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Archaeological surveys in the Aha Hills (north-east Namibia): first results

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In the framework of the field's program "Human origins in Namibia", we have completed several survey expeditions since 2015 in the Aha Hills - located in the northeastern part of Namibia. The project focuses on the research of the karstic morphologies indices able to trap and preserve fossils, especially early hominids.

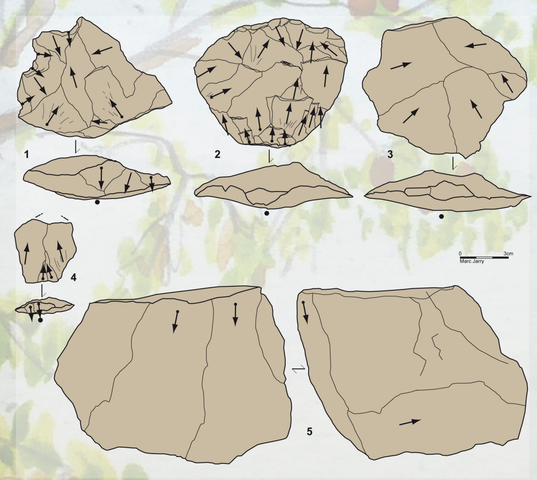
We have conducted systematic exploration of an area poorly investigated by archaeologists until now is also an opportunity to test its potential. The Aha Hills, straddling the border with Botswana, are calcareous, marble and dolomite landforms which outcrop above the extensive Kalahari sands.

We have explored approximately 25 of the Namibian Aha Hills to date. Several unknown lithic remains appear to be attributed to the MSA or perhaps to the LSA *lato sensu*.

Middle Stone Age remains ?

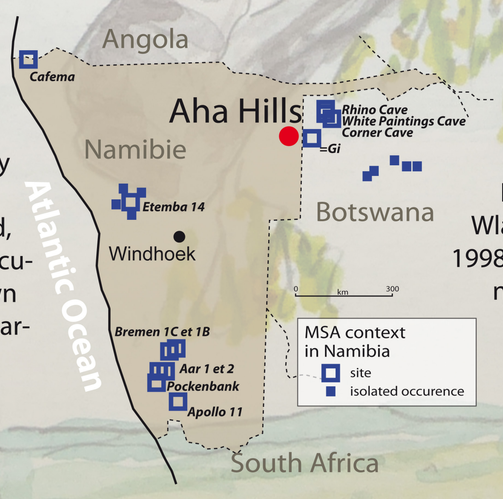
Excepted isolated remains attributable to MSA (cf. map beside : little red dots) (*lato sensu*), a site (baobab site) has been identify in the southern part of the Namibian Aha Hills. The site is located on a foothill zone. These southern hills are characterised by the presence of chert veins and a quartzite slab on top of the limestone. These raw matetials were used for knapping and probably attracted people.

Several cores of the Discoidal type were found. They were generally partial and unipolar, characterised by smooth striking surfaces. One of the samples studies appeared to have been produced using an anvil. Several other samples had only been very partially reduced (3 or 4 removals), also with a smooth striking surface. Given the evidence gleaned from the cores collected, the production system appears to be fairly heterogeneous, as regards both the types and dimensions of the products. All the products are flakes, some of which are longer than others. The dimensions vary between 5 and 10 centimetres. The products are generally thick. The underside is almost always plane, sometimes dihedral (in some cases, a natural dihedron), but rarely facetted. The upper sides are coarse (cortical surface or discontinuity) or show the reverse image of previous removals, some of which were made using centripetal debitage. The bulbs are generally prominent, with a bulbar splinter. While several examples of a more diffuse bulb with a small rim suggest the use of soft stone, the majority of the removals would appear to have been made by direct percussion with a hard hammer.

