

The Clactonian Notch Reconsidered

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The so-called “Clactonian notch” is of a long-renowned fame, to the extent that it has become a technotypological feature for designation throughout different industrial complexes of different periods. A Clactonian notch is described as a notch produced on an artifact by a single blow (Bordes 1961: 35; Newcomer 1971: 57; and many others). The notch is generally void of any retouch. Such a notch is different from a “regular” notch (in the Acheulian and other industrial complexes) produced by some secondary flaking and generally retouched on the inside. In the literature, the Clactonian notch, as its name implies, is considered to be one of the major characteristics of any clactonian assemblage.

By no means do I intend to suggest that notches on various artifacts, or specific notched tools, were not deliberately manufactured by man – even by “Clactonian Man”, whatever he may have been. However, a careful examination of notches, both Clactonian and non-Clactonian, as well as some experimental knapping – mainly undertaken during my recent research in England (Ohel 1977 a and b) – have led to the following observations.

In a great number of cases the single-blow notch is nothing more than a mere “accident” in the process of flaking. (Also Newcomer, personal communication 1976; Jones, personal communication and mutual experimentation 1976.)

Whenever an edge, especially a sharp one, meets a solid substance (stone, bone, wood, metal and also a stiff tendon), and twists, or is twisted, a notch is produced. (Also MacRae, personal communication and experimentation 1975.) Thus, many notches could be the result of natural or human “accidents”, and even if the twist was deliberate (e. g., to cut the tendon), the notch *per se* remains accidental.

Under conditions of movement, such as those reflected by gravel deposits in which most of the Clactonian artifacts were found, Clactonian notches might have been easily produced by blows, falls, crushings, or pressures of one stone upon another.

Fine, delicate trimming inside a notch, sometimes also seen in Clactonian notches, and usually in regular notches, need not necessarily be the result of human retouch. Experimentation has shown (also with Jones 1975, 1976) that more often than not the single blow itself produces a tiny “retouch” in the concavity which could easily be mistaken for deliberate, additional modification. Also, as soon as an accidental notch is produced by movement, the very thin, sharp concave edge of the notch becomes extremely susceptible to scratches, fractures, etc. by natural agents. The result may greatly resemble human retouch. Unless the notch is unquestionably retouched, or clearly belongs to a patterned, specialized industry of undisturbed physical conditions (fairly rare in Lower Paleolithic occurrences in Britain), the so-called “notch tool category” is highly suspect.

The notion, so widely accepted, that the Clactonian notch had a definite function as a “spoke-shave,” is certainly appealing, but is as yet mere speculation; even if we consider the wooden spear from Clacton (Oakley 1975: 14 and Fig. 5). Wooden sticks could just as well have been shaved by straight edges, and perhaps even more efficiently (Keeley, personal communication 1975). There is also the possibility that even when it can be determined that Clactonian notches were deliberately struck, such as in the case of chopper-cores, or borers, they were only a means to create or to resharpen an edge or an end. (Also Keeley, personal communication 1975; and see also Newcomer 1971: 57.)

Taking into account the above observations and considerations, it seems to me highly dubious to ascribe Clactonian notches to a classified tool category unless the intentional, preconceived manufacture of such not-

ches is satisfactorily proven. So far as both Clactonian and Acheulian assemblages in Britain are concerned, it is now my contention that no reliable recordings or comparisons can be performed on Clactonian notches for the time being, especially if they are to be judged according to traditional criteria. Consequently, the so-called "Clactonian notch" has, in fact, no clear, definite meaning within Clactonian assemblages.

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