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Q4(b)

Write a note on Mousterian tool tradition, Mousterian culture and its makers

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2025 · Anthropology GS 1 · 15 marks · The Nature of Culture

2.1 The Nature of Culture: The concept and Characteristics of culture and civilization; Ethnocentrism vis-a-vis cultural Relativism.

Core demand of the question

- Describe the Mousterian tool tradition, including technology and types
- Characterise Mousterian culture beyond stone
- Identify the makers and the dating and geographic range
- Treat tradition, culture and makers as three related parts

Revision summary

The tradition is Middle Palaeolithic flakes, **Levallois technique**, scrapers, points and denticulates.

Bordes saw facies as cultural variants. Binford saw functional tool-kits.

Culture includes fire, hunting and shelters. Be cautious on burial and ornament.

Makers in Europe are mainly **Neanderthals**. In the Levant early modern humans also used Mousterian tools.

The date ballpark is the Middle Palaeolithic, to about 40,000 years ago in Europe.

Mousterian is not identical with all Neanderthal behaviour everywhere.

Introduction

Mousterian names a Middle Palaeolithic stone-working tradition, a broader way of life often linked to **Neanderthals**, and a set of makers who were not always one species. Tradition, culture and makers are three related things, not three names for Neanderthal.

Body

Tool tradition

The Mousterian is a **flake-based** industry. The famous **Levallois** prepared-core method shapes the core so that the flake's form is already planned. Scrapers, especially side-scrapers, points, denticulates and notched pieces dominate. Handaxes recede relative to the Acheulean. The type site is **Le Moustier** in France.

François Bordes typed regional facies such as typical, denticulate, Quina and Charentian. **Lewis Binford** later argued that many facies are **functional** - butchery versus woodwork - rather than tribal styles. Typology exists; it is not automatically ethnicity. The tradition is economical with stone and suited to hafting, which implies composite tools.

Mousterian culture

Beyond stone, the package includes habitual **fire**, hunting of medium and large mammals, and use of caves and rock shelters. Some sites have pigment and possible personal ornament. Burial is debated site by site. **Shanidar** in Iraq is often cited, with caution. The culture is a Middle Palaeolithic way of life in cold-to-temperate Eurasia, with related industries in the Levant and North Africa. It is not one ceremony, and it is not a single pan-Mousterian religion.

Makers

In Europe the makers are primarily **Neanderthals** (*Homo neanderthalensis*), from roughly the later Middle Pleistocene until about 40,000 years ago depending on region, overlapping incoming *Homo sapiens*. In the Levant, Mousterian assemblages are associated with both **Neanderthals** and early modern humans, as at Skhul and Qafzeh versus Tabun and Amud. North African Middle Stone Age and Mousterian-like industries have their own hominin casts.

So tradition is technological. Culture is behavioural ecology plus limited symbolism. Makers are **Neanderthals** as the European default, with early sapiens sharing the toolkit at the gates of Europe.

Flow diagram

Mousterian -> Levallois flakes and scrapers
Mousterian -> Fire, hunt, cave, limited symbol
Mousterian -> Neanderthals and some early sapiens

Conclusion

Mousterian is a flake-and-Levallois tradition, a Middle Palaeolithic adaptive culture, and, in Europe, a Neanderthal signature that sapiens could also knap. Bordes versus Binford belongs on the tradition side: facies need not mean tribes.

Facts & figures

Levallois technique

A prepared-core method that produces predetermined flakes. It is a hallmark of many Mousterian assemblages.

François Bordes

He typed Mousterian facies as cultural variants. This was later challenged as functional rather than ethnic.

Lewis Binford

He interpreted Mousterian variability as tool-kit differences by activity, not as different tribes.

Neanderthals

Primary makers of the European Mousterian. In the Levant the same tradition is also associated with early *Homo sapiens* at some sites.

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