



Scottish Universities Environmental Research Centre

**NEANDERTHAL CLIMATE PREFERENCES
AND TOLERANCES: THE NEED FOR A
BETTER CHRONOLOGY**

**MIDDLE PALAEOLITHIC SITES IN
RUSSIA AND UKRAINE: SITE
SUMMARIES AND FIELDWORK 2004**

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*Environmental Factors in the Chronology of Human
Evolution and Dispersal*

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Contents	Page
1 Project Summary	1
1.1 Environmental Factors	2
1.2 Chronology	3
1.2.1 Sediments	3
1.2.2 Suitability for Luminescence Dating	4
1.2.3 Suitability for Tephra Chronology, Magnetic Palaeointensity and AMS ¹⁴ C Dating	5
1.3 Human Evolution and Dispersal	6
1.4 Priority for Analysis	7
 2 DSR - Gubs Gorge Sites	 10
2.1 Introduction	10
2.2 Luminescence samples	25
2.3 Gamma Dosimetry	25
2.4 Tephra, Magnetic Susceptibility, Sedimentary, Radiocarbon and Pollen Samples	27
2.4.1 Tephra, Magnetic Susceptibility and Sedimentary Samples	27
2.4.2 Radiocarbon Samples	27
2.4.3 Pollen Samples	27
2.5 Pre sampling Site Reviews (by Allsworth-Jones)	29
2.5.1 Monasheskaya	29
2.5.2 Gubs Rockshelter 1	49
2.5.3 Barakaevskaya	62
Appendix 2.1 Pre-sampling site assessment forms (by Burbidge & Allsworth-Jones)	76
Appendix 2.2 Luminescence sample forms	83
Appendix 2.3 Field gamma spectrometry forms	98
 3 DSR – Sochi Region Sites	 111
3.1 Introduction	111
3.2 Luminescence samples	129
3.3 Gamma Spectrometry	129

3.4	Tephra, Magnetic Susceptibility, Sedimentary, Radiocarbon and Pollen samples	131
3.4.1	Tephra, Magnetic Susceptibility and Sedimentary Samples	131
3.4.2	Radiocarbon samples	131
3.4.3	Pollen samples	131
3.5	Pre sampling site reviews (by P. Allsworth-Jones)	132
3.5.1	Navalishinskaya	132
3.5.2	Malaya Vorontsovskaya	138
3.5.3	Akhshtyr	154
3.5.4	Kepshinskaya	166
Appendix 3.1	Pre-sampling site assessment forms (by Burbidge and Allsworth-Jones)	172
Appendix 3.2	Luminescence sample forms	179
Appendix 3.3	Field gamma spectrometry forms	204
4	DSR – Russian Plain Sites	234
4.1	Introduction	234
4.2	Luminescence samples	253
4.3	Gamma Spectrometry	253
4.4	Tephra, Magnetic Susceptibility, Sedimentary and Pollen Samples	255
4.4.1	Tephra, Magnetic Susceptibility and Sedimentary Samples	255
4.4.2	Pollen samples	255
4.5	Pre sampling site reviews (by Allsworth-Jones, with some post sampling revised stratigraphies by Housley)	256
4.5.1	Biriuchya Balka	256
4.5.2	Palaeomagnetic investigations at Biriuchya Balka 2 (2003)	267
4.5.3	Kalitvenka	269
4.5.4	Kostenki 14 (Markina Gora)	277
Appendix 4.1	Pre-sampling site assessment forms (by Burbidge and Allsworth-Jones)	278
Appendix 4.2	Luminescence sample forms	283
Appendix 4.3	Field gamma spectrometry forms	313

