

<sup>1</sup> Detecting skill level and mental templates in Late Acheulean  
<sup>2</sup> biface morphology: Archaeological and experimental  
<sup>3</sup> insights

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<sup>5</sup> **Abstract**

<sup>6</sup> Despite the extensive literature focusing on Acheulean bifaces, especially the sources and  
<sup>7</sup> meaning of their morphological variability, many aspects of this topic remain elusive. Among  
<sup>8</sup> many factors identified to contribute to the considerable variation of biface morphology, skill  
<sup>9</sup> level and mental templates have been frequently cited. Here we present results from a multi-  
<sup>10</sup> disciplinary study of Late Acheulean handaxe-making skill acquisition involving twenty-six  
<sup>11</sup> naïve participants trained for up to 90 hours in Late Acheulean style handaxe production and  
<sup>12</sup> three expert knappers. We compare their handaxe to the Late Acheulean handaxe assemblage  
<sup>13</sup> from Boxgrove, UK. Through the principal component analysis of morphometric data derived  
<sup>14</sup> from images, our study suggested that both skill level and mental template have a relatively  
<sup>15</sup> clear manifestation in different aspects of biface morphology, where the former is related to  
<sup>16</sup> cross-sectional thinning (PC1) while the latter relates to handaxe elongation and pointedness  
<sup>17</sup> (PC2). Moreover, we also evaluated the effects of training using the data from a 90-hour long  
<sup>18</sup> knapping skill acquisition experiment and found that reaching the skill level of modern expert  
<sup>19</sup> requires more training time than was permitted in this extensive and long-running training  
<sup>20</sup> program. Our study demonstrated the potential of experimental archaeology and digital  
<sup>21</sup> photographs in revealing new insights from old archaeological assemblages.

<sup>22</sup> **Keywords:** Late Acheulean; Biface production; Boxgrove; Experimental archaeology; Skill  
<sup>23</sup> level; Mental template

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## 40 **1 Introduction**

41 The morphological variability of Acheulean bifaces has been one of the most well-studied and  
 42 well-published topics in paleolithic archaeology (Key & Lycett, 2019; Petraglia & Korisettar, 1998;  
 43 White, 1998). Despite the recurrent narrative emphasizing the heterogeneity and longevity of  
 44 biface assemblage on a global scale and the conservatism behind this phenomenon that evokes  
 45 genetic explanations (Corbey et al., 2016; Corbey, 2020; Richerson & Boyd, 2005; Sterelny, 2004),  
 46 many researchers have recognized the diversity within what has been deemed as a unified  
 47 Acheulean “tradition” and tried to dissect the sources and meaning of this variation (Lycett &  
 48 Gowlett, 2008; Nowell, 2002; Nowell & White, 2010; Sharon et al., 2011). More specifically, a  
 49 complex suite of interconnecting factors have been identified to contribute to the great variation  
 50 of biface morphology, including but not limited to raw materials (Eren et al., 2014; Lycett et  
 51 al., 2016; Sharon, 2008), percussor properties (Shipton et al., 2009), function (Key et al., 2016;  
 52 Key & Lycett, 2017; Kohn & Mithen, 1999; Machin et al., 2007; White & Foulds, 2018), reduction  
 53 method/intensity (Shipton et al., 2009; Shipton & Clarkson, 2015), learning processes (Kempe et  
 54 al., 2012; Lycett et al., 2016), skill level (Caruana & Herries, 2021; Herzlinger et al., 2017; Stout et  
 55 al., 2014), mental template (García-Medrano et al., 2019; Hutchence & Scott, 2021). From this  
 56 extensive list, skill level and mental template have been repeatedly mentioned and discussed in  
 57 the now extensive corpus of biface studies.

58 In its classical definition, mental template is the “idea of the proper form of an object exists  
 59 in the mind of the maker, and when this idea is expressed in tangible form in raw material, an

60 artifact results" (Deetz, 1967: 45). This concept essentially lies in the very foundation of the  
61 cultural-historical approach in that the identification of archaeological cultures is based on the  
62 existence of distinct mental templates in a given spatial-temporal framework. Early researchers,  
63 whether explicitly or implicitly, often endorse this conceptual framework and actively applies  
64 in the typological analysis of bifaces at the regional level (Roe, 1969; Wenban-Smith et al., 2000;  
65 Wenban-Smith, 2004). Combined with the production of large flakes, the emergence of mental  
66 templates (or "imposed form") has been recognized as two major technological innovations of the  
67 Acheulean compared with the Oldowan (Isaac, 1986). For a decade or so, this concept has been less  
68 frequently used, since it was criticized for its normative and static assumption (Lyman & O'Brien,  
69 2004), ignorance of other competing factors such as raw material constraints (White, 1995), and  
70 the lack of rigorous studies of its corresponding cognitive processes. Until very recently, several  
71 researchers have actively addressed these critiques and reconceptualized the mental template  
72 in the study of biface morphology. Hutchence and Scott (2021: 675), for example, leveraged the  
73 theory of "community of practice" (Wenger, 1998) and argued that "the consistency in handaxe  
74 shape found at sites like Boxgrove is a consequence of the emergent actions of individual knappers  
75 being simultaneously constrained by the imposition of social norms." Furthermore, raw material  
76 is often treated as a crucial variable to be controlled at the very beginning of a research design  
77 focusing on mental template. This is best exemplified by an experimental study of García-  
78 Medrano et al. (2019), where they carefully chose experimental nodules mirroring those found in  
79 archaeological context in composition, size, and shape. In terms of the cognitive mechanisms  
80 behind mental template, Ho and colleagues (2022) recently developed a series of navigation  
81 experiments demonstrating the externalization of the planning process to simple geometric  
82 representations, which has the potential to be transferred into a research setting aiming at directly  
83 testing the planning of knapping behaviors. In short, when exercised with proper caution, mental  
84 template still has its value in our study of biface morphological variation, which can be further  
85 dissected into a series of shape variables corresponding to pointedness and elongation, among  
86 other things.

