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In Search of the Origins of Distance Hunting—The Use and Misuse of Tip Cross-sectional Geometry of Wooden Spears

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Abstract

The origins of weapons, and subsequent innovations, constitute a significant focus of archaeological research, particularly for the Pleistocene period. Due to preservation challenges, inorganic components of early weapons, such as lithic points, are often the only artefacts to survive. As a result, archaeologists rely on proxies for understanding performance and function of these lasting components including experimental research and ethnographic comparison. Within these analogical frameworks, and alongside use-wear and fracture analysis, morphometrics constitute a key method in assessing whether a point is a weapon component. Early attempts to use the cross-sectional geometries of weapon points (or tips), making use of complete archaeological specimens and ethnographic weapons as reference datasets, suggested clear demarcations between different delivery modes. Yet, subsequent studies have shown that there are considerable overlaps. Recently, it was proposed that on the basis of tip geometries, the earliest complete weapons, Pleistocene wooden spears, are best matched to thrusting spear use. Here we demonstrate that there are measurement errors involved in this classification, and that furthermore there are overlaps between thrusting spears and javelins (throwing spears) that undermine the use of tip geometries to define spear delivery mode. If the correct methods are applied, archaeological wooden spear tip geometries would fit within both thrusting and javelin categories, meaning this is not methodologically useful at this time. We overview the available archaeological, experimental, and ethnographic evidence and propose that these currently support a hypothesis that the technological capacity for use of distance hunting weapons was in place from at least 300,000 years ago.

Keywords Ethno-archaeology · Morphometrics · TCSA · TCSP · Spears · Javelins

Introduction

The question as to when and where certain technological innovations like control of fire, clothing, and weapons first manifested and how these intersect with adaptations to climatic and demographic shifts are focal points in our understanding of human behavioural and cognitive evolution (Ashton & Davis, 2021; Hosfield, 2020). The innovation of weaponry provided early hominins with a wider array of strategies beyond pursuit hunting (see Liebenberg, 2006)

with which to hunt prey. One traditional unilineal model posits that the earliest hunting tools were essentially contact weapons, used either as stabbing spears or spears thrown at very short distances of ca. 5 m (Churchill, 1993; Shea, 2006). Medium (10–20 m) and long-distance (> 20 m) projectile weapons, including throwing spears (javelins), and eventually mechanically projected weapons, such as spearthrowers and bow and arrows, likely provided significant advantages. These include the ability to safely and effectively hunt, reducing risks of injury while increasing the distance between human hunters and prey, having a positive effect on individuals' and societies' health and life expectancy (Churchill, 1993; Shea & Sisk, 2010). Therefore, pinpointing the timing, regions, and species who first innovated distance weapons has been a focal point of archaeological research. The search for relevant data has relied heavily on ethnographic comparison. One means of evaluating isolated archaeological stone points that may have functioned as weapon tips is to evaluate their morphometrics and compare

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them to ethnographic and experimental points. Tip cross-sectional area (TCSA) and tip cross-sectional perimeter (TCSP) measurements are particularly widely used as comparative methods for stone weapon points. This approach has recently been extended to attempt to determine the delivery method(s) of Pleistocene wooden spears. We suggest that such attempts are beleaguered with significant and probably unresolvable issues. We present new and recently published morphometric data on archaeologically preserved wooden spears from Clacton, Schöningen, and Lehringen in Europe dating from 400 to 120 ka BP and compare these with ethnographic data. We show, as others previously have (Clarkson, 2016; Newman & Moore, 2013; Sahle & Brooks, 2019; Sahle et al., 2023), that the TCSA/TCSP method involves too many morphometric overlaps to be especially useful as a means of determining mode of spear delivery. When evaluated with appropriate measurements for wooden spears, Pleistocene wooden spears would nevertheless fit comfortably within known parameters for both thrusting and throwing spears, likely reflecting both high levels of morphometric variability, as well as multifunctionality. Based on previous experiments and published ethnographic data, we conclude by outlining evidence that wooden spears could have served as effective hunting weapons both at short range as well as at a distance.

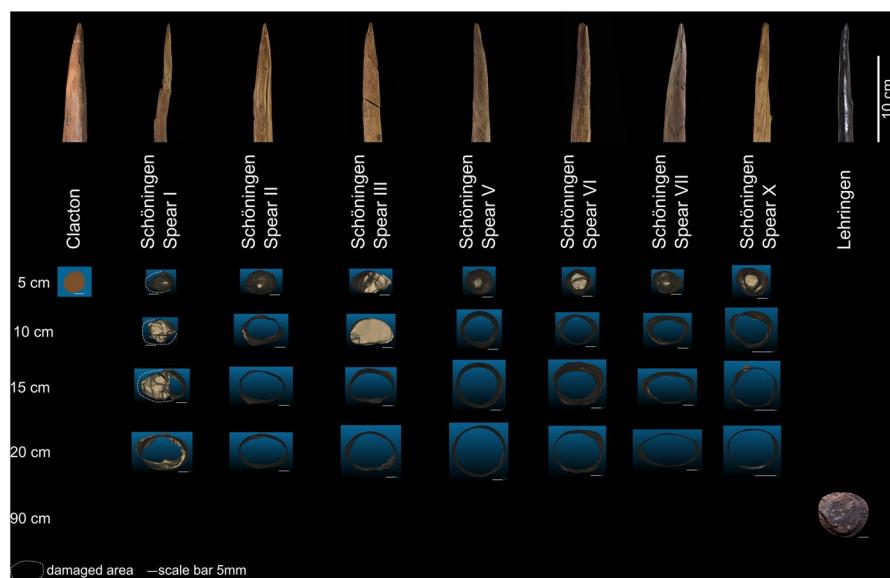
The Archaeological Record of Wooden Spears

Palaeolithic wooden tools rarely survive in the archaeological record, and most of our interpretations of early human evolution rest upon the data we can squeeze from stone, and in rare cases from bone and antler. Exceptional preservation conditions at a few sites across the globe enabled the survival of early wooden artefacts, providing evidence on

classes of technologies and behaviours not often discussed for the Lower and Middle Palaeolithic (Aranguren et al., 2018; Barham et al., 2023; Leder et al., 2024; Rios-Garaizar et al., 2018). These include the earliest unequivocal weapons in the archaeological record, in the form of complete and fragmented wooden pointed spears (Fig. 1) (Adam, 1951; Thieme, 1997; Warren, 1911). These discoveries altered our perception of the hunting abilities of early hominins, leading to a paradigm shift with regard to hominin behaviours (Conard et al., 2015).

A broken point shaped from yew wood (*Taxus baccata*) discovered in freshwater deposits at Clacton-on-Sea (UK) dates to Marine Isotope Stage (MIS) 11 (Ashton et al., 2016; Bridgland et al., 1999; Warren, 1911, 1923). On the basis of the wood species, size, shape, and shaft break, the object has most often been interpreted as a thrusting spear, although other functional uses such as a snow probe and game stake have also been proposed (Allington-Jones, 2015; Gamble, 1987; Oakley et al., 1977). The archaeological site of Schöningen (Germany) is most famous for its collection of wooden weapons made from spruce (*Picea abies*) and pine (*Pinus* sp.), including multiple throwing sticks alongside fragments of at least 10 and as many as 18 spears, several of which are complete (Conard et al., 2020; Leder et al., 2024; Schoch et al., 2015; Thieme, 1997). The ‘Spear Horizon’ dates to MIS 9 and also contains the remains of a significant number of butchered animals (García-Moreno et al., 2021; Richter & Krötschek, 2015; Starkovich & Conard, 2015; Van Kolfschoten et al., 2012, 2015; Voormolen, 2008). The Schöningen spears have been variously interpreted as throwing spears and/or thrusting spears, and as weapons for self-defence (Gaudzinski-Windheuser et al., 2018; Milks, 2018; Milks et al., 2023b; Schoch et al., 2015; Serangeli et al., 2015; Thieme, 1997). Also from the Eurasian Pleistocene

Fig. 1 Front points of wooden spears from Clacton-on-Sea, Schöningen, and Lehringen. The cross-section of Clacton is a mask from a microCT scan. Cross-sections of the Schöningen spears are taken from 3D models. The Lehringen cross-section is reproduced courtesy of Werner Schoch (2014). Elliptical outlines are a result of sediment pressure (see “Measurement Error 2: Original Published Diameter Data Were Overestimated” section)



record is the MIS 5e site of Lehringen (Germany), where in 1948 a complete yew spear was discovered in association with a straight-tusked elephant (*Palaeoloxodon antiquus*) (Adam, 1951; Movius, 1950; Thieme & Veil, 1985). The Lehringen spear—often called a ‘lance’—is normally interpreted as a thrusting weapon, again on the basis of its morphometrics (e.g. Gaudzinski-Windheuser et al., 2018; Oakley et al., 1977; Tode, 1954; Villa & Lenoir, 2006).