5	DSR – Crimean Sites	341
5.1	Introduction	341
5.2	Luminescence samples	359
5.3	Gamma Spectrometry	359
5.4	Tephra, Magnetic Susceptibility, Sedimentary and Radiocarbon Samples	361
5.4.1	Tephra, Magnetic and Sedimentary Samples	361
5.4.2	Radiocarbon Samples	361
5.5	Pre sampling site reviews (by Allsworth-Jones)	362
5.5.1	Sary-Kaya	362
5.5.2	Kabazi V	364
5.5.3	Kabazi II	369
5.5.4	Karabai	383
	Appendix 5.1 Pre-sampling site assessment forms	
	(by Burbidge and Allsworth-Jones)	384
	Appendix 5.2 Luminescence sample forms	390
	Appendix 5.3 Field gamma spectrometry forms	423
	References	458
	Figures	
	Figure 2.1. (a). Sampling localities visited in the 2004 project field season.	14
	Figure 2.2. (a). Plan of Monasheskaya cave and excavated areas.	15
	Figure 2.3. Monasheskaya Cave. (a). Section Y-Г, (b). Location...	16
	Figure 2.4. Monasheskaya Cave 2004 excavations. Plan and section...	17
	Figure 2.5. (a). Plan of Gubs Rockshelter 1, after Amirkhanov (1986). 2004...	18
	Figure 2.6. Gubs Rockshelter 1: 2004 section on the south side of...	19
	Figure 2.7. Gubs Rockshelter 1 2004: Plan and section with OSL sampling...	20
	Figure 2.8. (a). Plan of Barakaevskaya cave. (b). Barakaevskaya Cave,...	21
	Figure 2.9. Barakaevskaya Cave, Section A-V ~Point 128, showing...	22
	Figure 2.10. Monasheskaya Cave: plan	40
	Figure 2.11. Monasheskaya cave: 1961 section	41
	Figure 2.12. Monasheskaya cave: section Д-Е	42
	Figure 2.13. Monasheskaya cave: section Б-Д	43

Figure 2.14. Monasheskaya cave: section C-T	43
Figure 2.15. Monasheskaya cave: section Φ -X	44
Figure 2.16. Monasheskaya cave: section Д- Φ	44
Figure 2.17. Monasheskaya cave: section Г-Д	45
Figure 2.18. Monasheskaya cave: section У-Г	46
Figure 2.19. Monasheskaya, 2004 section with OSL sample positions	47
Figure 2.20. Gubs Rockshelter 1, plan in Liubin et al. (1973, fig. 1A)	58
Figure 2.21. Gubs Rockshelter 1, section in Liubin et al. (1973, fig. 1B)	58
Figure 2.22. Gubs Rockshelter 1, plan in Amirkhanov (1986, fig. 5)	59
Figure 2.23. Gubs Rockshelter 1, section from Amirkhanov (1986, fig. 6)	60
Figure 2.24. Gubs Rockshelter, 2004 section with OSL sample positions	61
Figure 2.25. Barakaevskaya, site plan	69
Figure 2.26. Barakaevskaya, sections A – D and V- Z	70
Figure 2.27. Barakaevskaya, 2004 section with position of the OSL sample	71
Figure 2.28. Pollen and spores diagram of the Mousterian deposits at...	75
Figure 3.1. Location of the Sochi Region in the Caucasus region, and the...	117
Figure 3.3. Section through the stratigraphy of Navalishinskaya cave...	118
Figure 3.4. Navalishenskaya: plan and 2004 section, with OSL sampling...	119
Figure 3.5. A. Section R-B-L-P at Malaya Vorontsovskaya. B. Plan of...	120
Figure 3.6. Malaya Vorontsovskaya, position of this profile...	121
Figure 3.7. Malaya Vorontsovskaya: plan and 2004 section, with OSL...	122
Figure 3.8. A. Plan of Akhshtyr cave showing the previously excavated areas.	123
Figure 3.9. Akhshtyr, Section Г-B, squares 99 and 100 (Figure 3.8)...	124
Figure 3.10. Akhshtyr: plan and 2004 section, with OSL sampling positions.	125
Figure 3.11. Section through the stratigraphy at, and plan of, Kepshinskaya...	126
Figure 3.12. Kepshinskaya. Luminescence sampling positions are shown...	127
Figure 3.13. Kepshinskaya: plan and 2004 section, with OSL sampling positions.	128
Figure 3.14. Navalishinskaya plan and section	136
Figure 3.15. Navalishinskaya, 2004 section with OSL sample positions	137
Figure 3.16. Malaya Vorontsovskaya plan and section according to Liubin...	149
Figure 3.17. Malaya Vorontsovskaya plan after Chistyakov (1996)	150
Figure 3.18. Malaya Vorontsovskaya section V'-U'-G' after Chistyakov (1996)	151
Figure 3.19. Malaya Vorontstovskaya sections DZ and Z-V''-U'' after...	152