87 Building upon the concept of mental template, one possible way of defining skill is the capacity  
88 for a knapper to realize mental templates using the resources available (Roux et al., 1995: 66).  
89 This version of conceptualization, particularly relevant when it comes to motor skills such as  
90 knapping, can be dismantled into two mutually dependent aspects, namely the intentional  
91 aspect (goal/strategic planning) and the operational aspect (means/motor execution) (Connolly

& Dingley, 1989). It also roughly corresponds to the well-known dichotomy developed by French lithic analysts of “*connaissance*” (abstract knowledge) and “*savoir-faire*” (practical know-how) (Pelegrin, 1993). As Stout (2002: 694) noted, the acquisition of skill is deeply rooted in its social context, and it is not composed of “some rigid motor formula” but “how to act in order to solve a problem.” This ecological notion of skill somewhat mirrors Hutchence and Scott’s (2021) reconceptualization of the mental template in that they both refute the idea that technology is simply an internal program expressed by the mind and they prefer a dynamic approach emphasizing the interaction between perception and action. The manifestations of skill in materialized form display a great amount of variation, but ethnoarchaeological studies have repeatedly suggested that skills can be improved through practice as perceived by the local practitioners. It is thus possible to evaluate the skill levels reflected in knapping products (Roux et al., 1995; Stout, 2002). When contextual information is less readily available as in the Late Acheulean archaeological assemblages, how to properly operationalize and measure knapping skills has been a methodological issue receiving much attention among archaeologists (Bamforth & Finlay, 2008; Kolhatkar, 2022). In addition to measurements that can be almost applied in any lithic technological system such as raw materials, platform preparation, as well as hinges, in the context of biface technology, symmetry (Hodgson, 2015; Hutchence & Debackere, 2019) and cross-sectional thinning (Caruana, 2020; Pargeter et al., 2019; Stout et al., 2014) have been frequently quoted as reliable and distinctive indicators of the skill level as supported by several experimental studies. These two features have also been commonly used as standards for dividing Early Acheulean and Late Acheulean (Callahan, 1979; Clark, 2001; Schick & Toth, 1993).

Drawing on these two lines of literature, we aim to explore the possibility of differentiating skill level and mental template through a comparative study of an archaeological biface assemblage known for its remarkable dexterity, a reference biface collection produced by modern knapping experts, and an experimental biface sample produced by modern novice knappers. Since the novice biface collection is generated from a 90-hour skill acquisition experiment, we also have the precious opportunity to introduce the diachronic dimension of training time and interrogate its impact on the variables of interest. As such, we propose the following two interconnected research questions in this article: 1) Can skill level and mental template be efficiently detected from biface morphometric data? 2) How does training affect novices’ performance in these two aspects?

<sup>123</sup> **2 Materials and methods**

<sup>124</sup> **2.1 Boxgrove biface collection**

<sup>125</sup> The archaeological site of Boxgrove is located in the former Eartham quarry, Boxgrove, West  
<sup>126</sup> Sussex, featuring a long sequence of Middle Pleistocene deposit (Pope et al., 2020; Roberts &  
<sup>127</sup> Parfitt, 1998). This 500-ka-old site has documented exceedingly rich details of Lower Paleolithic  
<sup>128</sup> hominins' subsistence behaviors (Smith, 2013, 2012) and their paleoenvironmental contexts  
<sup>129</sup> (Holmes et al., 2010). In addition to the presence of one of the earliest hominin fossil (*Homo*  
<sup>130</sup> *heidelbergensis*, Hillson et al., 2010) and bone assemblages with anthropogenic modifications  
<sup>131</sup> in northern Europe (Bello et al., 2009), Boxgrove is mostly known for its large sample size of  
<sup>132</sup> Late Acheulean-style flint handaxes and the high dexterity reflected in their manufacture. As  
<sup>133</sup> such, it has received wide research attention in the past two decades regarding the relationships  
<sup>134</sup> between technology, cognition, and skills (García-Medrano et al., 2019; Iovita et al., 2017; Iovita  
<sup>135</sup> & McPherron, 2011; Shipton & Clarkson, 2015; Stout et al., 2014). To identify the morphological  
<sup>136</sup> manifestation of knappers' dexterity in our study, we selected a complete handaxe assemblage  
<sup>137</sup> (n=326) previously analyzed and reported in digital formats by Iovita and McPherron (Iovita &  
<sup>138</sup> McPherron, 2011), which is currently curated at the Franks House of the British Museum (Iovita et  
<sup>139</sup> al., 2017). The digital photographs are taken of each handaxe at a 90° angle, which was oriented  
<sup>140</sup> with the tip to the right of the photos, and the camera faces the most convex surface of the  
<sup>141</sup> handaxe (Iovita & McPherron, 2011).

<sup>142</sup> **2.2 Experimental biface collection**

<sup>143</sup> The biface experimental replicas used in this study comprised two sub-collection. The first  
<sup>144</sup> sub-collection includes 10 bifaces knapped by three expert knappers, including Bruce Bradley  
<sup>145</sup> (n=4), John Lord (n=3), and Dietrich Stout (n=3) (Stout et al., 2014). These handaxes were made  
<sup>146</sup> for previous research projects, which similarly aimed to approximate 'Late Acheulean' handaxes  
<sup>147</sup> explicitly comparable to the Boxgrove assemblage (Faisal et al., 2010; Stout et al., 2014; Stout et al.,  
<sup>148</sup> 2011). The second sub-collection is produced from a 90-hour handaxe knapping skill acquisition  
<sup>149</sup> experiment (Bayani et al., 2021; Pargeter et al., 2020; Pargeter et al., 2019), where 30 adults with  
<sup>150</sup> no previous experience in knapping were recruited from Emory University and its surrounding  
<sup>151</sup> communities and requested to make 132 bifaces in total. Among these 30 adult participants, 17  
<sup>152</sup> have gone through multiple one-to-one or group training sessions that amounted to 89 hours

153 in maximum, while the remaining 13 were assigned to the controlled group, where no formal  
154 training is given. As part of the preparation efforts, the experimental team spalled the Norfolk  
155 flints acquired through [Neolithics.com](#) into flat blanks of similar size and shape for training and  
156 assessments. The mechanical properties of these raw materials are comparable to the ones used  
157 in Boxgrove in that they are both fine-grained and highly predictable in fracturing process.