In sum, authors typically accredit the wooden spears from Clacton and Lehringen to a function as thrusting weapons (Churchill, 2002; Gaudzinski-Windheuser et al., 2018; Lombard, 2022a, b; Oakley et al., 1977; Thieme & Veil, 1985). By contrast, in the case of the Schöningen spears, authors either consider them as having been used for distance throwing (Schoch et al., 2015; Thieme, 1997), as thrusting spears or for very short-distance (under ca. 5 m) throwing (Churchill, 2014, pp. 61–63; Gaudzinski-Windheuser et al., 2018), or multifunctionally as both thrusting and medium-distance throwing weapons (Leder et al., 2024; Milks, 2018; Milks et al., 2023b; Serangeli et al., 2023). The significance of morphometrics and reference to ethnographic examples to this debate cannot be overstated and thus requires a deeper investigation than has sometimes occurred.

Ethnographic Spear Point Morphometrics and Inference of Weapon Delivery

One way to approach the question of weapon delivery modes in the Palaeolithic is to integrate archaeological and ethnographic data. Until recently, the largest published morphometric dataset on complete ethnographic wooden spears was a sample of 36 spears from museum collections (Oakley et al., 1977), while Milks et al. (2023a) recently provided data on 58 complete ethnographic wooden spears. The morphometrics in both studies include length, mass, maximum diameter, point of balance, and tip diameters at various distances from the front point, which were compared to the data available at the time of known archaeological spears. Oakley et al. (1977) had proposed that it was possible to distinguish between thrusting and throwing spears on the basis of their comparative measurements. Through a critical engagement with Oakley et al.’s (1977) data and a statistical analysis of the new dataset, Milks et al. (2023a) demonstrated that none of the five criteria suggested for making a distinction between thrusting and throwing spears are upheld.

As complete hunting weapons rarely survive in the archaeological record, archaeologists focus on what typically preserves, namely stone points. Leaving aside the observation that not every early pointy artefact was likely to have been used as a spear point (Hutchings, 2016; Plisson & Beyries, 1998; Rots & Plisson, 2014; Shea, 1997), such studies rely on morphometric measurements, most often using calculations of tip cross-sectional area (TCSA) and tip

cross-sectional perimeter (TSCP). Analysing these archaeological stone points within a statistical framework, researchers compare these against tips of ethnographic weapons of known function to determine the likely weapon delivery mode(s) in the past (Lombard, 2021, 2022b; Lombard et al., 2022; Rios-Garaizar, 2016; Shea, 2006; Shea & Sisk, 2010; Sisk & Shea, 2011). Replicas of stone points tested as spear points have stood in as representative of stone points of known function, presenting a particular form of circular reasoning. To resolve the lack of data on spear tips, some have made use of ethnographic data of spears of known function tipped with different materials, and especially with metal (Lombard et al., 2022; Lombard, 2022a).

In this paper, we deliberately avoid conducting in-depth statistical analyses of the data for several reasons. First, the archaeological sample of wooden spears with relevant tip morphometrics ($n=9$) is too small for statistical analysis to prove useful; similarly, those ethnographic wooden spears for which function could be determined also represent small sample sizes, and often the provenance of these is from very specific groups and therefore unlikely to be representative of the weapon category as a whole. Second, a detailed statistical analysis of morphometrics of the ethnographic wooden spear reference dataset has recently been published (Milks et al., 2023a). Finally, we feel that with the issue of overlap of TCSA and TCSP for spear delivery mode being so significant, as we will demonstrate, even simple descriptive statistics can be misleading and misused. In fact, by stripping away statistics including means, medians, and probability, so often utilised for TCSA/TCSP, we illustrate that issues of overlap, sometimes but not always acknowledged in publications, make it challenging to assign delivery to a given archaeological weapon/weapon component.

Tip Cross-sectional Geometry

First introduced by Hughes (1998), TCSA has been widely explored by archaeologists as a proxy to infer differences between weapon delivery systems, as well as the penetrative effectiveness of weapon points (e.g. Eren et al., 2021; Grady & Churchill, 2023; Lazuén, 2012; Lombard, 2021, 2022b; Lombard et al., 2022; Sahle et al., 2013; Salem & Churchill, 2016; Sano, 2016; Shea, 2006; Shea & Sisk, 2010; Shea et al., 2001; Sisk & Shea, 2011; Sitton et al., 2020, 2022; Villa & Lenoir, 2009; Villa & Soriano, 2010). In the original publication, Hughes (1998, p. 350) emphasises that four variables influence projectile penetration including mass, velocity, tip cross-sectional area, and projectile shape. Therefore, area is only one component. We would add that material, an under-explored feature, may also influence penetration (Salem & Churchill, 2016; Wagstaff et al., 2009; Wilkins et al., 2014). The integration of ethnographic and experimentally used weapons as reference datasets forms

the key to this method. TCSP was introduced subsequently as an additional comparative morphometric to address the geometric differences between bifacial and unifacial stone tools (Sisk & Shea, 2009). The utility of both TCSA and TCSP has already been extensively debated, with key issues including:

1. Significant overlaps of the points' sizes *across* different weapon delivery systems, as well as wide variability *within* a given weapon delivery system in the ethnographic record (Clarkson, 2016; Newman & Moore, 2013; Sahle et al., 2023);
2. The TCSA/TCSP values of a given archaeological stone point in isolation of other functional evidence (e.g. use-wear, macroscopic impact fractures, distribution of edge damage) only indicates its *potential* for use as a weapon component (Hutchings, 2016; Lombard & Phillipson, 2010; Milks et al., 2016b; Rots & Plisson, 2014; Sisk & Shea, 2011);
3. Experimental results point to a negative correlation between TCSA/TCSP and penetration depth as one factor of weapon performance (with smaller areas and perimeters associated with greater depths of penetration), but other factors such as shape and energy also play a role and remain under-explored (Baldino et al., 2024; Clarkson, 2016; Grady & Churchill, 2023; Hughes, 1998; Salem & Churchill, 2016; Sitton et al., 2020, 2022).

The goal of this paper is not to discuss in depth the myriad issues of TCSA and TCSP in general, although these intersect with our concerns, but rather to address the specific application of these data to Pleistocene wooden spears and the conclusions that have been drawn concerning the weapon delivery mode of that particular type of weapon. In two recent publications (Lombard et al., 2022; Lombard, 2022a), TCSA values are calculated for fragmented and complete Pleistocene wooden spears. Lombard and colleagues compared TCSA values of wooden spears with ethnographic, experimental, and archaeological points made of stone and metal from various sites and of various ages. In these publications, a key aim appears to have been to strengthen and constrain the application of TCSA to archaeological weapons by expanding the ethnographic reference dataset (Lombard et al., 2022). The high values in comparison with ethnographic spears were used to propose that Pleistocene wooden spears did not function as javelins (thrown spears), but rather only as thrusting spears (Lombard, 2022a).

