
A Little Mystery, Mythology and Romance: How the 'Pigmy Flint' got its Name

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Abstract

The term 'pigmy flint' was coined in 1900 and frequently used to describe small flint tools, many of them microliths, in British archaeology during the earliest decades of the 20th Century. The term 'microlithe' originates in France somewhat earlier, with markedly different connotations. It was not until after the turn of the century that 'microlithique' was used to describe the industries we recognise as such, and the term was not commonly used in Britain until the mid-1920's, despite cross-Channel academic connections.

The changing nature of the terminology that was used to describe such "very small implements of flint" (Gatty, 1900) is mirrored by the different attitudes of early archaeologists to these tools, and latterly to the application of Mesolithic as a distinct term. They were ignored by some, and marvelled at by others. The presence of morphologically similar 'pigmy' across the world sparked questions of migration, function, and chronology – in its broadest culture-historical sense.

This paper explores the history of the use of the term 'pigmy flint', its role within the development of Mesolithic studies in Britain, and speculates on why the term fell out of use.

Keywords: Pygmy flint, pigmy flint, microlith, history of archaeology

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