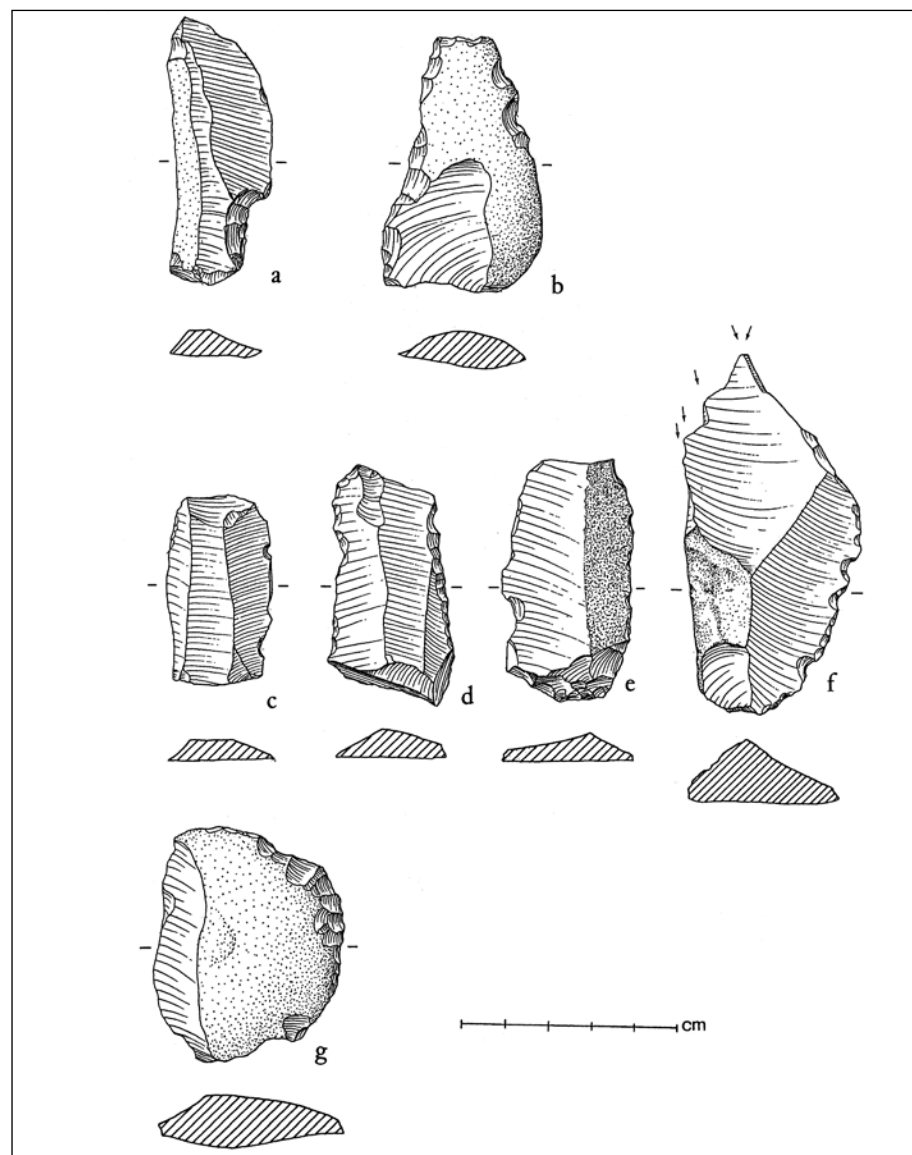
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TABLE 1. showing the number and distribution by period of Stone Age locations found during the Mount Nebo Survey.

| MOUNT NEBO SURVEY 1992 – 1998 | |
|---------------------------------------|-------|
| <i>Number of Stone Age locations:</i> | |
| Lower Palaeolithic | 15 |
| Middle Palaeolithic | 43 |
| Upper Palaeolithic | (2 ?) |
| Epipalaeolithic | 25 |
| Pre-Pottery Neolithic | 17 |
| Pottery Neolithic | 6 |

the Byzantine monastery at ‘Ayn Kanisah, including two fragmentary blade cores, two long blades, a pointed blade with indications of a retouched shoulder and a nosed scraper, and 2) a scatter of 37 flints from a terrace south of ‘Ayn Jadidah, which includes a number of fairly regular large blades or blade fragments, two side scrapers, one dihedral burin made on a large flake and three asymmetrically shouldered points like the one illustrated in Figure 3a.

Our first question, therefore, is whether or not these two flint scatters can reasonably be interpreted as Upper Palaeolithic? I think that the only evidence which may — with some reservations — lead us towards that conclusion is the presence in both collections of points with a retouched tang or asymmetrically shouldered points. In Europe these



3. (?) Upper Palaeolithic artefacts from MN 312 and a terrace south of ‘Ayn Jadidah: a shouldered point (a), a retouched flake (b), segments of large regular blades (c-e), a dihedral burin made on a large flake (f) and a side scraper (g).

artefacts, known as Font-Robert points, are common within the Upper Perigordian and they appear, albeit infrequently, in the Levantine Aurignacian, e.g. at Kebara and Ksar Aqil, and in Upper Palaeolithic contexts from Yabrud and Umm al-Tlel.

However, regardless of whether or not these two small assemblages represent the presence of hunter-gatherers of the Levantine Aurignacian tradition, it is clear that Upper Palaeolithic occupation appears scarce in the Mount Nebo region, especially when compared with the Middle Palaeolithic and Epipalaeolithic occupations of the same area.

In the inland, eastern landscapes of Jordan and Syria, the Upper Palaeolithic also seems to be poorly represented when compared with the Lower and Middle Palaeolithic. One possible reason may have been that Upper Palaeolithic groups were forced, by increased aridity during this period, to exploit larger territories than their Middle Palaeolithic counterparts and that this may have led to more dispersed settlement patterns.

Another uncertainty is linked to the definition of the Upper Palaeolithic in the area. It is now generally accepted that the technological change from flake-based to blade-based traditions cannot be directly linked to the appearance of *Homo sapiens sapiens* or, in the Near East, to the transition from the Middle to the Upper Palaeolithic (cf. e.g. Clark, Coinman and Neeley 2001: 49 ff.). As expressed by James Potter and others, "...artifact morphology in the Levant cycled back and forth through time between flakes and blades" (Potter 1995: 506).

For the time being, this might lead to the sug-

gestion that in the Mount Nebo region — as well as in other inland parts of the Levant — there may have been a longer Mousterian tradition which extended beyond the end of the Middle Palaeolithic, as known from other regions. If this was the case, it might at least partially explain the apparent scarcity of Upper Palaeolithic sites in the Mount Nebo region. Further analyses of our own Mousterian material and of late, stratified Mousterian **deposits** from inland Jordan and Syria might possibly elucidate that point.

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