In this paper, we focus on the question of whether TCSA and TCSP are adequate proxies to determine the weapon delivery mode of the oldest known complete wooden hunting spears dating from ca. 400 to ca. 120 ka BP. We outline three prior measurement errors and discuss three broader

conceptual issues regarding functional interpretations. We provide accurate morphometric measurements for the Pleistocene weapons and compare them to ethnographic data on wooden spears. The results provide further reasons to question the method of TCSA/TCSP in determining spear delivery mode. Moreover, and in spite of our concerns about the method, if others continue to use TCSA/TCSP to discuss early spears, we demonstrate that Pleistocene wooden spears would fit well with comparative data for both ethnographic throwing and thrusting spear morphometrics, including for both wooden and iron-tipped javelins.

Measurement Errors on Wooden Spears

Measurement Error 1: Formulas for TCSA and TCSP

The original formula for TCSA is identical to the calculation of a triangle's area, and was intended to produce estimated area data for unifacial and bifacial stone points (Hughes, 1998; Lombard, 2021; Shea, 2006). Sisk and Shea (2011) revised TCSA as a method, adding further reference datasets, and provided further equations to calculate tip cross-sectional perimeter (TCSP), enabling differentiation of perimeters of unifacial and bifacial points. The TCSA and TCSP calculations were arrived at using the following formulas:

Area of unifacial (triangular cross-sections) and bifacial (rhomboid cross-sections) points (TCSA)

$$\left(\frac{\text{Width}}{2} \right) * \text{Thickness}$$

Perimeter of unifacial points (TCSP)

$$\text{Width} + 2 * \sqrt{\left(\frac{\text{Width}}{2} \right)^2 + \left(\frac{\text{Thickness}}{2} \right)^2}$$

Perimeter of bifacial points (TCSP)

$$4 * \sqrt{\left(\frac{\text{Width}}{2} \right)^2 + \left(\frac{\text{Thickness}}{2} \right)^2}$$

These morphological criteria (triangular or rhomboid) are certainly not met by most archaeological and ethnographic wooden spear points, which tend to be round to elliptical in cross-section (Fig. 1) (Allington-Jones, 2015; Leder et al., 2024; Milks, 2018; Milks et al., 2023a; Oakley et al., 1977; Schoch et al., 2015; Thieme & Veil, 1985). Elliptical shapes in archaeological spears are due to sediment compression in deteriorated wood and originally had been approximately round (Fig. 1; “Measurement Error 2: Original Published Diameter Data Were Overestimated” section). Both Hughes (1998) and Salem and Churchill

(2016) calculate TCSA for prehistoric cylindrically shaped weapon points and weapon components (e.g. foreshafts) as:

$$\pi r^2$$

where r =radius.

This equation provides a more accurate representation of TCSA for round cross-sections, although it still requires an accurate measurement method for the radius (see “Measurement Error 2: Original Published Diameter Data Were Overestimated” section). In an aforementioned publication (Lombard, 2022a) the original TCSA calculation intended for stone points was used to calculate the TCSA of wooden spears, which would in theory result in significantly *underestimating* the TCSA for wooden spears. For TCSP, the correct formula for this shape is

$$\pi d$$

where d =diameter (Hughes, 1998); Fig. 2; but see also “Measurement Error 3: Use of Maximum Diameter as a Proxy for Tip Measurements” section).

To further illustrate the appropriateness of calculations for wooden spears based on a circle rather than triangles and rhomboids, we use the example of a cross-section of the Clacton spear point. We measured the area and perimeter of this CT scan-generated cross-section directly in SketchAndCalc® and compared the results of calculations

based on a circle (using the mean of width and thickness measurements, i.e. averaged diameter) to those based on a triangle/rhomboid. The difference between the area based on the equation for a circle from the direct measurement is 1.46 mm^2 , whereas the difference when calculating it based on a triangle/rhomboid is 33.42 mm^2 . Using the equation for a triangle/rhomboid results in underestimating its area by 37% (Fig. 3).

To confirm that the formula for the spears should be based on a circle, we show the underlying diameter measurements for the spears in Table 1 (also see Fig. 1 and “Measurement Error 2: Original Published Diameter Data Were Overestimated” section). For each of the spears, we demonstrate that the resulting TCSA values based on the triangle/rhomboidal equation consistently underestimates their area.

Measurement Error 2: Original Published Diameter Data Were Overestimated

The maximum diameter measurements for Pleistocene wooden spears used by Lombard (2022a; Lombard et al., 2022) were based on previously published measurement data (Oakley et al., 1977; Schoch et al., 2015; Thieme & Veil, 1985). For the Schöningen spears, diameter measurements were over-estimated as they were taken as single measurements of maximum width on objects that had suffered from sediment compression (Leder et al., 2024; Milks et al.,

Fig. 2 Calculating the cross-sectional area (TCSA) and perimeter (TCSP) of Schöningen Spear II. **a** Represents an idealised cross-section through a wooden spear tip. Averaged diameter represents the mean between two measurements replacing ‘width’ and ‘thickness’ due to taphonomic compression (see “Measurement Error 2: Original Published Diameter Data Were Overestimated” section). **b** Area and perimeter calculated based on a triangular shape. **c** Area and perimeter calculated based on a rhomboid shape. **d** Area and perimeter calculated based on a circular shape. Depending on the shapes, area sizes differ as much as 38.2%. Differences in perimeter calculations are substantially smaller but still reach up to 10.4%

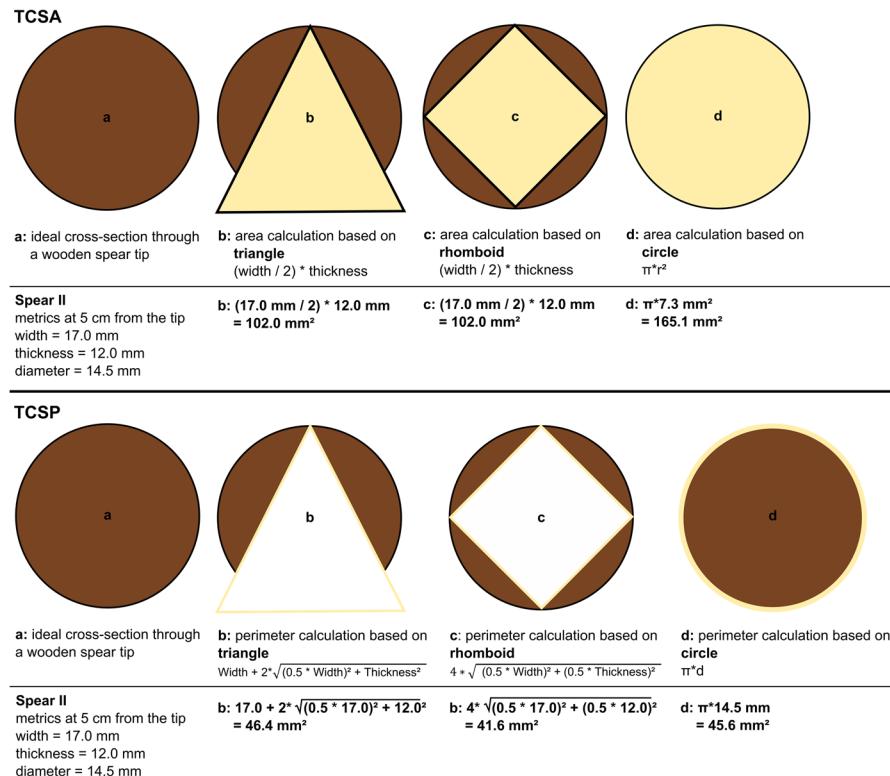


Fig. 3 Calculating the cross-section area of the Clacton spear point. Top: direct perimeter and area measurements from a CT scan slice taken ca. 4 cm from the point using the tool SketchAndCalc®. Middle: perimeter and area calculated using width and thickness measurements (averaged diameter) in SketchAndCalc, following the equation for the area of a circle, πr^2 . Bottom: schematic triangular and rhomboidal shapes, with perimeter and area calculated based on the equation for these shapes [Width/2] * Thickness; note that the result is the same, regardless of which diameter measurement is used for width vs thickness]

