A Recent Archaeological Discovery in the Turkana District of Northern Kenya

by

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In this article, Mr. Robbins of the University of California, Berkeley, gives an account of exciting finds of barbed harpoons, comparable to others found near Lake Edward to the west and far up the Nile to the north. The skeletal material is being studied at the Smithsonian Institution. The research work on which this article is founded was made possible by a National Science Foundation Field Grant.

In August of 1965 a most interesting Later Stone Age fishing station was discovered at the locality of Lothagam Hill which lies just behind the Kerio River delta in the Turkana District of Northern Kenya (East Africa, 1: 250,000. Sheet NA-37-5, South Horr). The Lothagam site, which was discovered in the course of an archaeological survey of the 220 ft. (70 m.) beach terrace of Lake Rudolf, is very rich in bone and stone artefacts, undecorated pottery, fauna and human skeletal remains. This paper will present some preliminary comments on the site and the stone and bone industry.

Description of the Site

The site lies in between the two north-south striking volcanic hills which are known by local Turkana tribesmen as Lothagam. (Pl. XVa.) At the time of Later Stone Age occupation, Lothagam was probably a peninsula which projected out into the then enlarged Lake Rudolf. Water flowed for some distance in between the two hills and people were living on the beach spit. The locality appears to have been a very favourable one as the hills served as protection and provided abundant raw material for tools from lava outcrops, and most important, the projection out into the lake provided a ready access to what must have been an excellent fishing area.

The Lothagam site has been considerably eroded, but is still large in terms of its horizontal extent. One could easily make a 100 m. traverse in either a north-south or an east-west direction. The light coloured beach sediments are well marked and stand out in contrast to underlying Pleistocene beds of red silt and sandstone. While excavations to date have been confined to the upper beds at Lothagam, the fossiliferous Pleistocene beds below also appear to be quite promising and merit systematic investigation. The thickness as well as the nature of the 220 ft. sediments vary, but it is estimated that an average thickness would be about 5 m. as seen in fig. 1. While cultural material and fauna were found throughout this section, there was a marked decrease in the material below five feet.

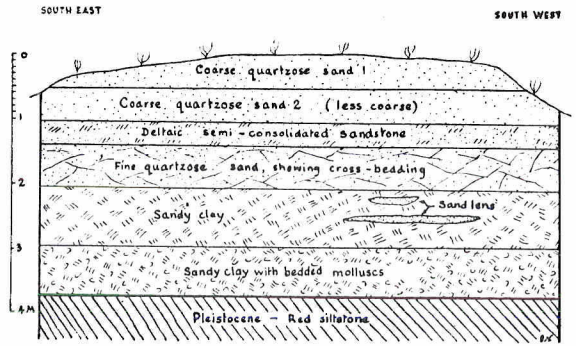


Fig. 1. The excavated section showing stratified sands overlying sandy clay. At the base of the clay is a layer containing molluscs.

Stone Industry

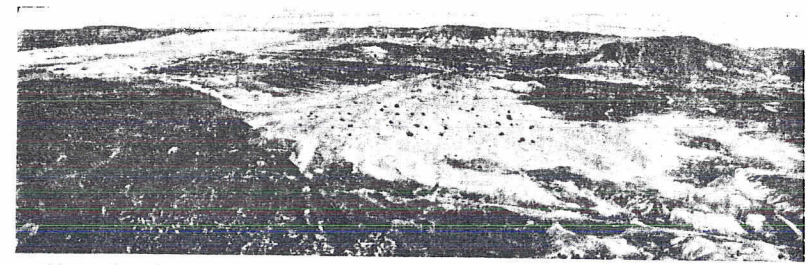
The stone industry is distinguished in that over 80 per cent of the specimens, including the waste, were made on lavas. (Trachybasalt, olivine-augite basanite and augite melabasalt were identified by Dr. John Walsh of the Kenya Department of Mines and Geology.) A tabular chert was also used and quartz, obsidian and chalcedony are represented. Surface artefacts are often highly weathered by wind and water action and have a glossy appearance. Lava artefacts coming from deposits *in situ* are typically fresh, but the exterior of the material has a lighter cast than is found in the interior.

The amount of waste is very high in proportion to the shaped tools. The waste flakes show plain striking platforms; faceted platforms do, however, occur. About one half of the complete flakes may be classified as end-struck and are irregular in plan view. Flake-blades are well represented, but true blades of Upper Paleolithic type are rare. Debitage was struck from a variety of cores including formless, single platform, proto-biconical, and flat discoidal types (Pl. XVb).

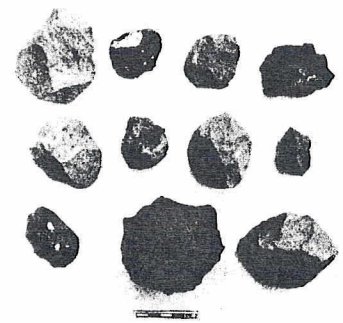
The shaped tools are characterized by a variety of convex backed blades which grade into smaller crescents, burins and a heavy duty component of steep and side scrapers (fig. 2).

