

USIPP 2026 Session Proposal

Title

Approaches to Early and Middle Stone Age/Palaeolithic open-air contexts in arid landscapes

Keywords

Pleistocene; arid landscapes; preservation; lithic record; methodological approaches; surface archaeology

Abstract

Arid regions are shaped by dynamic geomorphic processes that often limit the preservation of archaeological contexts by promoting surface instability, deflation, erosion, and material exposure. In these deflated landscapes, stratified Quaternary archaeological archives can be exceedingly rare. Caves and rock shelters that preserve sedimentary successions with cultural and environmental proxies are often scarce, resulting in an enduring gap in our knowledge of Stone Age/Palaeolithic land use and settlement of entire regions.

Yet, even these fragmented landscapes preserve persistent traces of human presence. Rare stratified open-air sites can capture sequences of occupation and environmental transformation, while the far more abundant surface lithic assemblages capture broader patterns of mobility, resource use, and technological behavior. Exploring these archives demands adaptive, multi-scalar strategies that can address variable formation processes, discontinuous sedimentation, and complex taphonomic histories.

This session invites contributions that advance methodological and interpretive approaches to open-air Early and Middle Stone Age / Lower and Middle Palaeolithic research in arid regions. Themes include, but are not limited to, the interaction between geomorphological processes and preservation potential; the integration of remote sensing, geoarchaeology, off-site archaeology, intensive survey and excavation; and the use of legacy datasets, museum collections, and archival records to refine regional frameworks, including, and especially, from currently inaccessible areas.

By combining new field evidence with re-evaluations of existing data, the session aims to highlight the persistent potential of open-air archaeological archives in shaping our understanding of human adaptation to shifting environmental conditions in currently arid environments, and to promote strategies that protect, interpret, and disseminate these fragile yet persistent records of the deep past.

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