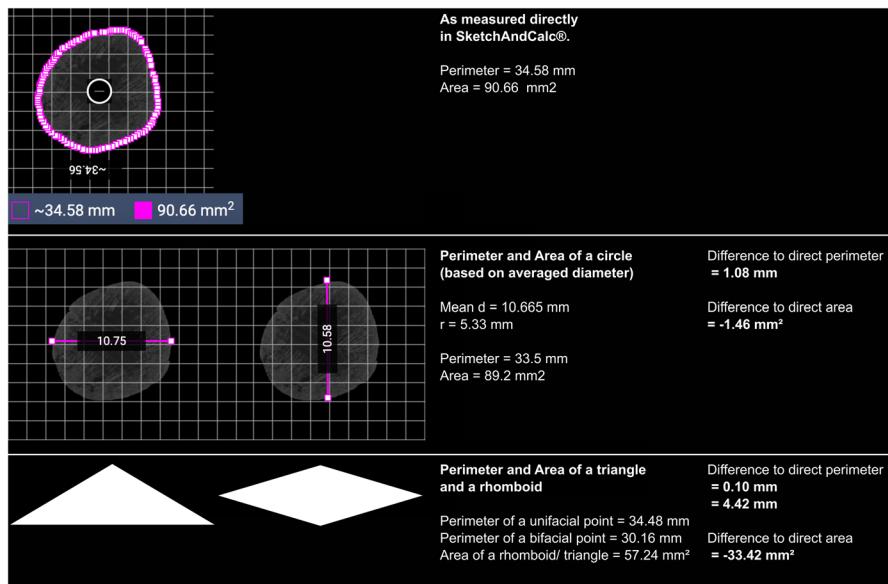


Table 1 Comparison of the formulas for TCSA based on a circle vs based on a triangle/ rhomboid for the archaeological wooden spears, using the two diameter measurements taken at 5 cm, using callipers

Spear	Measurement 1 at 5 cm (width)	Measurement 2 at 5 cm (thickness)	Mean value	TCSA based on circle	TCSA based on triangle/rhomboid*
Clacton	15	15	15	176.7	112.5
Schöningen Spear I (slightly damaged at 5 cm)	12.9	9.4	11.15	98.52	60.63
Schöningen Spear II	15.5	11.9	13.7	147.41	92.2
Schöningen Spear III	17	12	14.5	165.12	102
Schöningen Spear V	15	13	14	153.94	97.5
Schöningen Spear VI	15.3	12.5	13.9	151.75	95.6
Schöningen Spear VII	17	14	14.5	165.1	102
Schöningen Spear X	17	14	15.5	188.69	119
Lehringen	13	11	12	113.09	71.5

For the circle equation, this calculation uses the mean value of the two diameter measurements. For the triangle/rhomboid equation, the two diameter measurements are used for width and thickness

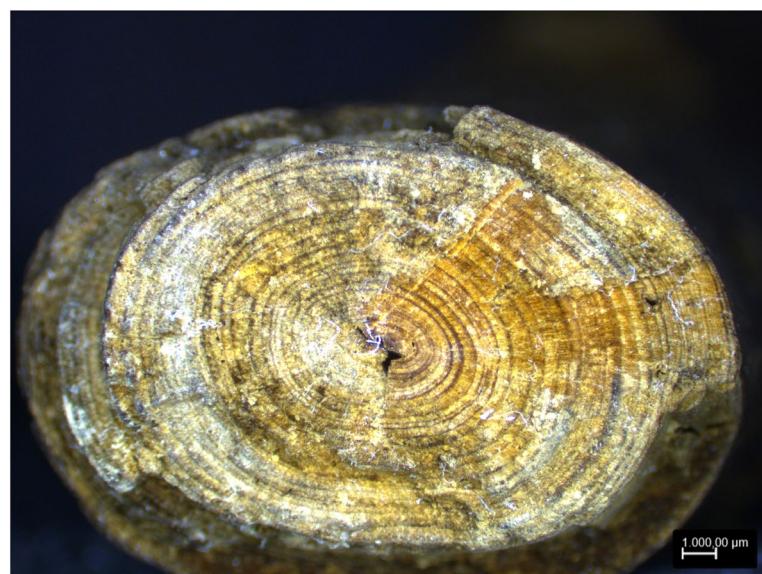
*These values remain constant, irrespective of which diameter measurement is selected for width and which for thickness

2023b). Analysis of these ‘squashed’ cross-sections, which had formerly been broadly round, confirms the taphonomic nature of the current morphology (Figs. 1 and 4). Woodworking alters the surface of wooden artefacts while truncating annual rings when carving into the wood (e.g. see Milks et al., 2023b). For the wooden weapons when both wood and annual ring cross-sections have elliptic shapes, such features suggest taphonomic alterations when cell wall degradation in wood has advanced (Schmitt et al., 2005) and superimposed sediments result in taphonomic compression. In the case of Schöningen, 15 m of sediment cover and a former ice-sheet induced immense pressure on these wooden artefacts over a period of 300 ka (Lang et al., 2015; Schoch et al., 2015). Computed tomography scans in combination with annual

ring analysis together show that elliptical cross-sections of Schöningen spears are taphonomic in nature, while for at least one of the Schöningen double-pointed sticks, points were shaped to be elliptical as illustrated by the cutting away of annual rings (Leder et al., 2024; Milks et al., 2023b). We can thus understand that the Schöningen spears, generally with minimal deformation in cross-section, were designed to be round in cross-section, and should be analysed as such.

Consequently, the diameter measurements reported in those publications for archaeological weapons are larger than the true original diameter measurements would have been (Figs. 1 and 4), as previously published measurements reflected a single diameter measurement of the widest value (Schoch et al., 2015; Thieme, 1997). We revised

Fig. 4 Cross-section of Spear II from Schöningen at 148 cm from the front point. Note the elliptical shape of the cross-section and the shape of annual rings due to sediment compression. Photo M. Sietz, NLD



the measurement method to create more accurate diameter values by taking two perpendicular diameter measurements and using the average value; we recently published these corrected data (Fig. 3) (Leder et al., 2024; Milks et al., 2023b). We use this method here to present corrected tip data and resulting TCSA and TCSP calculations for the Clacton, Schöningen, and Lehringen spears (Table 2). We provide relevant ethnographic data for comparative purposes (Tables 3 and 4). We do so not because we feel these data are especially useful (see further discussion points below), but rather to provide accurate measurements and

calculations for those who wish to make these comparisons, and as a reference dataset for future experimental replicas.

The TCSA and TCSP for ethnographic thrusting spears sit comfortably within the range of those for throwing spears (Tables 3 and 4), whether measured at 5 cm or at 20 cm. Therefore, on the basis of a direct comparison between the archaeological and ethnographic wooden spears, tip diameter does not appear to correlate with delivery mode of wooden spears (see also Milks et al., 2023a).

