

letters

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Recent archaeological findings at the Sterkfontein site

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ABSTRACT

UNTIL the present decade it was thought that the Early Stone Age of Africa consisted of two industrial complexes, the Oldowan and the Acheulian, the latter succeeding the former after a transitional phase. Well excavated and well dated Oldowan sites are known only from Eastern Africa, although Oldowan sites are reported from North and South Africa, and all known examples are older than 1.5 Myr (refs 1–4). The earliest manifestations of the Acheulian appear approximately 1.5 Myr BP (refs 5, 6) and continue until the Last Interglacial. Leakey has challenged the idea that the Acheulian represents a continuous development of the Oldowan in East Africa^{1,7,8}. At Olduvai in Bed II she recognises two industrial complexes, which are said to represent two distinct cultural traditions, possibly produced by two different hominid taxa. These industries are the Acheulian and the Developed Oldowan. The criteria for defining the Developed Oldowan B have recently been revised and Leakey⁷ now states that the morphology and technical features of manufacture of bifaces are the principal distinguishing characters between the two industries. The main technological distinction is that the Acheulian biface makers knew how to detach large flakes (>10 cm) while the Developed Oldowan hominids did not. As a result of this revised definition some of the assemblages at Olduvai originally defined as Developed Oldowan B have been reclassified as Acheulian by Leakey⁷. The problem of the Acheulian and Developed Oldowan can be stated as two alternative hypotheses. (1) Two cultural traditions began in East Africa approximately 1.5 Myr BP, each associated with a distinct social population over an immense span of time; possibly they were of different hominid taxa. Or (2), there was only one cultural tradition (industry), the Acheulian Industrial Complex, beginning about 1.5 Myr BP and marked by highly variable bifacial tools and relative frequency of artefact types; only one hominid taxon during any given period was involved. I have now made a comparative study of the Sterkfontein and Olduvai Gorge Bed II assemblages, which suggests that the Developed Oldowan B industry falls within the Acheulian Industrial Complex and therefore serious consideration should be given to dropping the former term.

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