Figure 3.20. Malaya Vorontsovskaya, 2004 section with OSL sample positions	153
Figure 3.21. Akhshtyr. Plan of the excavated part of the cave and section...	162
Figure 3.22. Akhshtyr. Section along the line A-B, western edge of...	163
Figure 3.23. Akhshtyr handaxes from layer 7(12) after Chistyakov (1996)	164
Figure 3.24. Akhshtyr pollen diagram after Vekilova et al. (1978)	164
Figure 3.25. Akhshtyr, 2004 section with OSL sample positions	165
Figure 3.26. Kepshinskaya cave (after Liubin 1989). Plan and section...	169
Figure 3.27. Kepshinskaya cave, 2004 section with OSL sample positions	170
Figure 3.28. Kepshinskaya cave pollen sequence (after Liubin et al. 1971...	171
Figure 3.29. (Liubin et al. 1971, fig. 19) Pollen frequencies for present...	171
Figure 4.1. Location of the Russian Steppe sites, with locations of other...	234
Figure 4.2. Biriuchya Balka 2 section, after Matiukhin (1998)	241
Figure 4.3. Biriuchya Balka 2 main section. Luminescence sampling...	242
Figure 4.4. Biriuchya Balka 2 sondage. Luminescence sampling positions...	243
Figure 4.5. Biriuchya Balka 2 section as recorded by Matiukhin in 2004	244
Figure 4.6. Biriuchya Balka 1a. Luminescence sampling positions are...	245
Figure 4.7. Biriuchya Balka 1a section as recorded by Matiukhin in 2004	246
Figure 4.8. Kalitvenka 1. Luminescence sampling positions are shown...	247
Figure 4.9. Kalitvenka 1 section as recorded by Matiukhin in 2004	248
Figure 4.10. Kalitvenka 1v. Luminescence sampling positions are shown...	249
Figure 4.11. Kalitvenka 1v section as recorded by Matiukhin in 2004	250
Figure 4.12. Kostenki 14 (Markina Gora). a. South section, b. East section...	251
Figure 4.13. Kostenki 14 (Markina Gora). a. South section, b. East section...	252
Figure 4.14. Map showing the location of the various sites within Biriuchya...	263
Figure 4.15. Biriuchya Balka 2 section, after Matiukhin (1998, page 471, Fig. 3)	264
Figure 4.16. Biriuchya Balka 2 section as recorded by Matiukhin in 2004	265
Figure 4.17. Biriuchya Balka 1a section as recorded by Matiukhin in 2004	266
Figure 4.18. Kalitvenka 1 section as recorded by Matiukhin in 2004	275
Figure 4.19. Kalitvenka 1v section as recorded by Matiukhin in 2004	276
Figure 5.1. Location of the Crimean sites, with locations of other Middle...	342
Figure 5.2. Published Sary-Kaya section, after Chabai (2004)	351
Figure 5.3. Sary-Kaya section. Luminescence sampling positions are...	352

Figure 5.4. Published Kabazi V section. Relative position of sampling in the...	353
Figure 5.5. Kabazi V. Luminescence sediment sampling positions are...	354
Figure 5.6. Kabazi II, East section. Position of sampling in the present...	355
Figure 5.7. Kabazi II. Luminescence sampling positions are shown as...	356
Figure 5.8. Karabai section. Luminescence sampling positions are shown...	358
Figure 5.9. Sary-Kaya section, after Chabai and Kolosov	363
Figure 5.10. Kabazi V stratigraphic profile, line 9	365
Figure 5.11. Kabazi II section along line 9 (ERAUL 84)	375
Figure 5.12. Kabazi II, lower excavation area (ERAUL 84)	376
Figure 5.13. Kabazi II pollen zones, after Gerasimenko (ERAUL 87)	379
Figure 5.14. Kabazi II section along line 3 / 4, after Chabai (2004)	381
Figure 5.15. Kabazi II section along line 3 / 4 lower portion, after Chabai (2004)	382