Table 2 Corrected TCSA and TCSP data for archaeological wooden spears with examples for 5 cm and 20 cm values (all raw data can be found in the accompanying datasets)

Artefact	Dia (mm) at 5 cm	TCSA (πr^2) at 5 cm	TCSP ($\pi \bar{D}$) at 5 cm	Dia (mm) at 20 cm	TCSA (πr^2) at 20 cm	TCSP ($\pi \bar{D}$) at 20 cm
Clacton	15.0	176.7	47.1	30.5	730.6	95.8
Sch. Spear I	11.2	97.6	35.0	21	346.4	66
Sch. Spear II	13.7	147.4	43.0	19	283.5	59.7
Sch. Spear III	14.5	165.1	45.6	22	380.1	69.1
Sch. Spear V	14.0	153.9	44.0	26	530.9	81.7
Sch. Spear VI	13.9	151.7	43.7	23	415.5	72.3
Sch. Spear VII	14.5	165.1	45.6	24	452.4	75.4
Sch. Spear X*	15.5	188.7	48.7	22	380.1	69.1
Lehringen	12.0	113.1	37.7	17	227	53.4
Minimum	11.2	97.6	35.0	17	227	53.4
Maximum	16.0	188.7	48.7	30.5	730.6	95.8
Mean	13.9	151.1	43.4	22.7	416.3	71.4
Standard deviation	1.45	27.5	4.1	3.7	139.1	11.6

*The point in Spear X was reworked and hence its original diameter probably changed considerably (Leder et al., 2024)

Table 3 TCSA and TCSP data at 5 cm and 20 cm for ethnographic wooden thrusting spears

Museum	ID	TCSA 5 cm	TCSP 5 cm	TCSA 20 cm	TCSP 20 cm
Horniman	NN18970	63.6	28.3	113.1	37.7
MAA Cambridge	Z 42280	95.0	34.6	154.0	44.0
MAA Cambridge	Z 6377	132.7	40.8	201.1	50.3
Minimum		63.6	28.3	113.1	37.7
Maximum		132.7	40.8	201.1	50.3
Mean		97.1	34.6	156.0	44.0
Standard deviation		28.3	5.1	36.0	5.1

Table 4 TCSA and TCSP data at 5 cm and 20 cm for ethnographic wooden throwing spears (javelins)

Museum	ID	TCSA 5 cm	TCSP 5 cm	TCSA 20 cm	TCSP 20 cm
Horniman	NN18960	63.6	28.3	153.9	44.0
Horniman	NN18952	50.3	25.1	132.7	40.2.18
Horniman	NN18950	95.0	34.6	201.1	50.3
Horniman	NN18958	78.5	31.4	176.7	47.1
SAM	A39396	NA	NA	415.5	72.3
Australian Museum	E.10755	132.7	40.8	227	53.4
Australian Museum	E.10756	132.7	40.8	176.7	47.1
Australian Museum	E.20093	153.9	44.0	176.7	47.1
TMAG	M.2721	227.0	53.4	314.2	62.8
TMAG	M.2724	78.5	31.4	132.7	40.8
TMAG	M.2723	63.6	28.3	132.7	40.8
TMAG	M.2722	176.7	47.1	254.5	56.5
TMAG	M.5902	153.9	44.0	254.5	56.5
TMAG	M.1207	153.9	44.0	254.5	56.5
Minimum		50.3	25.1	132.7	40.8
Maximum		227.0	53.4	415.5	72.3
Mean		120.0	37.9	214.5	51.2
Standard deviation		50.9	8.3	77.2	8.8

Measurement Error 3: Use of Maximum Diameter as a Proxy for Tip Measurements

A third error is that measurements of maximum diameter on archaeological wooden spears were used as though they were equivalent to a tip diameter (Lombard et al., 2022; Lombard, 2022a). The location of the maximum diameter (LMD) for complete and nearly complete Schöningen spears ($n=6$) is between 19 and 41% of the total length from the tip (Leder et al., 2024, Tables S20, S24) meaning the widest diameter is placed along the shaft rather than the tip. For the Lehringen artefact, the LMD is located at the base of the spear, and is thus even more irrelevant as a tip value (Milks, 2018; Thieme & Veil, 1985). Maximum diameters of the Schöningen spears measure between 23 and 45 mm (Leder et al., 2024, Tables S6 S20, S24), while the maximum diameter for the Lehringen spear is 31 mm (Milks, 2018; Thieme & Veil, 1985). Maximum diameters are therefore significantly larger than the tip diameters of

all known complete Pleistocene wooden spears, whether measured at 5 or 20 cm (Table 2).

To make a meaningful comparison with tip areas and perimeters of stone points possible, we use the appropriate formula of πr^2 (“[Measurement Error 1: Formulas for TCSA and TCSP](#)” section), coupled with corrected diameter measurements (“[Measurement Error 2: Original Published Diameter Data Were Overestimated](#)” section). Instead of having TCSA values between 481 mm² (Lehringen) and 722 mm² (Clacton) as previously calculated (Lombard, 2022a; see also different values of 408 mm² to 878 mm² published in Lombard et al., 2022), we present revised area and perimeter calculations for wooden spear tips (Table 2). These now range from 98.5 to 188.7 mm² at 5 cm, up to 227–730.6 mm² at 20 cm, with Clacton having by far the largest values. Interestingly, Lehringen, interpreted as a thrusting spear based on its location of maximum diameter, has the smallest area of the sample. Most of the Schöningen spears cluster within the throwing spear range, irrespective of whether areas and

perimeters are measured at 5 or at 20 cm (Tables 2, 3, and 4). We examine the implications of these results in the following sections.

Conceptual Problems

Conceptual Problem 1: Correlating Morphometrics with Function

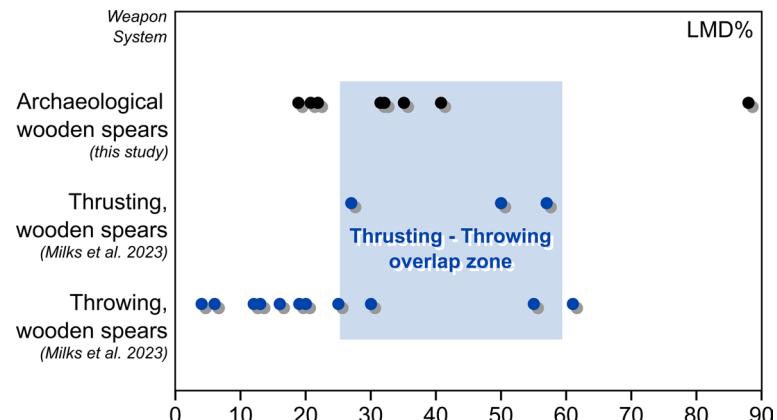
Besides the aforementioned technicalities, an essential question remains as to whether such tip area metrics are useful proxies to infer spear function/weapon delivery mode. In a recent review on the use of morphometrics of complete ethnographic wooden spears, the only measurements that were found to reliably correlate with mode of delivery were length, the location of the maximum diameter in relation to its overall length (LMD, expressed as a % of its total length), and point of balance (PoB, expressed as a % of its total length) (Milks et al., 2023a). Yet, it was noted in that analysis that the small samples of known delivery mode, strongly biased by a large percentage of extremely long javelins coming from a single group, present limitations to these correlations. And indeed, limitations of our data in that paper were highlighted by the contemporaneous publication ethnographic javelin lengths ranging from 108 to 314 cm (Sahle et al., 2023 Appendix A), meaning that the Schöningen spear lengths again fall comfortably within known ethnographic javelin lengths (Leder et al., 2024, Table S6). LMD can be viewed as a proxy for the point of balance (PoB), which is located in the front half of throwing spears, as this is a feature that is essential for flight (Johnson, 1987). LMD values for ethnographic wooden spears range from between 4 and 61% of the total length from the point, with the highest value corresponding to a PoB of 49% (see accompanying dataset). This feature does not prove the use of the spears for throwing as a projectile per se, nor does their use as projectile tools exclude use as a thrusting weapon. What is key is that the LMD of complete and nearly

complete Schöningen spears is located in the front half making them likely to be *suited* for flight (Table 1, Fig. 5) (Leder et al., 2024; Milks et al., 2023a). This does differ with the Lehringen example, where an LMD of 88% means a PoB would almost certainly be toward the back of the weapon (Milks, 2018; Milks et al., 2023a; Thieme & Veil, 1985) making it unsuitable for throwing.