158 In this experiment, all research participants participated in the initial assessment (assessment 1 in  
159 our data set) before formal training, where they each produced a handaxe after watching three 15-  
160 minute videos of Late Acheulean style handaxes demonstrated by expert knappers and examining  
161 four Late Acheulean style handaxe replicas. Training was provided by verbal instruction and  
162 support from the second author, an experienced knapping instructor ([Khreisheh et al., 2013](#))  
163 with 10 years knapping practice and specific knowledge of Late Acheulean technology including  
164 the Boxgrove handaxe assemblage. She was present at all training sessions to provide help and  
165 instruction to participants. All training occurred under controlled conditions at the outdoor  
166 knapping area of Emory's Paleolithic Technology Lab, with knapping tools and raw materials  
167 provided. All participants were instructed in basic knapping techniques including how to select  
168 appropriate percussors, initiate flaking on a nodule, maintain the correct flaking gestures and  
169 angles, prepare flake platforms, visualize outcomes, deal with raw material imperfections, and  
170 correct mistakes. Handaxe-specific instruction included establishment and maintenance of  
171 a bifacial plane, cross-sectional thinning, and overall shaping. The training emphasized both  
172 aspects of handaxe making technical skill (the importance of producing thin pieces with centered  
173 edges) as well as mental template related markers (symmetrical edges).

174 Subsequently, the 17 participants in the experimental group were assessed after every ten hours  
175 of the cumulative learning period, where each of them was requested to produce a handaxe for  
176 expert knapper's (N. Khreisheh) review, leading to the compilation of a data set composing 9  
177 assessments in total. It should be also noted that 6 out of 17 participants dropped out of the  
178 research before the final assessment due to personal reasons. To detect the effect of training  
179 on skill level and mental template, we reorganized our assessment classification scheme and  
180 combined it into three broader categories, namely pre-training (assessment 1), early training  
181 (assessment 2-5), and late training (assessment 6-9), which helps increase the sample size of  
182 the measured intervals. A more detailed experimental protocol can be assessed in one of our  
183 published papers ([Pargeter et al., 2019](#)).

184 **2.3 Lithic analysis**

185 To better understand the morphological variation of Boxgrove biface collection, we adopted a  
186 standardized analytical procedure to extract the morphometric information from 752 photos  
187 of the studied samples prepared by R. I. ([Iovita & McPherron, 2011](#)), which include both the  
188 front and lateral views of a given specimen. First, we used Adobe Photoshop to conduct a batch  
189 transformation of the samples' pixel scale into a real-world measurement scale based on the fixed  
190 photographic setting. This is then followed by the batch conversion of color photographs to a  
191 black-and-white binary format. Subsequently, we cropped the silhouettes of bifaces one by one  
192 using the Quick Selection Tool in Adobe Photoshop. The metric measurements were conducted  
193 in ImageJ ([Rueden et al., 2017](#)), where we employed a custom ImageJ script ([Pargeter et al., 2019](#))  
194 to measure the maximum length, width, and thickness of a given silhouette. The width and  
195 thickness measurements are taken at 10% increments of length starting at the tip of each biface  
196 (**Figure 1**), which eventually leads to 19 morphometric variables in total (1 length measurement,  
197 9 width measurements, and 9 thickness measurements). Finally, we calculated the geometric  
198 means of all 19 linear measurements to create a scale-free data set that preserves the individual  
199 morphological variation at the same time ([Lycett et al., 2006](#)), which also at least alleviate the  
200 effect of resharpening process to some extent. The same procedure was also applied to the  
201 morphometric analyses of the experimental biface collection, which was partially published in  
202 Pargeter et al. ([2019](#)).

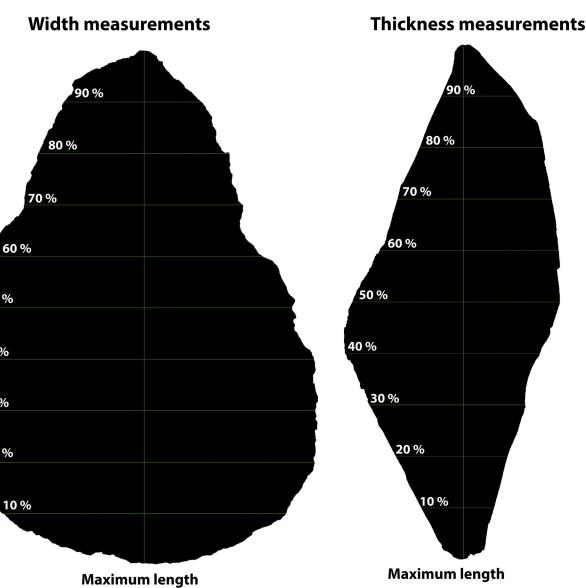


Figure 1: A visual demonstration of the biface measurement protocol using Image J (after Pargeter et al. 2019: Figure 5).

203 **2.4 Statistical analyses**

204 Given the number of variables involved in this study, we used principal component analysis (PCA)  
205 to reduce the dimension and identify the possible patterns in this morphometric data set, which  
206 is one of the most used techniques in similar studies (García-Medrano, Maldonado-Garrido,  
207 et al., 2020; García-Medrano, Ashton, et al., 2020; Herzlinger et al., 2017; Iovita & McPherron,  
208 2011; Shipton & Clarkson, 2015; Stout et al., 2014). To detect the effect of training on novices'  
209 performance as compared with archaeological samples and biface made by experts, we also  
210 compare the corresponding metrics built on PCA across different training periods and across  
211 all groups using the Games-Howell nonparametric post-hoc test, which does not rely on the  
212 assumptions of equal sample sizes and equal variance. This study adheres to the principles of  
213 reproducibility and data transparency of archaeological research by depositing all the codes and  
214 data sets involved in an open-access online repository (Marwick, 2017), which can be accessed  
215 through the author's Github (<https://github.com/Raylc/PaST-pilot>).