Tables

Table 1.1. A Summary of Dating Priorities for the 2004 samples.	9
Table 2.1. Luminescence and related samples taken, and measurements...	11
Table 2.2. Tephra, Magnetic Susceptibility, Sedimentary, Radiocarbon,...	13
Table 2.3. Monasheskaya cave: rodent species by number and layer	48
Table 2.4. Gubs Rockshelter 1, pollen table in Liubin et al. (1973, 58)	59
Table 2.5. Barakayevskaya: the mammals and their quantitative distribution...	72
Table 2.6. Geographical analysis of the fossil flora from the Mousterian...	73
Table 3.1. Luminescence and related samples taken, and measurements made...	112
Table 3.2. Tephra, magnetic susceptibility, sedimentary, pollen, AMS and...	114
Table 4.1. Luminescence and related samples taken, and measurements...	235
Table 4.2. Tephra, magnetic susceptibility, sedimentary, pollen and general...	237
Table 5.1. Luminescence and related samples taken, and measurements...	343
Table 5.2. Tephra, Magnetic Susceptibility, Sedimentary, and Radiocarbon...	347
Table 5.3. Correlations between Kabazi II, Starosel'e and Kabazi V. After...	357
Table 5.4. Kabazi V stratigraphic description	366

Table 5.5. Kabazi V correlation of sequences	367
Table 5.6. Kabazi V ESR and U-series dates	368
Table 5.7. Kabazi II stratigraphic description (ERAUL 84)	377
Table 5.8. Kabazi II ESR and U-series dates (ERAUL 84)	378
Table 5.9. Correlation of sites, after Chabai et al. (ERAUL 87)	380

1 Project Summary

The Natural Environment Research Council's (NERC) research programme *Environmental Factors in the Chronology of Human Evolution and Dispersal* (EFCHEd) aims to investigate whether climate change was responsible for human evolution. This project that is one of ten funded by NERC under the EFCHEd initiative is entitled *Neanderthal climate preferences and tolerances: the need for a better chronology*. This series of linked reports detail the field investigations undertaken in the summer of 2004 ahead of laboratory analyses of the recovered samples. They draw together the available data from field observations and previous published studies to provide a record of our knowledge prior to the sedimentary and chronological studies that will commence from the fall of 2004.

The aim of our project is to investigate whether the present chronological data for late Mousterian sites in Europe are biasing our perception of Neanderthal populations by making them appear more-cold adapted than the incoming anatomically modern humans. We have focused our attention on the part of the Neanderthal world that experienced the most continental climatic environments - namely, European Russia north and east of the Black Sea - for it is in such a region that the environmental preferences will be most discernible. By applying a range of cross-validated non-¹⁴C chronological methodologies (luminescence, tephra chronology, palaeomagnetic intensity, and Ar-Ar) to late Middle Palaeolithic, and to a lesser extent early Upper Palaeolithic, assemblages we aim to identify spatial and temporal patterning which, when correlated with local environmental proxies and wider climate data, should permit a better understanding of Neanderthal climatic tolerances.

The information contained in these reports provides the basis by which we have begun to prioritise the laboratory analyses. The key elements that must be taken into account in any such prioritisation may be found in the name EFCHEd, namely '**environmental factors**' (climate proxy data - in our case information from previous or ongoing studies concerning the pollen, fauna and sedimentology of the layers we have sampled), '**chronology**' (i.e. suitability of samples to the dating methods that we intend to apply), '**human evolution**' (the presence of either direct human skeletal remains or, more commonly, typologically diagnostic humanly-worked material -

1 Summary

typically lithic tool assemblages), and ‘**dispersal**’ (in our case the requirement to include sites from a number of separate geographical regions). Provided we base our decisions on criteria that take account of these factors then we will be fulfilling the aims of the funding body that has sponsored our research.

1.1 Environmental Factors

Within this project we intend to acquire most of our data on environmental proxies from existing studies of the site fauna and pollen combined with new sedimentary analyses to be undertaken by Nick McCave. We have to acknowledge that we are very dependent on the previous investigators who have studied the pollen and the faunal assemblages. In some instances the quality of the reporting has been less than ideal, thus inhibited a good understanding of the climate record – in particular, the use of secondary reports of Levkovskaya’s pollen studies on Middle Palaeolithic sites in the Russian Federation has not been altogether satisfactory and access to the primary reports is necessary. The fact we have taken pollen samples from the same sampling points as the full luminescence samples should allow us to correlate our chronological determinations with the existing work of Levkovskaya once the detailed information is to hand. In the Crimea, at Kabazi II, the situation is better in that the detailed report of Gerasimenko (1999) has been published and is readily accessible. However, with regards to the other Crimean sites the pollen record has still to be analysed although the work has commenced and will be completed by Gerasimenko in due course. How the timing works out in relation to our investigations is an unknown.