In terms of tip morphometrics, we avoid statistical modelling in this paper so as to avoid masking the spread of data. However, previous statistical modelling (Pearson's correlation coefficient and ANOVA) of the ethnographic sample found no support for Oakley et al.'s (1977) hypothesis that throwing spears are finer morphometrically at the tips than thrusting spears (Milks et al., 2023a). This illustrates that categorising early spears as being either thrown *or* thrust on the basis of morphometric comparison of their points with ethnographic examples is unlikely to be empirically viable. This is echoed in other studies showing likely overlaps in terms of tip geometry for different modes of weapon delivery (Clarkson, 2016; Sahle et al., 2023) and presents a major obstacle, if not a fatal flaw in attempts to use TCSA and TCSP as proxies for delivery systems. In a recent ethnographic field study, Sahle et al. (2023) demonstrate that Chabu and Manja peoples in southwest Ethiopia use ten different javelin types (categorised by size and mass). Weapon choice within this depended on multiple factors including the hunter's experience and age, prey size and prey speed, and hunting strategy among others, but not weapon delivery method (as these were all javelins). Measurements on 163 of the javelins in that study provided a wide range of TCSA and TCSP values which overlap with published values for ethnographic darts, throwing spears, and thrusting spears (Lombard et al., 2022; Newman & Moore, 2013; cf. Sahle et al., 2023, Tables 2–3, Fig. 4).

Key to our argument that TCSA and TCSP are not useful measures for spears is the issue of significant overlaps between spear tip measurements across thrusting and javelin use when the dataset is enlarged to include various weapon tip materials (Fig. 6). Comparing the archaeological data

Fig. 5 Location of maximum diameters (LMD %) of archaeological (Schöningen and Lehringen) compared with ethnographic wooden spears of known function



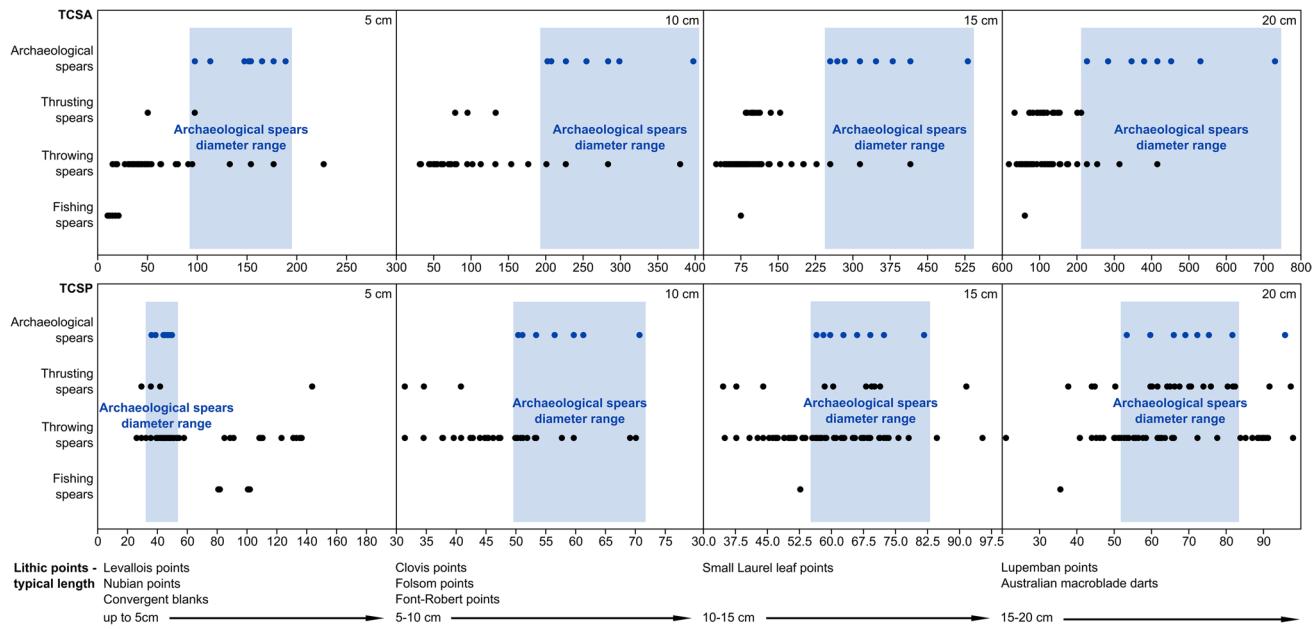


Fig. 6 TCSA and TCSP ranges for 490 known ethnographic fishing spears, ethnographic thrusting spears (combined with those categorised as ‘stabbing spears’ in Lombard et al., 2022), ethnographic throwing spears, and archaeological wooden spears. All ethnographic data underpinning this graph are culled from the associated publications (Lombard et al., 2022; Milks et al., 2023a; Sahle et al., 2023).

(Table 2) with ethnographic data on wooden spear morphometrics (Tables 3 and 4; see also accompanying dataset) produces a wide range of TCSA values, while TCSP values are more constrained. The wide spread of TCSA data points holds true whether comparing point data at 5 cm or 20 cm from the tip. TCSA values for known Pleistocene wooden spears places most of them within the range of known ethnographic throwing spears of variable tip materials for each diameter measurement location (Fig. 6). TCSP values of the archaeological wooden spears also overlap with values for thrusting spears, particularly when comparing data as measured at 20 cm (Tables 2, 3, and 4, Fig. 6). Only at the 20 cm measurement location do we start to see archaeological spears pulling ahead of throwing spear TCSA, whereas thrusting spear TCSA values at this location are actually comparably smaller.

A further variable impacting on TCSA and TCSP values for wooden spears may be the repairing of tips; the Schöningen spear with the largest TCSA and TCSP values, Spear X, was reshaped after its tip was broken (Leder et al., 2024; Schoch et al., 2015), and therefore the original point was likely smaller in diameter because the location of the new point was moved farther back along the thicker shaft. In sum, any correlation between TCSA/TCSP—or indeed most morphometric measures with the exceptions of length, PoB and LMD—and throwability for wooden spears is not supported either ethnographically or archaeologically, and these should

Relevant metric data on archaeological wooden spears are provided here with previous publications providing some of these data already (Leder et al., 2024; Milks, 2018). Metric data on lithic points can be found in (Abadi et al., 2020; Aubry et al., 2008; Eren et al., 2020; Hallinan & Shaw, 2020; Leder, 2014; Milks et al., 2016b; Newman & Moore, 2013; Shott & Otárola-Castillo, 2022; Taylor, 2022)

therefore be decoupled (Milks et al., 2023a). This becomes a greater issue when one engages in a transparent way about the quality of associated museum databases and provenance of ethnographic objects, the quality and opacity of some ethnographic reviews on weapon function, alongside the currently understudied effects of weapon tip material and shape. We would like to reiterate that we do not ourselves believe tip morphometric data support that archaeological spears served as throwing weapons, since these data do not appear to be clearly able to distinguish between throwing and thrusting, with overlaps in both TCSA and TCSP of comparative ethnographic reference samples across all measurement locations (Fig. 6).