The backed blades and crescents show a finesse in workmanship even though the lavas are the dominant raw material. It should be noted that the backed blades are not true blades by European Upper Paleolithic standards, but may be classed as flake-blades. There is little evidence to indicate that any of the backed blades or crescents were hafted in bone handles or shafts. The state of preservation of bone at Lothagam in terms of both fauna and artefacts is excellent and one would expect to find evidence for hafting in bone if such were the practice.

In contrast to the other shaped tools the burins were predominantly made from the small chunks of tabular chert. The natural shape of the chert was exploited in the manufacture of the burins. Burins were not typically made on a flake or blade as was common in Upper Paleolithic cultures in Europe, but rather the chunk itself was trimmed and

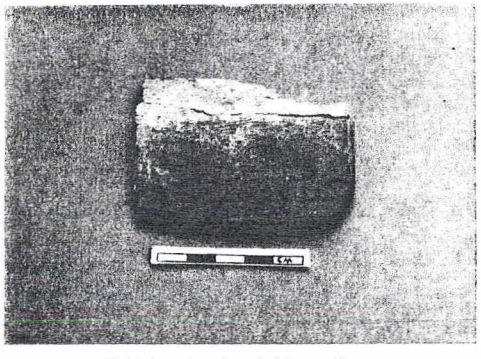


(*a*) *View from the eastern-most peak of Lothagam hill showing the light-coloured beach deposits standing out between the hills.*



(*b*) *Typical Lothagam cores.*

(a) *Probable leister prongs.*



(b) *Broken piece of worked hippo rib.*

used for the burin. A single flake-blade was struck off one edge of the tabular-shaped chert and then several burin blows were struck off at an approximate right angle to the initial scar (see fig. 2, top right). A sharp chisel-like edge was produced where the scars intersected. Such implements would have been effective tools in the manufacture of the associated bone artefacts.

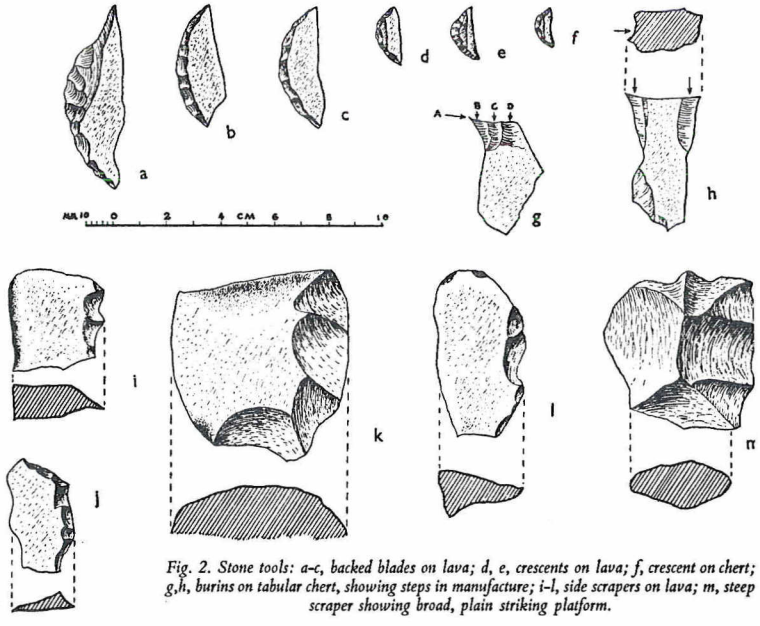


Fig. 2. Stone tools: a–c, backed blades on lava; d, e, crescents on lava; f, crescent on chert; g,h, burins on tabular chert, showing steps in manufacture; i–l, side scrapers on lava; m, steep scraper showing broad, plain striking platform.

Scrapers are the most numerous of the shaped tools. They tend to be large and crudely trimmed and because of this some of them would not be out of place in an earlier, Sangoan assemblage. The flake scars along the scraping edges are broad and often the edges only show very few scars. Although the edges on the scrapers are usually convex, serrated (denticulate) and concave edges are also fairly well represented. True end scrapers are uncommon.

Bone Industry

Bone artefacts are very abundant at Lothagam, both on the erosion surfaces and in the deposits. Specimens coming from the eroded areas are often well mineralized and black in colour. *In situ* specimens tend to be light and less mineralization has taken place.

