Haua Fteah

Haua Fteah, or Great Cave, is an exceptionally preserved Stone Age site. This cave houses great depths of sedimentary deposits, in which many artifacts were found. The internal layers of the cave span over 80,000 years in time and contain assemblages of various industries. A large part of these deposits are thought to be from the Middle Paleolithic, or Middle Stone Age (MSA). Haua Fteah is a naturally occurring cave, found on the northern coast of Cyrenaican Libya. The cave itself is massive, with its opening spanning a 60 ft high by 180 ft wide arch. It consists of a huge vertical shaft, round in shape with an overhang extending towards the front. The shaft has been filled with silt by various processes of sedimentation. Presently, the cave is found within a Mediterranean vegetational zone surrounded by desert and subdesert.

The site was discovered by C.B.M. McBurney and C.T. Houlder. There was a series of three excavations: the first in 1951, followed by another in 1952, and the last excavation in 1955. With each excavation the size and depth increased. At the end of the excavations, almost 13 m of sediments were penetrated before reaching bedrock. The excavation technique was very precise, measuring horizontal layers, or spits, in an ordered fashion. Natural layers were evident in the sediments from obvious differences in colors and textures. Both types of layers aid in the precision of the excavations.

The dates for this site vary, depending on the layer in question. For the purposes of this report, I will focus on the layers that represent the Middle Paleolithic period. The earliest dates for this section of material date to around 55,000 years ago, +/- 8000 years, from 14C and isotopic dating techniques. There are different theories as to how old the cave is, which explains the large margin.

The evidence for determining the paleo-environment is quite strong. Archaeologists have been able to determine that a series of occupations took place at Haua Fteah. From comparing the proportions of various faunas present during this period, estimations concerning the climatic patterns could be made. During the MSA, the climate was similar to that of our current summer and winter climatic patterns. Furthermore, the occupation periods of the site seem to be correlated with the rising and falling of sea level. With a high sea level, the mouth of the cave would be closer to water. This would be a prime living environment, with shelter and water in close proximity.

The artifacts found at the site are great in number and diversity, however there is a low density of finds in the layers for the MSA. The MSA is characterized by a mixture of elements from evolved Levalloisian and Mousterian industries. A combination of industries are demonstrated throughout the layers in question: (evolved) Hybrid-Mousterian, Levalloisian, and Mousterian. There are many flakes and other fragments of stone and bone; however, there are very few finished tools. End-scrapers and angle burins are found throughout, in addition to cores and bifacial tools. However, side scrapers are rare, and points are virtually absent.

Within these layers, there are abrupt transitions. There appears to be a break in local cultural development. From this, one could infer that there was an arrival of a new community. Furthermore, there is a complete disappearance of burins, as well as a decrease in the number of end scrapers. At the same time, points and side-scrapers appear. In addition to this, various sections of burnt earth are found throughout the site. In some instances, the distribution of the artifacts was centered around such a burnt patch. This site appears to have been used by a series of occupants throughout time, based on the stratigraphic sequence.

Haua Fteah is an incredible site, and is very interesting when one looks at all of the different industries and time periods. For tens of thousands of years early man could have inhabited the area. The climate and rising tides seem to have affected the extent to which the cave was occupied. As one population left, new ones may have entered. Perhaps some returned. In all cases, each left their mark.