216 **3 Results**

217 **3.1 Principal component analysis**

218 Our analysis suggested that the first two components already explain 77.2% of the variation for  
219 the entire morphometric data set composed of 19 variables (Figure 2), which is a rather decent  
220 explained variance ratio to avoid overfitting. We then decided to focus on and further interpreted  
221 the implications of these first two components based on their relationships between variables  
222 (Table 1). The first principal component (PC1) indicates the overall cross-sectional thickness as it  
223 is positively correlated with all thickness measurements while negatively correlated with all other  
224 measurements. That being said, a higher PC1 value indicates a thicker biface, and vice versa. The  
225 second principal component (PC2) tracks the elongation and pointedness based on its positive  
226 relationship with maximum length and bottom width/thickness. As PC2 increases, a biface will  
227 be generally longer and more pointed since its bottom part will be bulkier.

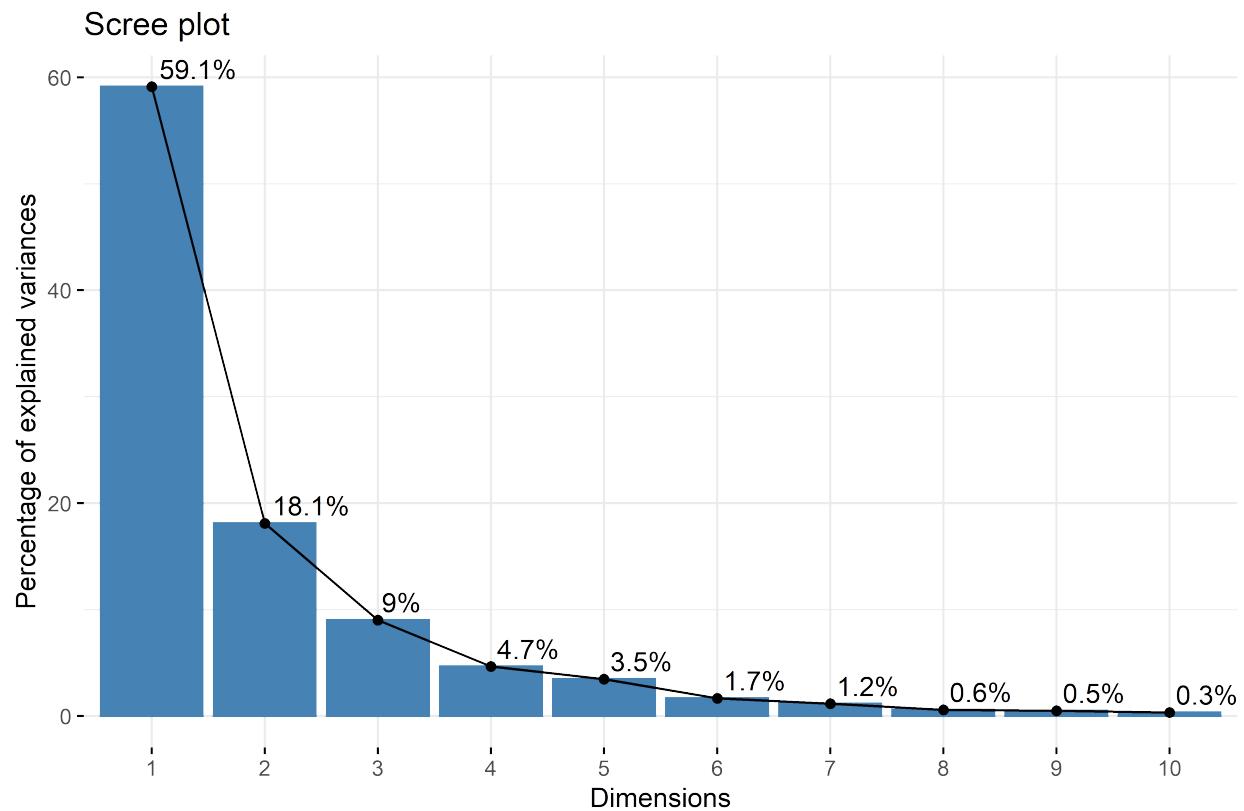


Figure 2: A scree plot showing the percentage of explained variances of the first 10 principal components.

Table 1: Variable loadings for the first two principal components

X	Dim.1	Dim.2
width_0.1	-0.1131312	-0.1256408
width_0.2	-0.1419554	-0.1326946
width_0.3	-0.1684170	-0.1232328
width_0.4	-0.1867226	-0.0966578
width_0.5	-0.2037483	-0.0651505
width_0.6	-0.2121330	-0.0197136
width_0.7	-0.2083163	0.0232790
width_0.8	-0.1885821	0.0661257
width_0.9	-0.1447319	0.0805702
thickness_0.1	0.0142639	-0.0240388
thickness_0.2	0.0247137	-0.0227114
thickness_0.3	0.0435524	-0.0093580
thickness_0.4	0.0667936	0.0047643
thickness_0.5	0.0893523	0.0261202
thickness_0.6	0.1083112	0.0484852
thickness_0.7	0.1288346	0.0628567
thickness_0.8	0.1444047	0.0659257
thickness_0.9	0.1308949	0.0487419
max_length	-0.3626265	0.2507234

228 A closer look at the principal component scatter plot ([Figure 3](#)) yields the clustering of different  
 229 groups of bifaces. The majority of Boxgrove bifaces occupy an area featuring negative values of  
 230 both PC1 and PC2. The expert group is similar to the Boxgrove group in PC1, while the former has  
 231 a relatively higher PC2 value than the latter on average. The group of novice displays the highest  
 232 level of variability, however, it is rather pronounced that most bifaces made by novices have a  
 233 positive PC1 value that is different from both the groups of Boxgrove and experts.