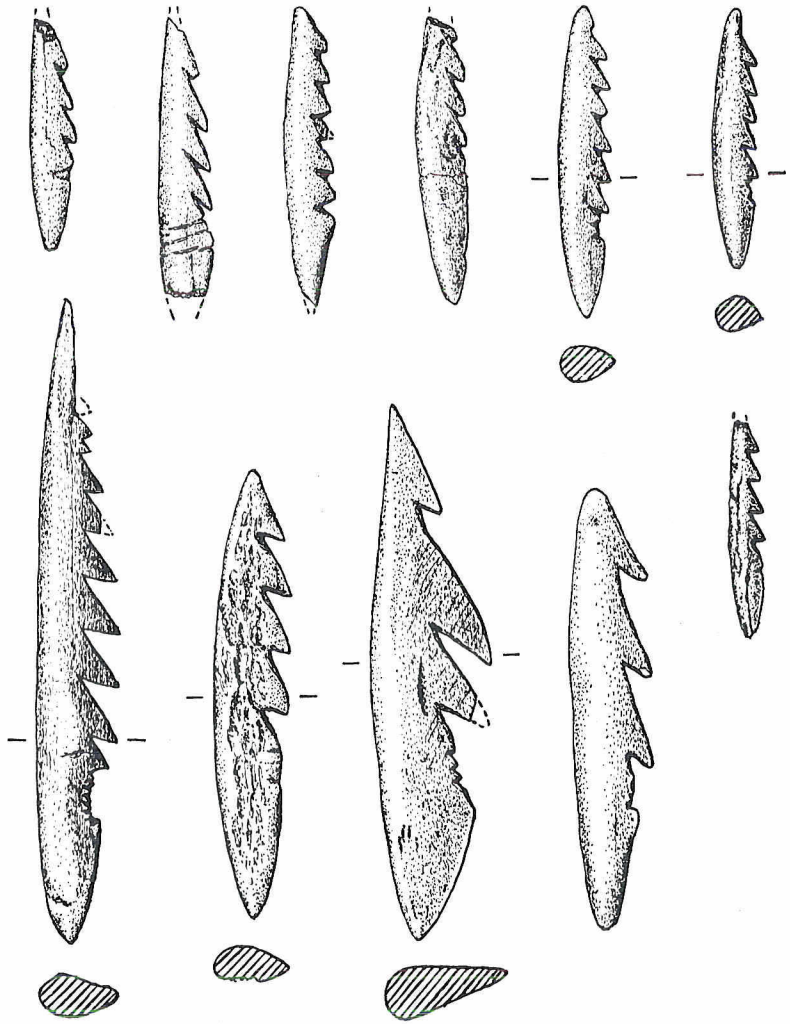


Fig. 3 Uniserial points, showing variation in style.

The characteristic bone artefact is the uniserially barbed projectile point (fig. 3). Thes implements probably served as harpoon heads or spear points, or perhaps in some c the smaller examples as arrow tips. At Lothagam, neither biserially barbed points no bone fish hooks have been found. Also represented in the bone assemblage are an assort ment of probable leister prongs, (Pl. XVIa) one bone needle and a fragment of worke hippopotamus rib which is perhaps part of a scoop or blade of a canoe paddle (Pl. XVIb)

The uniserial points exhibit considerable variation in terms of size and number o barbs. The smallest complete specimen is 3 cm. long while the largest is 21.8 cm. long Some examples have as few as two barbs, while one incomplete example has twent barbs. This variation does not appear to have any stratigraphic significance, but probabl relates to the hunting of different varieties of prey as well as the stylistic preference o the individual craftsman. The butts are not drilled through for the purpose of attachin a line or hafting, but are usually notched just behind the final barb. Butts with circula incisions or grooves are also fairly common. Many specimens show striations relatin to the process of manufacture and it should be possible to reconstruct what the technique were by experimentation. Rubbing stones are present and perhaps were used in thi process.

The uniserial points from Lothagam compare favourably with similar specimen coming from the sites of Ishango in the Congo and Early Khartoum in the Sudan. I particular, some of the Lothagam points show a close stylistic resemblance to certain o the Ishango specimens coming from the "Niveau tufaces" (Heinzelin, J. de, 1957, Pl. 34 1–2, 6–11). However, the cross sections of the Lothagam points appear to be more bilater ally symmetrical than those from Ishango. It is to be noted that the Lothagam point lack the small notch on the butt which appears on the side opposite the row of barb on the Ishango specimens. Some of the larger of the Lothagam points are very simila in their general appearance to the Ishango points coming from the level, "du sable fin micace" (ibid, Pl. 29, 4–5, 7–8). The Early Khartoum uniserial points tend to show mor curvature on the barbs than the Lothagam specimens, however highly curved barbs d occur in the Lothagam assemblage (Arkell, 1949, Pl. 46, 1). At Lothagam, the degre of curvature probably reflects the preference of the individual craftsman. The butts o the Lothagam points show more variation than the Early Khartoum examples. Th latter tend to be more rounded at the end than the Lothagam counterparts and groovin of the butts is a dominant feature of the Khartoum specimens (ibid, Pl. 49, bottom row)

A final comparison of the industry from this new Kenya lakeside fishing station wit Ishango and the Nile Valley sites will be exceedingly interesting as Lothagam will fil a geographical and cultural gap between these two important areas.

REFERENCES

Arkell, A. J. 1949 *Early Khartoum*, Oxford.

Heinzelin, J. de, 1957 "Les Fouilles d'Ishango," *Exploration du Parc National Albert*, fasc. 2 Bruxelles.