The Three Phases of the Japanese Palaeolithic Culture

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The Palaeolithic culture in the Japanese Archipelago is divided into Phases I, II, and III. Significant changes in the culture occur from one phase to the next.

(1) Phase I (before 30,000 years B.P.) is the oldest Palaeolithic material in Japan. Stone tools of this phase lack clearly defined forms. They fall into two basic classes: large tools and small tools. Raw materials indicate little care in selection, and tool blanks show emphasis on the potential usefulness of one part of the object, rather than on the form of the entire object.

(2) The appearance of knife-shaped stone tools marks Phase II (30,000 to 14,000 years B.P.). This phase also sees the manufacture and use of points, gravers, edge-ground stone axes, and other stone tools with well-defined forms. The development of tools with definite, recurring shapes relates to hafting, or the use of composite tools. Regional and temporal variation is clear in the process of forming blanks for tool production. Details of the sequence of this phase are not yet fully worked out, but edge-ground stone axes are distinctive of the older levels and points are distinctive of the younger ones.

(3) Knife-shaped tools disappear in Phase III (14,000 to 12,000 years B.P.) and a culture characterized by microblades spreads throughout the country. Within the microblade industry, System A, as used by the author, is closely related to microblade industries on the Asiatic continent, while a variety of localized System B production techniques evolved in the wake of System A. Individual microblades are units of more elaborate tools; they manifest the so-called "repetitive" technology.

The microblade culture is the last Palaeolithic culture in Japan and the base from which the Jomon culture emerges.