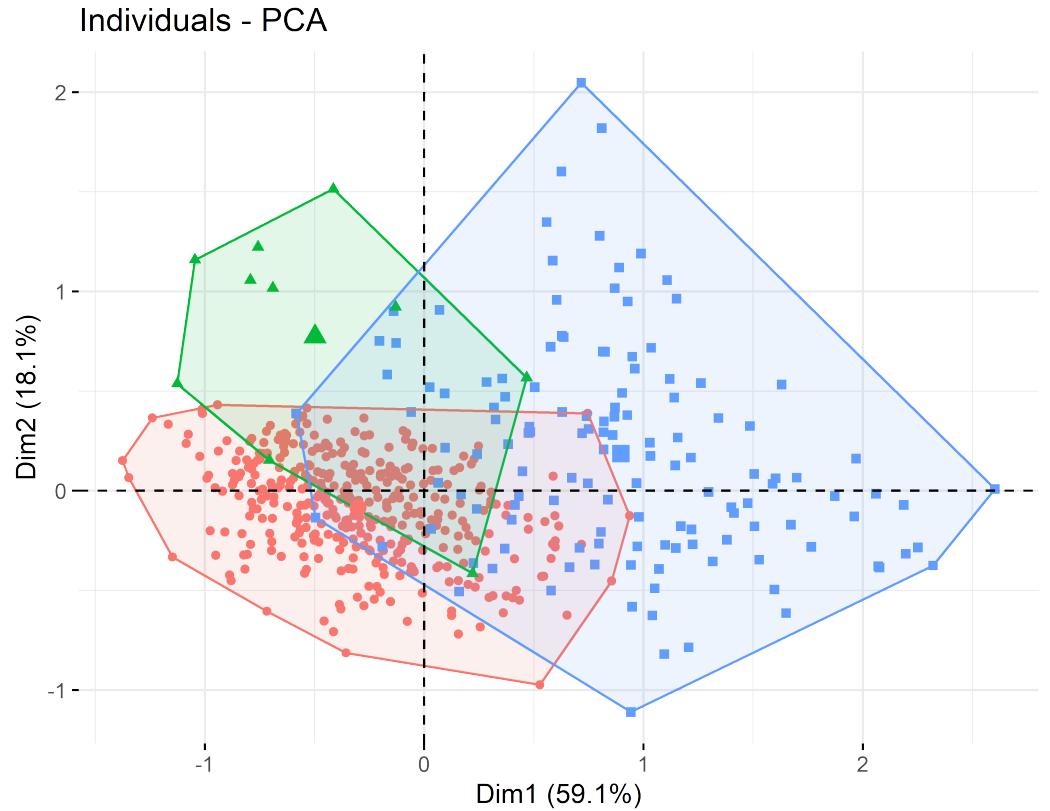


Figure 3: A principal component scatter plot of bifaces from the groups of Boxgrove (red, n=326), expert (green, n=10), and novice (blue, n=132).

### 234 3.2 Effects of training

235 We extracted the PC1 and PC2 values of individual bifaces and compared them between different  
 236 groups. More specifically, the novice group was divided into three sub-groups based on their  
 237 training stages as specified in the method section. As such, we found that for PC1 values (**Figure**  
 238 **4**), the only two group comparisons that are **not** statistically significant are the one between  
 239 Boxgrove and Expert ( $t = -1.65, p > 0.05$ ) and the one between Early training and Late training  
 240 stages ( $t = -0.649, p > 0.05$ ), which at least partially confirms our visual observation of the  
 241 general PCA scatter plot. Likewise, for PC2 values (**Figure 5**), the group comparison between the  
 242 Early training and Late stages again is **not** statistically significant ( $t = 0.333, p > 0.05$ ). However, a  
 243 rather surprising result here is that the mean PC2 value difference between the Pre-training group  
 244 and Boxgrove is also **not** statistically significant ( $t = -0.818, p > 0.05$ ).

### A between-group comparison of PC1 values

$$F_{\text{Welch}}(4, 44.97) = 119.31, p = 2.45\text{e-}23, \widehat{\omega_p^2} = 0.90, \text{CI}_{95\%} [0.86, 1.00], n_{\text{obs}} = 518$$

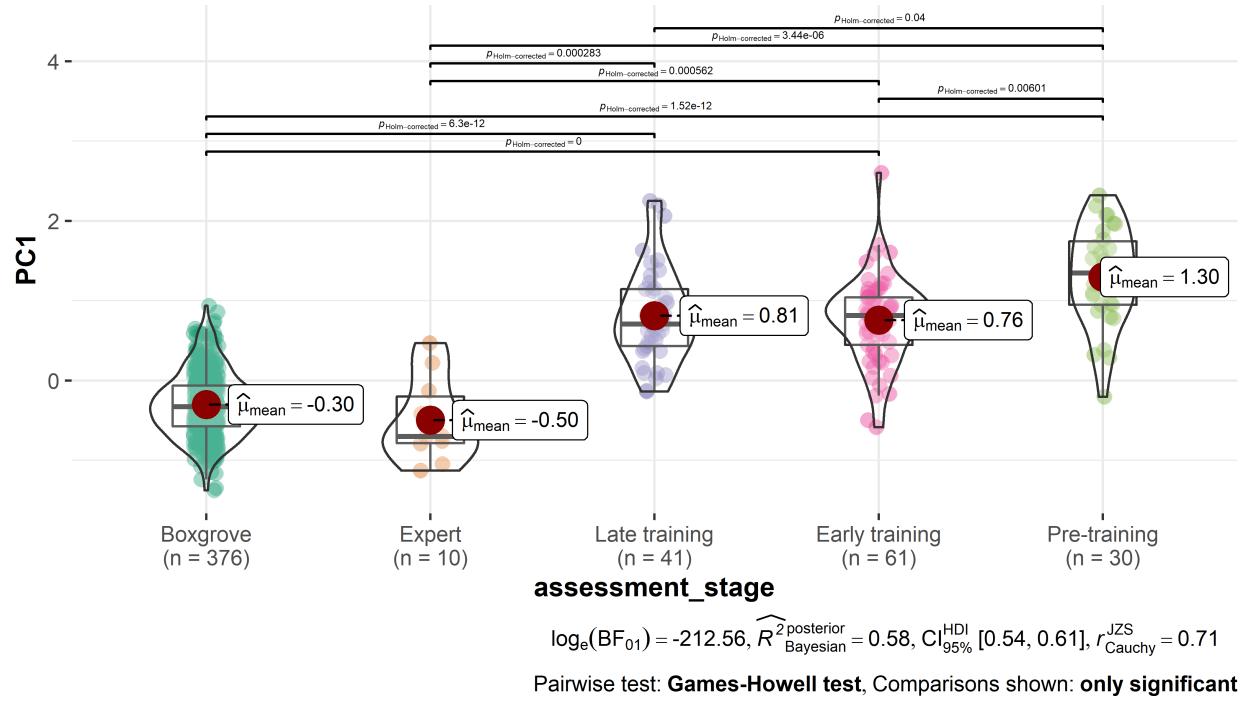


Figure 4: A between-group comparison of PC1 values.