The placement of ‘tip diameter’ measurements present an additional conundrum in comparing different weapon types that include single-component weapons such as wooden spears while previous datasets use maximum width of the hafted point instead, irrespective of its distance from the tip, shape, tip material, etc. (Fig. 6). Taper lengths on the Schöningen spears range from 25 to 50 cm, with a median of 37.6 cm (Leder et al., 2024). Archaeological lithic point lengths vary considerably (Fig. 6), and examples of early stone points, such as Levallois and convergent points thought to have been used in Eurasia to tip spears, are only ca. 5 to 7 cm long (e.g. Iovita et al., 2014; Rios-Garaizar, 2016; Rots, 2013). Ethnographic iron points of javelins also vary, with point lengths ranging between 3 and 37 cm (medians

of 14 cm, Sahle et al., 2013, and 15 cm Lombard, 2022a; Sahle et al., 2023). For iron-tipped thrusting spears, existing data provide a range of 5 to 80 cm (median of 23 cm, Lombard, 2022a). Arguably, any measurements beyond the generally cited lethal penetration depth of 20 cm (Hughes, 1998; Salem & Churchill, 2016; Waguespack et al., 2009; Wilkins et al., 2014) might not be especially useful.

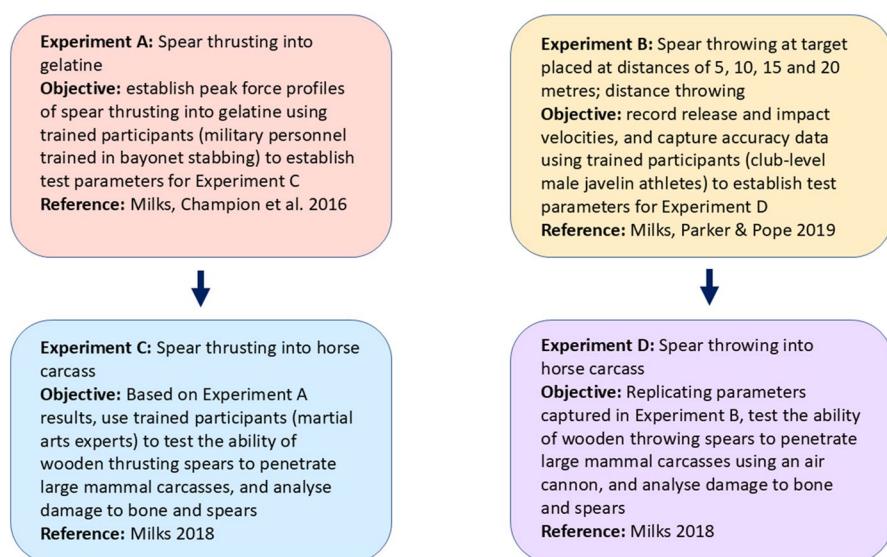
If tip area (as opposed to a simple width measurement) was a proxy for size of the point to open the wound for a narrower shaft to enter, we also encounter issues with the data because areas for cylinders tend to be larger than those of triangles and rhomboids of a similar width (see “[Measurement Error 1: Formulas for TCSA and TCSP](#)” section). Although shafts and their relationship to point sizes are not well-studied areas, we can visit area data presented by Hughes (1998, p. 354 Table II), with width, thickness, area, and perimeter data for a sample of ethnographic arrow and dart tips and foreshafts. Foreshafts are consistently larger in cross-sectional area than tips, although the opposite is true for thickness/diameter measurements. The same holds true for javelins (Sahle et al., 2023 Appendix) wherein the median of point widths is 1.2 times that of foreshaft diameters, whereas the median of cross-sectional areas in foreshafts is 6.1 times larger than for points. Therefore, a hypothesis that cross-sectional areas of hafted tips would be larger than shaft sectional areas is unsupported. Arguably on the basis of those data, only TCSP would be a valuable method to compare tips of different cross-sectional shapes (Hughes, 1998), yet median TCSP in foreshafts of recently published ethnographic spears (Sahle et al., 2023) is still 1.9 times larger than of their points.

Conceptual Problem 2: Experiments on Performance of Wooden Spears

Some researchers question whether early wooden spears could be effective as throwing weapons beyond 5 m distances (e.g. Churchill, 2014; Gaudzinski-Windheuser et al., 2018; White et al., 2016). In a recent paper, Lombard (2022a, p. 2) states that “experiments do not demonstrate that thrown from any distance wooden spears can penetrate the hides of the horses hunted at Schöningen”. Yet, experiments have provided data affirming the capability of wooden spears to effectively wound horses, when used as both thrusting and throwing weapons; here we will briefly summarise the methods and results of those experiments (Milks, 2018; Milks et al., 2016a, 2019).

A series of four stepped experiments were designed in collaboration with Cranfield (UK) Defence and Security’s ballistics engineers to understand the performance of Schöningen-type spears when used by skilled participants (Fig. 7). Two foundational experiments, both using replicas of Schöningen Spear II, were designed to provide reference data. Experiment A (Fig. 7) captured the forces involved during thrusting with wooden spears (Milks et al., 2016a). Experiment B captured accuracy, release velocity, and impact velocity data when wooden spears were thrown by javelin athletes at distances of 5, 10, 15, and 20 m at a target, and for maximum distance (Milks et al., 2019). The results of that experiment demonstrated that impact velocities and kinetic energy did not significantly vary by throwing distance (Milks et al., 2019 Fig. 1). Experiment C was built upon Experiment A (Fig. 7) and consisted of two male participants trained in martial arts using Spear II replicas to thrust the spears into a horse carcass (Milks, 2018). Meanwhile, Experiment D

Fig. 7 Workflow of experiments described in “[Conceptual Problem 2: Experiments on Performance of Wooden Spears](#)” section



was designed to conduct tightly controlled testing by using an air cannon to fire the spears (Fig. 7), replicating the impact velocities and KE achieved when thrown by javelin athletes in Experiment B, into a second horse carcass (Milks, 2018). Experiments C and D captured data on depth of penetration, with spears and bones subsequently examined for damage. The impact velocities, and hence impact energies, were captured during all experiments through the use of high-speed video footage, using real-time calculations after each shot to ensure the impacts remained true to the delivery system. While a more detailed publication of Experiments C and D is forthcoming, the results are already available (Milks, 2018). Therefore, although Lombard (2022a) questioned whether the impact energies in these horse carcass experiments are equivalent to real-life use as distance weapons, we clarify that the *primary objective* of Experiment B was to provide accurate impact velocity and kinetic energy data for the subsequent controlled experiment, and that the controlled experimental impacts on the horse carcass therefore represent accurate impact velocities from human performance trials, including for distance throws. This is not of course the same as testing these weapons on a live animal, which naturally would have ethical implications.

To briefly summarise the results of Experiments C and D, these demonstrated the ability of wooden spears used in both thrusting and throwing modes to penetrate horse hide, and also their ability to damage bone and muscle tissue, and penetrate > 20 cm, the oft-cited value for lethal wounding (Hughes, 1998; Salem & Churchill, 2016; Waguespack et al., 2009; Wilkins et al., 2014). Notably in the experiments summarised here, while spear thrusts sometimes failed to penetrate the hide, the hide was *always* penetrated when replicating throwing. However, the mean penetration values for thrusting (15.5 cm) and throwing (15.7 cm) were very similar (Milks, 2018, p.330). Both thrust and thrown wooden spears are demonstrated therefore to be capable of lethally wounding a horse (as defined by > 20 cm depth of penetration). That experiment is the first to test wooden spears on large animal carcasses with hide intact and demonstrate the *capability* of these weapons to create lethal wounds on a large animal during both thrusting and throwing. However, the small sample sizes of these experiments present a limitation that would need further validation in a larger experimental study in order to assess *probability* of delivering a lethal wound with thrusting vs throwing, while the definition of 'lethal' depths of penetration is a further issue that is in dire need of experimental testing.