To an extent the faunal studies are useful however the anthropogenic influence, particularly on the larger fauna, has to be always borne in mind. The small mammal fauna may be more informative when considering environmental conditions.

The sedimentary sequences have all been detailed in the field by the previous investigators and many of the descriptions are available to us. With the new sites this information is not immediately available but will be forthcoming in time. However, the value of being able to undertake complete sedimentary grain size analyses in conjunction with tephra and magnetic palaeointensity measurements will be of major

1 Summary

value. The luminescence profiling samples may also be valuable in this context in identifying hiatus points in the sedimentary column.

1.2 Chronology

The suitability of samples for dating is very much dependent on the nature of the sampled sediment, and obviously different dating methodologies have their own often different requirements. For this reason this section has been sub-divided under three headings that consider (1) the nature of the sediments, (2) their suitability for OSL dating, and (3) the suitability for other chronological analyses.

1.2.1 Sediments

The natures of the sediments sampled in the present study varied widely, as a function of geographical/geological region and geomorphological context. However, the most commonly encountered components were a silty inorganic fine fraction, and limestone (or chalk/marl) clasts. The proportion of clasts varied such that in the mountainous sites many layers were clast supported, while in lower relief areas most were based on a silty matrix. A sand sized component of hard mineral grains (e.g. quartz, feldspar) was also identified at many sites, although with certain exceptions this was minor compared to silt and/or rock clasts. Carbonate content was generally high to very high. Detailed sedimentary analysis by the Cambridge University group should quantify particle size distributions and organic contents, while qualitative evidence will be collected as luminescence sample preparation proceeds.

Examples of rocky sites are Monasheskaya and Barakaevskaya (Gubs region), Malaya Vorontsovskaya and Navalishinskaya (Sochi Region), Kabazi V (Crimea). In these sites the silty/sandy material in many layers was eluvium from the limestone/chalky bedrock. Variations in the levels of physical and chemical weathering during different climatic phases may have altered inputs to the sedimentary matrix. However, a variety of depositional mechanisms have been posited for these sites, and the inclusion of allochthonous material is not precluded, which is important for pollen analysis, tephrochronology, and OSL dating. A very relevant source is anthropogenic: a limited number of layers in the rockier sites

1 Summary

(caves/shelters) contained high proportions of charcoal, bone and/or lithics material deposited apparently as the result of human activity.

The sites based on silty sediments were Biriuchya Balka and Kostenki (Russian Plain), and Karabai (Crimea). Here the sedimentary material generally appeared loessic, but often-contained signs of post depositional reworking (colluviation) as well as calcite precipitation/spring action. The bases of the sections at these sites were below or close to the modern water table.

Other sites contained a mixture of rocky and fines supported layers e.g. Gubs Rockshelter (Gubs region), Akhshtyr and Kepshinskaya (Sochi region), and Sary-Kaya and Kabazi II (Crimea). Transitions between fine and coarse layers were sometimes dramatic, indicating changes in type or at least energy of sedimentation at these sites. The most striking example was at Akhshtyr, where apparently water-lain clayey sediments were sealed by loose, rocky deposits.

The Kalitvenka site (Russian Plains) was unique in containing sediments with a mostly sandy matrix, reflecting quartzite based drift geology in the area.

1.2.2 Suitability for Luminescence Dating

The luminescence dating of sediments generally utilises optically stimulated signals from sand sized grains of quartz or feldspar, or silt sized polymineral samples (silt sized quartz concentrates have also been used, as has the thermally stimulated signal from polymineral samples). The major reason for using an optically stimulable signal is that it is likely to have been set to zero by exposure sunlight prior to or during sedimentary deposition. When dating the accumulation of a sedimentary sequence by luminescence methods it is clearly important then to identify sediments or sedimentary components that are likely to contain material that was bleached prior to burial, and into which material with large residual signals has not been incorporated.