### A between-group comparison of PC2 values

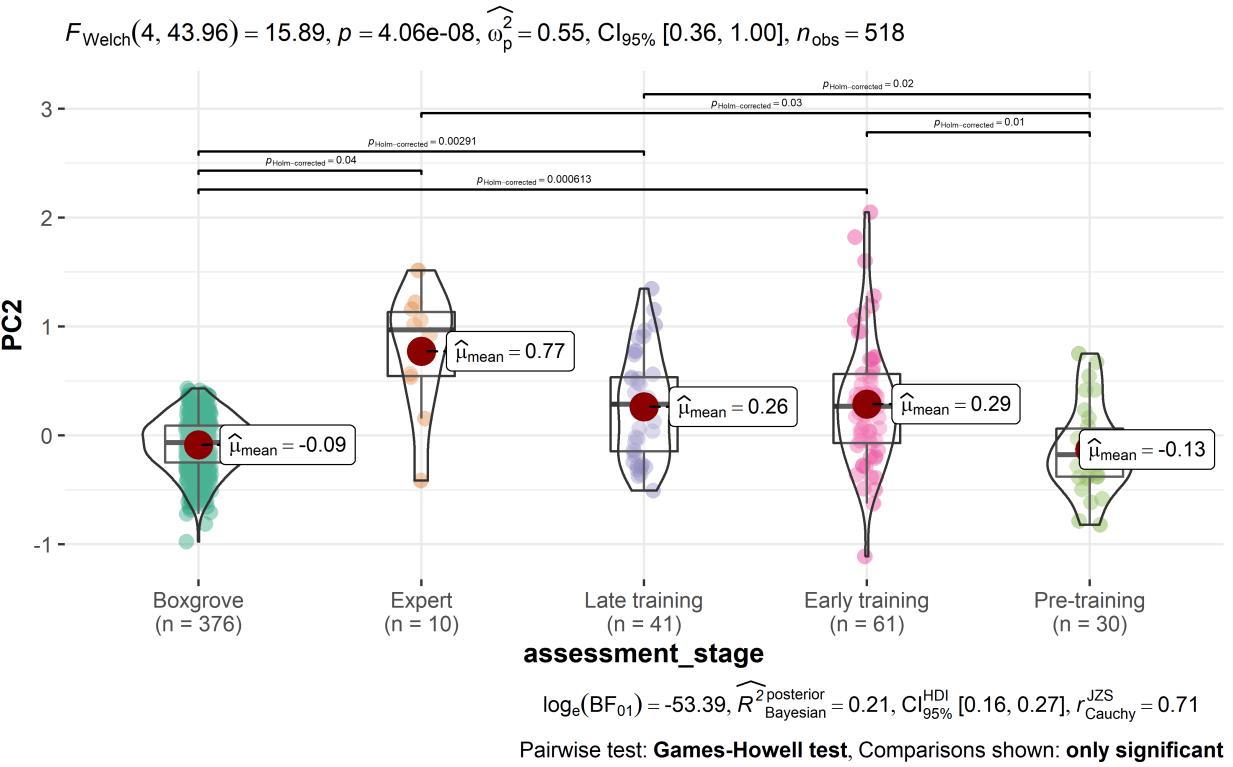


Figure 5: A between-group comparison of PC2 values.

## 245 4 Discussion

246 In accordance with the existing literature on biface knapping skill (Callahan, 1979; Caruana, 2020;  
 247 Stout et al., 2014), the results of PCA suggested that PC1 (cross-sectional thinning) is a robust  
 248 indicator of skill level as it is a common feature shared by modern expert knapper and Boxgrove  
 249 knappers. Thinning is regarded as a technique requiring a high knapping skill level because  
 250 it requires one to carefully detach flakes in an invasive manner while not breaking the biface  
 251 into several pieces, serving the purpose of achieving the desired convexity and/or volume. This  
 252 procedure involves precise control of striking forces, strategic choice of platform external angle,  
 253 and attentive preparation of bifacial intersection plane, all of which were part of our experimental  
 254 training program (Callahan, 1979; Caruana, 2022; Pargeter et al., 2020; Shipton et al., 2013; Stout  
 255 et al., 2014). Experimental studies have also shown that the thinning stage of biface produce often  
 256 involves the use of soft hammers, which is also supported by indirect archaeological evidence  
 257 of flake attributes from Boxgrove (Roberts & Parfitt, 1998: 384-394; Roberts & Pope, 2009). This

258 also reflects the majority of samples in both our expert and novice experimental assemblages. In  
259 the skill acquisition experiments, novice knappers have been explicitly taught to switch to the  
260 soft hammer for thinning purposes, but some of them did not follow the instruction during the  
261 assessment. On the other hand, it has also been shown that hard hammers can also be used to  
262 achieve similar thinning results (Bradley & Sampson, 1986; Pelcin, 1997), corresponding to the  
263 cases of replicas produced by Bruce Bradley and a few novices in our study.