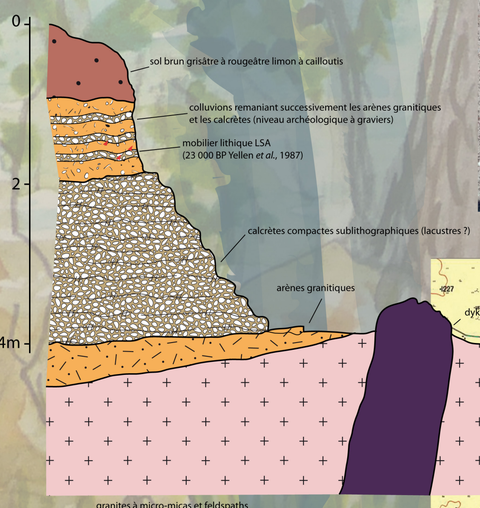


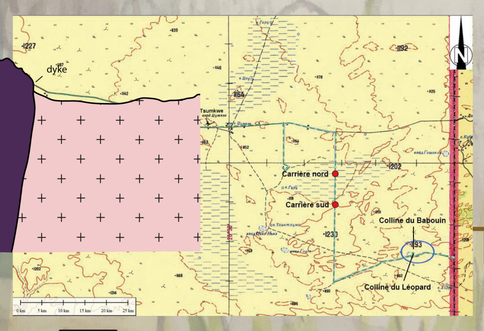
We did not identify many retouched implements. Retouching is often partial, and can be direct as well as reversed. The tools identified are often scrapers, some of which are side scrapers. Some unusual scrapers were present, as well as several notched and denticulated implements.

When we attempt to fit this series into the general context of Namibian Prehistory, we are forced to admit that it is difficult to make comparisons. Although the southern part of the country has yielded a few sites, in particular the reference stratigraphy of the Apollo 11 cave (Vogelsang 2010), the north is lacking in sites. We therefore have to turn to Botswana to find several MSA sites, such as the very closely located ≠Gi (Brooks *et al.* 1990, Kuman 1989) and the Tsodillo Hills shelters (Nash *et al.* 2016). It should be noted that, while the recent MSA is relatively well represented, the older phases are rare, and references for the ESA are so far very insufficiently documented for Namibia. Additional bibliographic research is required to extend our own reference framework to cover the whole of southern Africa and increase the initial cartography of the sites described here.



At the present time, we clearly cannot exclude the hypothesis that these fossils date from the LSA, or the recent facies of the Middle Stone Age in southern Africa. None of the typical technological elements or techno-economic behaviour characteristic of the Howiesons Poort and Still Bay facies are present here. Neither do we have any elements that truly fit a "traditional" MSA diagnosis, such as those found for example at Etemba 14 (Schmidt, 2011), Rhino Cave (Robbin et al. 2000), Corner Cave (Coulson and Wlaker, 2002) or even further at Aar1 (Vogelsang, 1998) and Bremen 1c or 1B (Vogelsang, 1998). The closest reference would appear to be the Cafema site on the Cunene river in the north of Namibia (Nicoll, 2010), although there again, the presence of points and attested Levallois debitage makes any comparison less valid…





Late Stone Age remains ?

Along the track from Tsumkwe to Gam, a series of small quarries have extracted the calcrete for the production and maintenance of the strip of road. In order to make observations regarding the nature, strength and age of these calcretes, we made several stops along this axis. In two of these quarries, just below the pedological soil removed during the excavation process, we noted the presence of a highly concentrated deposit of archaeological material. The material was entirely made up of lithic industry items.

In one of these quarries, we found a stratigraphic profile which enabled us to determine the origin of the remains. We were able to observe some implements still tied in their original level. The latter corresponds to ancient colluviums that developed at the roof of the calcrete. These colluviums reshaped the granite arenas that emerge nearby, as well as fragments of dismantled calcrete. The whole area then underwent a pedogenic process of the ferruginous type.

The material was cut from various types of rock: good quality chalcedony, chert, silcrete and probably flint. It includes numerous flakes, most of which are small, and several blade fragments. It should be noted that no ceramic fragment was found among these remains.

Based on our bibliography, it appears that this material may correspond to a recent phase of Prehistory, late MSA or Late Stone Age..

The presence of several sites and isolated artefacts attests to the long occupations of the landscape, and suggests that it is not impossible to find even more ancient signs of human presence.

HON
HUMAN ORIGINS IN NAMIBIA

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