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News and Views

The Early to Middle Stone Age Transition and the Emergence of Modern Human Behaviour at site 8-B-11, Sai Island, Sudan

P. Van Peer^{a*}, R. Fullagar^b, S. Stokes^c, R. M. Bailey^c, J. Moeyersons^d,
F. Steenhoudt^a, A. Geerts^a, T. Vanderbeken^a, M. De Dapper^e, F. Geus^f

^a *Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium*

^b *University of Sydney, Australia*

^c *Oxford Luminescence Research Group, School of Geography and the Environment, University of Oxford, UK*

^d *Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren, Belgium*

^e *University of Gent, Belgium*

^f *Section Française de la Direction des Antiquités du Soudan – Université Charles de Gaulle-Lille 3, France*

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Introduction

Site 8-B-11 at Sai Island in northern Sudan is a stratified site containing late Middle and early Upper Pleistocene occupation levels in excellent conditions of preservation. In Middle Pleistocene times, the banks of a small gully were repeatedly occupied by human groups leaving Acheulean and Sangoan material cultures in an interstratified pattern. Optical age determinations on aeolian intercalations within the gully sediments range between 220 and 150 ka. This sequence is truncated by Nile floodplain silts in which three occupation levels with Lupemban-related Nubian Complex assemblages (Van Peer, 1998) are stratified. The long archaeological sequence at 8-B-11 is a rare African case to document the Early to

Middle Stone Age transition by means of primary context situations in direct stratigraphic superposition (Clark, 2001; Tryon & McBrearty, 2002). In contrast to the Acheulean, the early MSA Sangoan levels show sophisticated behaviours involving considerable technological and symbolic investment. Quartzite cobbles were used in the grinding of vegetal materials. Yellow and red ochre were exploited and ground to pigments using shaped mortars and selected chert nodules. We conclude that 8-B-11 is a key site with regard to the initial emergence of modern human behaviour outside subsaharan Africa (McBrearty & Brooks, 2000).

General description

Sai (Fig. 1a) is a 50 km² island located between the second and third Nile cataracts, 10 km south of the town of Abri (Northern Sudan) whose archaeological importance was recognized in the mid 20th century (Arkell, 1949). It has

* Corresponding author. Philip Van Peer, Laboratorium voor Prehistorie, Redingenstraat 16bis, 3000 Leuven (Belgium).

E-mail address: philip.vanpeer@geo.kuleuven.ac.be (P. Van Peer).