264 Given the dissimilarity of PC2 (elongation and pointedness) values between archaeological and  
265 experimental samples and its similarity among modern knappers, we argue that this dimension  
266 reflects different mental templates, where the Boxgrove assemblage displays an ovate shape  
267 featuring a wider tip while the experimental assemblages are characterized by a more pointed  
268 shape with a longer central axis. This divergence of group-level aesthetic choices can be best  
269 explained under the theoretical framework of the communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) as  
270 advocated by Hutchence and Scott in biface analysis(2021). The most common form of learning  
271 in the experiment occurred in the group condition, where the instructor taught multiple novices  
272 at the same time and novices have the chance to also communicated and learned from their  
273 peers. Unfortunately, the biface data from the instructor (N. Khreisheh) are unavailable, but it  
274 should be noted that the instructor has learned how to knap and how to teach knapping from one  
275 of our expert knapper (Bruce Bradley). This cascading effect of social learning might explain why  
276 there is a shared mental template between the expert group and the novice group after training.

277 In terms of our second research question, this study shows that training does have an immediate  
278 intervention effect (pre-training vs. post-training) in both PC1 (skill level) and PC2 (mental tem-  
279 plate). Nonetheless, once the training has been initiated, its effects across different assessments  
280 on both dimensions are rather unconsipicous. This finding corroborates what has been suggested  
281 in Pargeter et al. (2019) that 90 hours of training for handaxe making is still not enough for  
282 novices to reach the skill level as reflected in expert knappers, considering the massive social  
283 support involved in the experiment set up including the direct and deliberate pedagogy and  
284 the simplified raw material procurement and preparation procedures. This follow-up project  
285 further adds the samples produced by the Late Acheulean toolmaker as a new benchmark to  
286 deepen our understanding of this issue. It is noteworthy how constrained is the Boxgrove as-  
287 semblage morphological variation as measured by both PC1 and PC2 even when compared with  
288 the modern expert group (Figure 3), especially given the fact that it has the largest sample size

among all studied group. Some potential explanations for this phenomenon include 1) the strong idiosyncrasy of individual expert knappers shaped by their own unique learning and practice experience; and/or 2) the present day-skill shortage of our expert knapper as compared with Boxgrove knappers despite their multiple years of knapping practice (Milks, 2019).  
The pre-training group is similar to the Boxgrove group in PC2 because these novices lack the ability to effectively reduce the nodules, which are typically flat pre-prepared cortical flakes, to the desired form (Figure 6). If the given nodules already possess an oval morphology like those presented in the Boxgrove assemblage, it is likely the form of end products knapped by novices in the pre-training group will remain roughly unchanged. This explanation is also supported by the comparison of average delta weight, defined as the difference between the weight of handaxe and the weight of nodule, among four groups, where the pre-training group displays the lowest value (Figure 7). On the other hand, the refitting analyses of the Boxgrove handaxe assemblage have suggested that the nodules exploited by knappers inhabiting this site are somewhat bulky and amorphous (Roberts & Parfitt, 1998: 339, 360). These characteristics have been clearly displayed in a recent attempt of slow-motion refitting of a handaxe specimen from Boxgrove GTP17 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iS58MUJ1ZEo>). As such, behind the resemblance of the pre-training group and the Boxgrove assemblage in PC2 are two types of mechanisms that are fundamentally different from each other, where the latter group exhibits a complex suite of cognitive and motor execution processes to transform the shapeless raw materials to a delicate end product in a given shape.

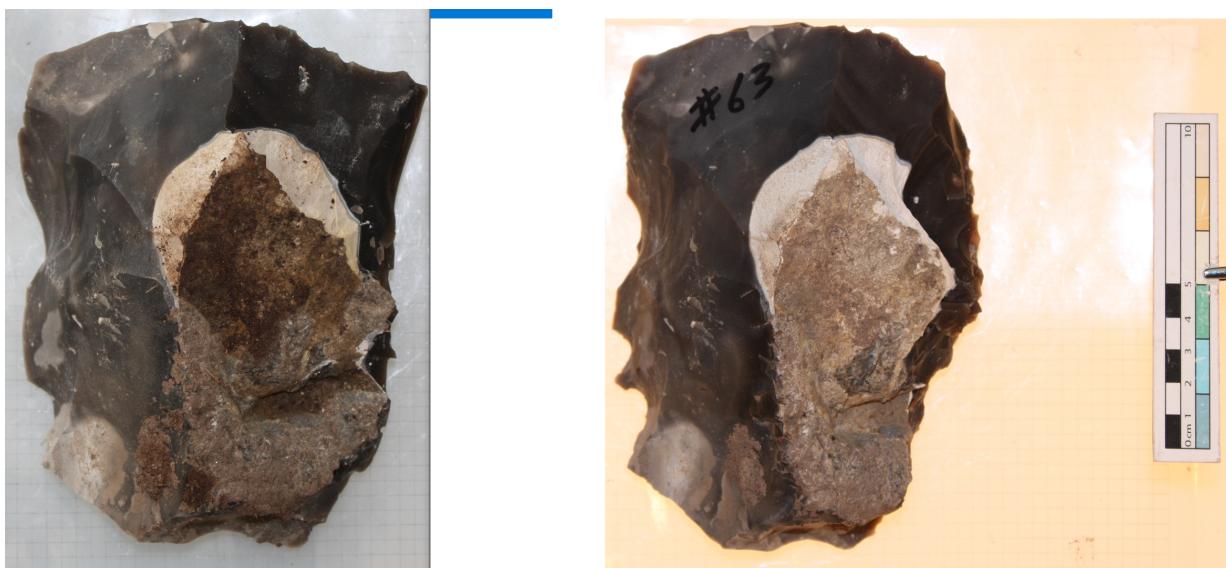


Figure 6: Core 63 before (left) and after knapping(right), showing the minimal morphological change during the process

### A between-group comparison of delta weight

$$F_{\text{Welch}}(3, 34.01) = 10.52, p = 4.81e-05, \widehat{\omega_p^2} = 0.43, \text{CI}_{95\%} [0.19, 1.00], n_{\text{obs}} = 142$$