Poorly bleached material with large residuals is likely to have eroded from *insitu* material (autochthonous). Identifying which minerals / grain sizes are present in the limestone present at many of the sites sampled in the present study is considered important in order that other phases be examined for dating purposes. Well-bleached material is likely to have come into a site from outside (allochthonous), in particular if blown in on the wind. Other mechanisms delivering allochthonous material, such as

1 Summary

colluviation and fluvial deposition, may provide relatively well-bleached material, but are likely to yield a mixture of bleached and unbleached grains. In one sense then, it would be highly desirable to examine the sand-sized component of the samples, since De distributions could then be examined and different populations potentially separated. On the other hand however, when dating a surface or colluvially deposited sediment, the silt-sized fraction is likely to have been more thoroughly reworked (by bioturbation for example), and may yield an average answer closer to the date of burial. Also, *insitu* material might be bleached by thorough reworking at the surface over a prolonged period (by bioturbation for example), or by heating in the particular case of fires associated with human occupation.

Given the selection of a well bleached component from which to measure the absorbed dose, difficulties in determining the average environmental dose rate to a sample during its burial period may be the limiting factor in the accuracy of a luminescence age. These may arise from temporal fluctuations in water content, transport of radionuclides, compaction of the sediments and crystallisation/dissolution of minerals within them. It is therefore important to identify sediments, which are likely to have a simple or easily modelable history with respect to these factors.

1.2.3 Suitability for Tephra Chronology, Magnetic Susceptibility and AMS ^{14}C Dating

The Mediterranean region and the Caucasus Mountains have seen a great deal of volcanic activity during the Quaternary. Based on current estimates of past eruption magnitudes and ash dispersal dynamics, it has been suggested that several of the EFCHED sites lie within the probable fallout ranges of a number of past volcanic events. It is therefore likely that, preservation permitting, a number of distinct ash layers are contained within the sediment sequences investigated as part of this project. If these layers are successfully located they could act as key temporal marker horizons within a given site and if the same ash is found in multiple sites, as means of correlating between sites.

In rare cases, such as at Kostenki, the volcanic ash or tephra layer may be preserved as a discrete unit of essentially pure volcanic glass. In many cases, this is not the case and the location of tephra layers involves the isolation of the ash component from the rest of the sediment. The extraction procedure must be altered

1 Summary

depending on the exact nature of the sediment in question, but it is usually necessary to dissolve the carbonate and organic fraction. The remaining sample will contain silicic minerals including sand and tephra, which can be separated via density separation. The isolated tephra can then be geochemically fingerprinted using an electron microprobe and other analytical techniques, and the unique chemical signature will hopefully allow the layer to be attributed to a well dated volcanic event. The larger Mediterranean eruptions, including the Y-5, have been extensively investigated in many locations in the eastern Mediterranean region, so identification should be straight forward. It is possible however that tephra layers may be present from the as yet uncharacterised Caucasian volcanoes of Elbrus and Kazbek. It is hoped that samples recently obtained from a cave near these volcanoes will allow these events to be formally characterised so they may be of use in current and future tephrochronological investigations.

In parallel with the sedimentological studies, samples are being routinely analysed to determine their magnetic susceptibility. The magnetic susceptibility of a sediment depends principally on the extent to which the sample contains trace magnetic constituents, and is a parameter that can be quickly measured in the laboratory on a slowly dried sediment or soil sample. Changes in susceptibility along a sedimentary profile reflect changing environmental conditions at the time of deposition (whether changes in the material being deposited; or changes in climate, leading to different amounts of biological activity and soil formation), and the aim of the work is to identify the extent to which the magnetic susceptibility can be used as a qualitative climate indicator across a range of open air sites.

The scale of AMS dating in this project was always going to be limited, in that the project design specifically aimed to use non- ^{14}C methodologies to determine if a bias exists in the ^{14}C chronology of the late Middle Palaeolithic. However, a number of the sites included in this study have no existing ^{14}C dates and so where suitable material for AMS could be obtained from well-defined layers and positions, it was taken for comparative purposes. Sampling in 2004 was very much influenced by the paucity of available appropriate material, and because our fieldwork consisted primarily of sampling cleaned existing sections, and not new excavation, few opportunities for radiocarbon measurement arose. Six of the fifteen samples that we were able to get were charcoal or burnt bone, and the rest were unburnt bone. Because the ^{14}C dating is supplementary to the other analyses, decisions on AMS

1 Summary

dating will focus on those samples that usefully complement our other studies, although it should be noted that the resource exists to date the majority of the samples that were collected.