Conceptual Problem 3. Representations and Omissions Regarding Ethnohistoric Accounts on Use of Spears

Beyond experimental data, ethnographic evidence of the use of wooden javelins provides evidence of the capacity for hunting prey including kangaroo, emu, suids, and possibly

jaguar (Milks, 2020). Spears were historically noted to have been thrown by a number of societies at distances of 30 to 50 m for hunting and violence (Tiwi, Melville Islands: Spencer, 1914; Morris, 1964; Aboriginal Tasmanians: Lloyd, 1862; Robinson, 1966; Roth, 1890; various mainland Aboriginal Australians: Christison & Edge-Partington, 1903; Giles, 1889; Bari, South Sudan: Baker, 1874; Mae Enga, Papua New Guinea: Meggitt, 1977; Chabu, Ethiopia: Sahle et al., 2023). Spencer (1914) staged a competition-style event with nine Tiwi men and recorded throwing distances of 31.8 to 43.7 m with a spear weighing 1.8 kg. As has been discussed elsewhere, an oft-cited estimate of 5–10 m for effective spear throwing is based on a mean value of 13 societies, within an overarching ethnographic review of weapon use (Churchill, 1993). While the underlying sources in that review are not clear, it could not have included all of the sources above. Churchill (1993, p. 19 emphasis added) explores distance throwing as a hunting technique as follows:

The Tiwi and Tasmanian cases are curious exceptions to an otherwise robust pattern of hand spears used with disadvantage, ambush, and pursuit hunting. These cases show that hand-propelled spears *can be used as long-range projectiles with approach hunting* – although it was only the Tasmanians who threw the spear long distances (30–40 m) (Roth, 1890); the Tiwi approach prey closely before throwing (Goodale, 1971). If the Tasmanians are excluded, the average effective distance of the hand-thrown spear drops to 5.7 +/- 0.9 m (N=13).

With respect to the Tiwi, other sources indicate that they did in fact throw at significant distances (Morris, 1964; Spencer, 1914). We contend that on the basis of evidence, distance throwing is likely to be less related to the capacity of the technology and humans using them than to environment, prey, and socio-cultural factors including whether groups also use(d) mechanically projected weapons or not. As tempting as it is to rely on statistical means, confidence intervals, or significance values to establish categories, in itself an ongoing debate in the wider sciences (e.g. Amrhein et al., 2019), it masks the range of variability, which does not serve in helping us understand the potential range of human behaviours in the present and past.

Discussion and Conclusion

Ethnographic and experimental data help us build robust links with human behaviours in the deep past (Eren & Meltzer, 2024); yet following fundamental scientific principles (whether statistically led or otherwise) analogical tools and archaeological data can only be used to support or reject hypotheses but never to prove. Quantitative and qualitative

data can serve to support or question existing narratives, or indeed build new ones. With that in mind, at this juncture, we find through multiple lines of enquiry no empirical basis to reject the hypothesis that Pleistocene spears were used as projectile weapons. Rather, thus far the ethnographic, archaeological, and experimental data on wooden spear use support the hypothesis that these were multifunctional tools, and several of the spears from Schöningen could have functioned as projectiles thrown at medium distances. We reiterate that this does not, and likely never could, *prove* that they functioned as such, but narratives to the contrary must be formulated by accounting for the data at hand.

In a recent paper, Lombard (2022a) proposed that the technological capacity to hunt with javelins was in place no earlier than MIS 6, i.e. 190 ka BP. This argument is stated to be based on ethno-historical and experimental data. Based on these same criteria, we show that there is no clear correlation between tip geometries and delivery method for spears, which instead are illustrated as having significant overlap. When applying the correct measurement data and equations, most of the Schöningen spears could, on the basis of tip geometries, fall within both thrusting and throwing categories, making a distinction on the basis of tip morphology problematic (as it is for spears as a whole). Furthermore, ethno-historic and experimental analogies support the functionality of at least some of the Schöningen spears as thrown weapons. Use-wear and fracture analysis have provided useful, if not entirely uncomplicated, methods for further evaluating the function of stone points (e.g. Iovita et al., 2014; Rots & Plisson, 2014; Wilkins et al., 2015). Future experimental approaches on use-wear and fracturing of wooden-tipped weapons, which do also fracture during use, could potentially provide similar insights into function. However, we would highlight that to our knowledge, there are as yet no reliable data on distinguishing between thrusting and throwing spears, even for stone points, though these data do appear to be emerging for spearthrower use (Coppe et al., 2023). While we demonstrate significant limitations for use of TCSA and TCSP to determine mode of delivery, these still play an important role as contributing factors to penetration. The variability of these measures observed within and across ethnographic weapon delivery systems may relate to myriad factors that may not always relate to function.

The Spear Horizon of Schöningen 13 II-4, dating c. 300,000 BP (MIS 9) is exceptional because unlike most archaeological sites and finds, it preserved complete weapons that allow us to analyse many different aspects of their manufacture and use; the complete examples show lengths and LMD consistent with throwing technologies (Leder et al., 2024; Milks et al., 2023a). Yet attempts to categorise the Schöningen spears as thrusting or throwing is, we argue, a false dichotomy. Both strategies can be used in tandem,

for example to initially injure prey by throwing spears, and if necessary to deliver a fatal blow by then thrusting it into the animal, as well as to keep other predators and scavengers at bay. The site also bears evidence of another potential medium-distance throwing technology, namely double-pointed tools that have been interpreted by a number of scholars working independently from one another as throwing sticks (Bordes, 2014; Conard et al., 2020; Leder et al., 2024; Milks et al., 2023b; Thieme, 1997). The presence and interpreted function of these tools thus supports the hypothesis that distance weapons were used in Europe from at least 300 ka BP.

Based on physiological characteristics present in *Homo erectus*, it has been argued that hominins may have had the capacity for powerful and accurate throws as early as 2 million years ago (Roach & Lieberman, 2014; Roach & Richmond, 2015; Roach et al., 2013). In a finite element model, Berthaume (2014) found that humeri from Neanderthal and early Upper Palaeolithic populations were equally well-adapted to strains during throwing. Contributing to the complexity, there is human variation in humeral torsion (Cowgill, 2007; Larson, 2015), a key feature for interpreting fossil evidence of throwing. Hominin fossils also present a mixed picture with respect to bone remodelling in response to activities, with evidence both in favour of (Faivre et al., 2014) and against (Rhodes & Churchill, 2009) throwing in the pre-sapiens hominin record. Due to the paucity of postcranial remains, as well as issues of equifinality, this may not be resolvable via the fossil record. In absence of future ‘smoking gun’ type evidence, it could well remain one of the big ‘unknowns’.

In short, while archaeologists may never be able to definitively say how these early wooden spears were used, the evidence at Schöningen suggests that at least from a design perspective, the capacity for medium-distance projectiles was present. Furthermore, even though wooden spears are likely to be less effective than other weapon types in some respects (e.g. effective distance), experimental and ethnographic analogy demonstrates their capacity to injure and fatally wound animals and humans. We close by highlighting a series of points also made by Sahle et al. (2023), namely that when richly contextualised, ethnographic comparison illustrates that weapon variability can relate not only to delivery method, but also to hunting dynamics and strategies, prey type, and use by children, or in ceremonies. Similarly, Newman and Moore (2013) argue that it is essential to not make assumptions that tool design always closely tracks optimal performance, but rather may reflect technological approaches, and the dynamics of cultural transmission. Ethnographic analogy, whether through comparisons of material culture or behaviours, provide useful context and pathways for expanding our understanding of technological and behavioural variability. Yet statistical approaches that

mask that variability in order to establish false categories should be reconsidered. In our opinion, the use and misuse of TCSA/TCSP to determine mode of weapon delivery has established a bias with respect to crucial human innovations in the form of prehistoric weapon systems.

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Author Contribution Both authors, DL and AM, contributed equally to the conceptualisation, methodology, analysis, writing of the original draft, and review and editing of the manuscript. DL prepared Figs. 1, 2, 4, 5, and 6 and AM prepared Figs. 3 and 7. Both authors reviewed and approved the manuscript.

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Data Availability Data is provided both within the manuscript (Tables 1 through 4), and as an accompanying datafile (xls).

Declarations

Competing Interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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