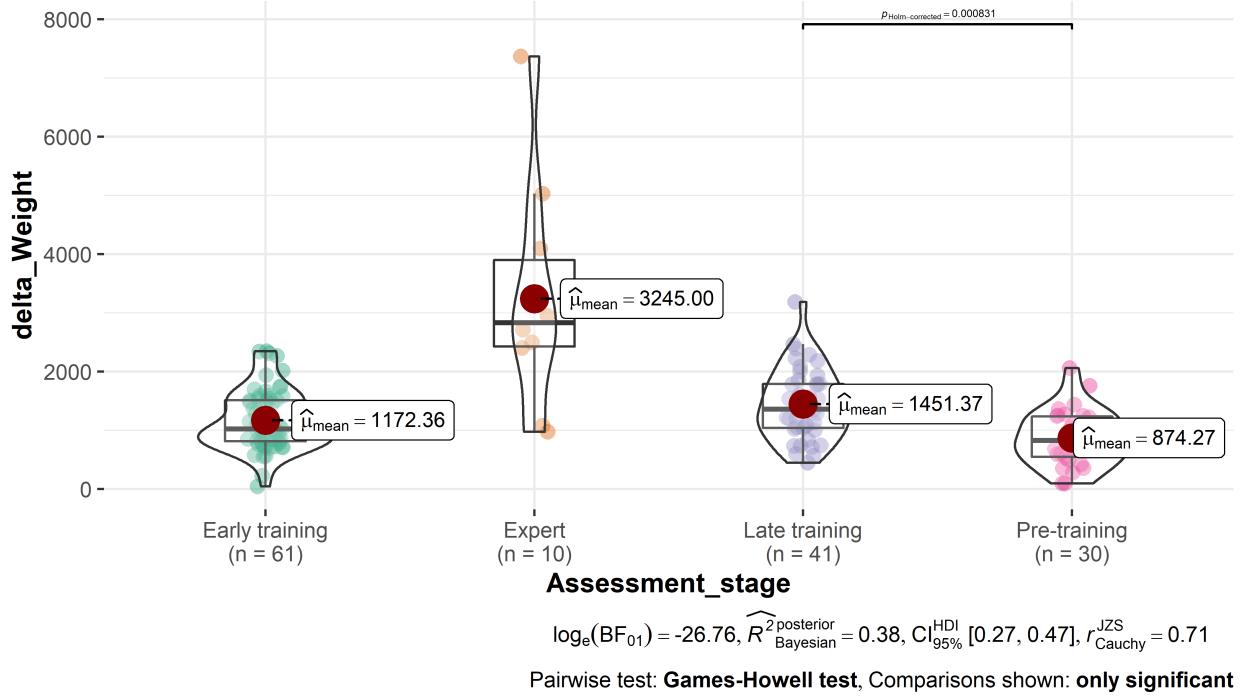


Figure 7: A comparison of the delta weight between the pre-training, early training, late training, and the expert group.

Another contribution that we would like to highlight here is that this research project demonstrates the potential of reusing old archaeological data in digital format to address novel research questions. In this paper, the main source of archaeological data is a collection of photos produced and curated by one of our co-authors (R. Iovita) more than 10 years ago, and the morphological variation data of the experimental collection are also derived from photographs instead of remeasurements of the original replicas. Given the irreversible nature of archaeological excavations, digitized data, be it text, pictures, or videos, often become the sole evidence that is available for certain research questions. Yet, it has been widely acknowledged that the reuse of archaeological data has not received enough attention among researchers in our discipline (Faniel et al., 2018; Huggett, 2018; Moody et al., 2021). Among many reasons preventing archaeologists from reusing published and digitized data (Sobotkova, 2018), the lack of a standardized practice of and motivation for data sharing is a prominent one (Marwick & Birch, 2018). As stated in the method section, we addressed this issue by sharing the raw data and the code for generating the derived data on an open-access repository. Another major and legitimate concern of archaeological data reuse is

323 their quality. In terms of this aspect, we do acknowledge the limitations of relying on photos when  
324 it comes to the more detailed technological analysis of stone artifacts, however, our paper shows  
325 that finding the appropriate research questions given the data available is key to revealing new  
326 novel insights into the studied topic. Moreover, we believe that this type of research has a strong  
327 contemporary relevance due to the continued influence of the COVID-19 on fieldwork-related  
328 travel and direct access to archaeological artifacts (Balandier et al., 2022; Ogundiran, 2021).

## 329 5 Conclusions

330 Regarding the two research questions we proposed in the beginning, our case study suggested  
331 that 1) we can delineate the effects of skill level and mental template through the multivariate  
332 analysis of morphometric data, where the former is associated with cross-sectional thinning  
333 while the latter is reflected in elongation and pointedness; 2) Training has an immediate effect  
334 of sharing a common mental template, but 90 hours of training is still not enough for novice to  
335 reach the level of expertise as reflected in modern experienced knappers, let alone the Boxgrove  
336 foragers. However, it should be noted that it is not our intention to construct a false binary  
337 framework and put these two factors as disconnected and opposite concepts. In the future, more  
338 robust experimental studies are needed to deepen our understanding of the relationship between  
339 skill acquisition and the morphological variability of bifaces as well as their implications for the  
340 biological and cultural evolution of the hominin lineages.

## 341 6 CRediT authorship contribution statement

342 **Cheng Liu:** Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Visualization, Writing  
343 – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Nada Khreisheh:** Investigation, Writing – review &  
344 editing. **Radu Iovita:** Resources, Writing – review & editing. **Dietrich Stout:** Conceptualization,  
345 Investigation, Resources, Funding acquisition, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing –  
346 review & editing. **Justin Pargeter:** Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Supervision,  
347 Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

<sup>348</sup> **7 Declaration of competing interest**

<sup>349</sup> The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relation-  
<sup>350</sup> ships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

<sup>351</sup> **8 Acknowledgements**

<sup>352</sup> This work was supported by funding from the National Science Foundation of the USA (grants  
<sup>353</sup> SMA-1328567 & DRL-1631563), the John Templeton Foundation (grant 47994), and the Emory  
<sup>354</sup> University Research Council. The handaxe knapping skill acquisition experiment involved in this  
<sup>355</sup> study was approved by Emory University's Internal Review Board (IRB study no: 00067237).

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