1.3 Human Evolution and Dispersal

Although direct human skeletal remains are rare, we do have considerable information on the archaeological stone tool industries from the majority of the sites within the project. This said, some localities have not produced large lithics assemblages – for example some of the cave bear fauna rich sites in the NW Caucasus – whilst others, like Kalitvenka, are best characterised as workshop sites and hence lack the large body of typologically diagnostic material that is so important if wider regional inferences are to be drawn. Using these factors it has been possible to grade the sites in terms of their likely importance were they to be dated and thus prioritise where we should put our efforts.

The dispersal element of the study is best explained through the need to maintain a geographical spread in our analyses. The sites have been grouped into four categories (A-D), where (A) are inland sites in the Caucasus, (B) being coastal sites along the eastern Black Sea coast, (C) consisting of inland sites situated in the Russian steppe region, and (D) being sites on the Crimean peninsula. In terms of the project design it is important that this geographical spread is adhered to and so in addition to the factors already mentioned some account of this needs to be taken when making the prioritisation decisions.

1.4 Priority for Analysis

Using the criteria outlined above, the following grading has been applied to the sites within our study (Table 1.1). By including all the sites with a score equal to 50% or higher in the initial stage of analysis, we are able to maintain the vital geographical spread and such a sample may produce a general overview of the trends that can be further developed when neighbouring sites are brought into the analysis process. What this analysis does not convey are some of the relationship questions that apply to individual samples on different sites. An example of this would be the chronological relationship of the three Gubs Gorge sites and the question whether the

1 Summary

alternate Stadial and Interstadial events that the pollen shows represent contemporaneous climate oscillations or whether they are successive and thus the whole sequence covers a much longer period of time. A sample-based prioritisation might better highlight such factors but the case for dealing with samples on a site basis is far more compelling.

It must be acknowledged that different analyses in Cambridge and East Kilbride may need to progress differently and that later batches of analyses at each institution will obviously have to take account of experience learnt from the initial studies. However, the overall objectives of the EFCHED programme should be kept in mind as work progresses. We want to be able to report in the fall of 2006 that we have adhered to the broad outlines of the EFCHED initiative and we have some hopefully worthwhile, convincing and informative data, and hence the need to keep a critical eye on the bigger objectives when analysing the samples.

1 Summary

Geog Group		Archaeological Factors			Environmental Factors	Chronological Factors				Rating (%)
		Large Pal diagnostic assemblage	Human remains	Upal & Mpal	Good pollen/faunal proxies	Good layered stratigraphy	Good multi-insitu chronology	Good existing chronology	Good OSL datability	
C	Kostenki 14	2	0	0	1	2		3	1	64
D	Kabazi II	2	0	0	2	2		2	1	64
B	Akhshtyr	2	1	2	1	1		1	0	57
C	Biriuchya Balka 2 + 1a	1	0	2	0	2		2	1	57
A	Monasheskaya	2	2	0	1	2		0	0	50
A	Gubs Rockshelter N1	1	0	2	0	2		0	1	43
A	Barakaevskaya	2	2	0	1	0		0	0	36
B	Navalishenskaya	0	0	2	1	2		0	0	36
B	Malaya Vorontsovskaya	1	0	0	1	2		1	0	36
C	Kalitvenka 1	0	0	0	0	2		0	3	36
C	Kalitvenka 1v	0	0	0	0	1		0	3	29
D	Kabazi V	2	0	0	0	2		0	0	29
D	Karabai	1	0	0	0	2		0	1	29
D	Sary-Kaya	1	0	0	0	2		0	1	29
B	Kepshinskaya	0	0	0	1	1		0	0	14

Table 1.1. A Summary of Dating Priorities for the 2004 samples based on archaeological, environmental and chronological factors. Key: 0 = ‘no’, ‘low’, ‘not available’, or ‘not present’; 1 = ‘medium’, ‘only partially available’ or ‘moderately present’; 2 = ‘yes’, ‘high’, ‘comprehensive account available’, or ‘notably present’; 3 = ‘exceptional evidence’ or ‘very high potential’. On the basis of these figures it is proposed that the samples from the sites in bold are prioritised at the start, with others being brought into the schedule as results and progress allows.