

An Acheulian palaeoart manuport from Morocco

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One of the dominant issues in the ongoing debates about the world's earliest palaeoart evidence concerns the issue of the recognition of iconicity by Lower Palaeolithic hominids. This issue is rather complex, involving questions of

cognitive evolution, of hominid perception, of consciousness, and of what constitutes evidence of an intelligent organism's awareness of iconic properties. In this context it is of importance to consider objects that appear to have become manuports because of their iconic properties. Recently I have presented such an object from Tan-Tan, southern Morocco (Bednarik 2001). Another one of the earliest such finds currently known to us is reported here.

The object in question is from Site No. A-84-2, a surface cluster of Acheulian tools in the vicinity of the townships Erfoud and Rissani, eastern Morocco. The location is roughly at the same latitude as Marrakech, but about 330 km to the east of it. This is just south of the main range of the Atlas Mountains, the Haut Atlas (Fig. 1).



Figure 1. The location of the Erfoud (1) and Tan-Tan (2) Acheulian sites in Morocco.

The region is essentially a desert of small pebbles and sand, and the site consists of a dense cluster of numerous Late Acheulian stone tools, measuring about six metres across. It includes the apparent remains of a dwelling, consisting of a pile of stones forming an enclosed space of a few square metres, adjacent to a rock outcrop. Such hut remains have been found at various Acheulian sites, including in Algeria and Libya (Kuckenbug 2001: Figs 3.2, 3.3; Ziegert 1995), but also elsewhere in Africa and in Europe and India (Bednarik 1993). Within what appears to be the foundation of an Acheulian dwelling at Site A-84-2,

Professor Lutz Fiedler from Marburg University collected in 1984 an object called here the Erfoud manuport. The Acheulian remains at the site include numerous darkly patinated stone tools, but no stones of such large sizes occur for hundreds of metres around the site.

The manuport consists of a silicified fragment of a cuttlefish fossil cast dating from the Devonian or Carboniferous period (*Orthoceras* sp.). Such fossils are very common in other parts of Morocco, but they do not occur naturally in the region of the find site. The specimen appears to have been carried for a considerable distance before it was deposited within the outline of an apparent hut, together with now similarly patinated Late Acheulian tools. This manuport is 67.4 mm long, 34.3 mm wide at its widest point, and 32.8 mm thick at 90° to that width and to the long axis. The thickness of the broken base of the object ranges from 23.7 mm to 26.2 mm. The surface has a 'gnarled' texture of a deep-brown to almost black colour. This dark surface is attributable to a coat of manganese-rich rock varnish, occurring as distinctly patterned microscopic patches. The object's interior seems to consist, as far as it is possible to determine this without damaging it, of a light-brown and semitranslucent chalcedonic silica. Microscopic examination of the surface has not yielded a single indication that it has been modified by humans in any way, but it needs to be appreciated that the surface was weathered considerably before it became patinated.

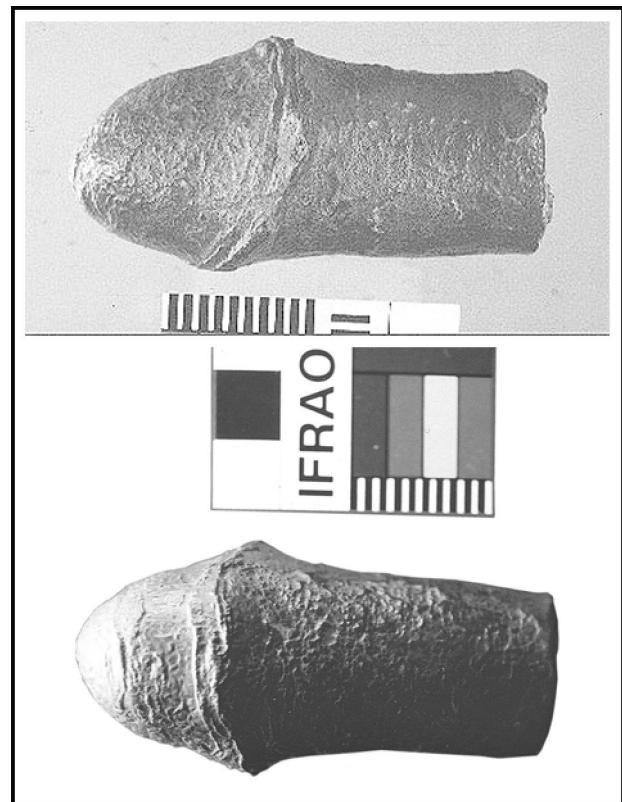


Figure 2. Two views of the Erfoud manuport.

The object's surface condition suggests that it was deposited in the same period as the stone tools found with it. An explanation is required for why it became a manuport, having been brought from some distance, and considering

its apparently unworked, non-artefact status. This is readily found in its shape, being that of a perfectly naturalistic and life-size, non-erect human penis (Fig. 2). The only realistic explanation for the curation of this object is that this clear similarity was perceived by a hominid. Bearing in mind that this would have occurred only in the order of 200 or 300 millennia ago, acceptance of this interpretation of the find should not present any difficulty. After all, the Makapansgat manuport is around ten times as old, and yet its presence in the South African dolomite cave can only realistically be accounted for by acceptance of a similar appreciation of certain visual properties (Bednarik 1998).

The Erfoud manuport is therefore not an unexpected find, but it challenges the hypothesis that pre-Upper Palaeolithic hominids lacked both symbolism and the ability to perceive iconicity. This is an important point in view

of d'Errico and Nowell's (2000) rejection of the latter ability, when they argue that the grooves on the Berekhat Ram figurine were not made to emphasise its iconic properties, but are randomly carved and essentially meaningless cuts.

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