



# Cultural taxonomic systems and the Late Palaeolithic/Later Stone Age prehistory of the Nile Valley – a critical review

**Felix Riede**, **Sébastien Plutniak**  and **Shumon Tobias Hussain**  based on peer reviews by **Giuseppina Mutri** and 1 anonymous reviewer

Alice Leplongeon (2023) Tool types and the establishment of the Late Palaeolithic (Later Stone Age) cultural taxonomic system in the Nile Valley. Zenodo, ver. 4, peer-reviewed and recommended by Peer Community in Archaeology.

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The paper entitled “Tool types and the establishment of the Late Palaeolithic (Later Stone Age) cultural taxonomic system in the Nile Valley” submitted by A. Leplongeon offers a review of the many cultural taxonomic in use for the prehistory – especially the Late Palaeolithic/Late Stone Age – of the Nile Valley (Leplongeon 2023). This paper was first developed for a special conference session convened at the EAA annual meeting in 2021 and is intended for an edited volume on the topic of typology and taxonomy in archaeology.

Issues of cultural taxonomy have recently risen to the forefront of archaeological debate (Reynolds and Riede 2019; Ivanovaité et al. 2020; Lyman 2021). Archaeological systematics, most notably typology, have roots in the research history of a particular region and period (e.g. Plutniak 2022); commonly, different scholars employ different and at times incommensurable systems, often leading to a lack of clarity and inter-regional interoperability. African prehistory is not exempt from this debate (e.g. Wilkins 2020) and, in fact, such a situation is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in the iconic Nile Valley. The Nile Valley is marked by a complex colonial history and long-standing archaeological interest from a range of national and international actors. It is also a vital corridor for understanding human dispersals out of and into Africa, and along the North African coastal zone. As Leplongeon usefully reviews, early researchers have, as elsewhere, proposed a variety of archaeological cultures, the legacies of which still weigh in on contemporary discussions. In the Nile Valley, these are the Kubbanian (23.5-19.3 ka cal. BP), the Halfan (24-19 ka cal. BP), the Qadan (20.2-12 ka cal BP), the Afian (16.8-14 ka cal. BP) and the Isnan (16.6-13.2 ka cal. BP) but their temporal and spatial signatures remain in part poorly constrained, or their epistemic status debated. Leplongeon’s critical and timely chronicle of this

debate highlights in particular the vital contributions of the many female prehistorians who have worked in the region – Angela Close (e.g. 1978; 1977) and Maxine Kleindienst (e.g. 2006) to name just a few of the more recent ones – and whose earlier work had already addressed, if not even solved many of the pressing cultural taxonomic issues that beleaguer the Late Palaeolithic/Later Stone Age record of this region.

Leplongeon and colleagues (Leplongeon et al. 2020; Mesfin et al. 2020) have contributed themselves substantially to new cultural taxonomic research in the wider region, showing how novel quantitative methods coupled with research-historical acumen can flag up and overcome the shortcomings of previous systematics. Yet, as Leplongeon also notes, the cultural taxonomic framework for the Nile Valley specifically has proven rather robust and does seem to serve its purpose as a broad chronological shorthand well. By the same token, she urges due caution when it comes to interpreting these lithic-based taxonomic units in terms of past social groups. Cultural systematics are essential for such interpretations, but age-old frameworks are often not fit for this purpose. New work by Leplongeon is likely to not only continue the long tradition of female prehistorians working in the Nile Valley but also provides an epistemologically and empirically more robust platform for understanding the social and ecological dynamics of Late Palaeolithic/Later Stone Age communities there.

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## Reviews

### Evaluation round #1

DOI or URL of the preprint: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7711117>

Version of the preprint: 2

### Authors' reply, 20 June 2023

Dear Felix,

Please find attached two pdfs with the reply to the reviewers' comments as well as a revised version of the article with tracked changes. A clean revised version (v3) has also been uploaded on the zenodo server. Many thanks to the reviewers for their constructive comments.

Kind regards,

Alice

[Download author's reply](#)

[Download tracked changes file](#)

### Decision by [Felix Riede](#), [Sébastien Plutniak](#) and [Shumon Tobias Hussain](#), posted 12 June 2023, validated 12 June 2023

#### Please revise

Dear Alice,

reviews are finally in for your contribution - they are very positive overall and make some minor and sensible suggestions for revisions.

Please do have a look at these, prepare a revised version and response letter.

Thanks so much for your contribution and your patience.

Warmly,

Felix

### Reviewed by [Giuseppina Mutri](#), 20 April 2023

[Download the review](#)

### Reviewed by anonymous reviewer 1, 10 June 2023

The article by Alice Leplongeon is a very welcomed piece of research about the prehistory of the Nile Valley. The declared aim is that of investigating the consistency of the definition of the (very) many cultural entities identified over decades of research in NE Africa, and the influence such definitions still have on contemporary research, to address long-standing, and perhaps irremediable issue, i.e. easing comparability between different seasons of research set apart not only by number of years, but mostly by methodologies and research priorities. In doing this, the author sets out and relies on a very insightful, and also very useful for the reader, review of the research on the Late Stone Age of the Nile Valley, which has a long and important history rooted at the end of 1800's. The very core of the author's concern is the plethora of cultural entities coined during the second half of the past century, often defined on typologies based on little shared terminology hindering reanalysis of assemblages from old excavations and comparisons with new ones.

The manuscript is well structured and written and the aim of the article is very well delineated and clear. The title clearly describes the article but is maybe too wide in scope. The expression "later prehistory" might

suggest the paper discusses e.g. Neolithic archaeology as well, which is not. Since the paper actually deals with Late Stone Age contexts of the very end of the Pleistocene, I would suggest a somewhat rephrasing of the title by adding for example "later Pleistocene prehistory" or terms like Late Stone Age/late Palaeolithic.

The abstract is informative and clearly presents context, aims and conclusions of the article. The introduction clearly describes the reason for the study by providing a synthetic rationale and the main points of discussion. Since the article main part is a review of the research conducted in the Nile Valley and adjacent regions, I believe the introduction does not need to build too much on recent and past research, which is extensively addressed there. Yet I would suggest to at least add references for the statement in lines 31-33.

I would elaborate a little more on the subject of occupation of desert areas during the harshest phases of the late Pleistocene (par. 3.2, lines 438-447) because 1) as the author correctly points out, it has been the object of intense debate and 2) it would further legitimate the focus of the article on the Nile Valley. Further, the title of paragraph 3.2 ends with a question mark, but it is not entirely clear to me whether the author is questioning the current state of affairs or whether it is rather a question about the real possibilities of standardisation. Either way, one would expect some kind of answer at the end or somewhere in the paragraph, which does not seem to come clearly. It is most likely me who misunderstood the rationale of this paragraph, but I would still like to invite the author to discuss this a little more clearly at the end of the paragraph, as this seems to be the very core of the study.

References are accurately put, are appropriate and necessary. The tables and figures are clear and complete, are absolutely useful, and are understandable without relying too much on the text. I would strongly suggest adding at least one figure synthetizing the main typological classes of industries other than the Sebilian.