

Archaeology in the Sochi Area

Four sites are described in the SUERC volume (2005). To a large extent these summaries rely upon Liubin and other authorities who previously worked in the area. The same sites, and others, were also described in detail by Chistyakov (1996). He was obviously a very careful scholar, who paid particular attention to the archaeological remains, and his account is the primary reference for what follows. Golovanova and Doronichev (2003) mentioned this area as part of their wide-ranging survey, which since it was published in English in a well known journal, will have reached a much wider audience than any of the previous publications. Right or wrong, their arguments will have to be taken into account.

Navalishinskaya

The stratigraphy is as described in the SUERC volume. Layers 1, 1a, and 2 were Upper Palaeolithic, whereas layers 3, 4, and 5 were Middle Palaeolithic. The Middle Palaeolithic was described by Liubin as a Denticulate Mousterian, and he cautioned that the large number of denticulates in the Upper Palaeolithic required examination to determine how far they were due to natural or to cultural factors. In his view, there was likely to be a significant chronological gap between the Middle and the Upper Palaeolithic.

According to Chistyakov, the Mousterian lithic collection amounted to 74 pieces. These included 3 cores and 31 tools (6 on Levallois blanks). The author agreed with Liubin's analysis and classified the industry as a Denticulate Mousterian, which could probably also be described as Levallois. It was compared to the Middle Palaeolithic at Akhshtyr.

Akhshtyr

The stratigraphy is as described in the SUERC volume. The nearest consensus one can come to in terms of the cultural layers and their numbering (granted the many different people who have worked in the cave at various times) is as follows. Layer 1 is Mediaeval, 2a is Neolithic, and 2b is Upper Palaeolithic. Mousterian layers are 3, 4 and 4a, 5 and 5a. Layer 3a may contain both Upper and Middle Palaeolithic, and Layer 6/7 may be Acheulean. The archaeological material studied by Chistyakov comes from Zamyatnin's excavations of 1937-1939. He divided his finds into two horizons, Upper Mousterian from layer 3 and Lower Mousterian from layer 5. The total number of artefacts from these excavations comes to 2082 pieces (a good deal less than the total of 3598 mentioned in the SUERC volume which reflects later finds as well: cf. Chistyakov, 1996, 71). The number of artefacts attributed by Zamyatnin to the Upper and Lower Mousterian respectively is 709 and 1373.

Some of the technical and typological indices established by Chistyakov for these industries are as follows. The indices are those established by the late Professor Bordes. IL= Levallois technical index. Iam= blade index. IFI= faceting index. ILty= Levallois typological index. IR= sidescraper index. The indices taken together provide a technological and typological profile of the assemblage concerned.

Layer	IL	Ilam	IFl	ILty	IR
Upper	20.7	28.7	54.0	26.3	24.1
Lower	22.9	29.6	64.4	25.8	29.2

The same figures are reproduced by Golovanova and Doronichev (2003, 108). Chistyakov commented that technologically the assemblages from both layers are very similar to each other and that both are “within the limits” characteristic for Levallois blade faceted industries. The collections for the upper and lower layers contained 261 and 407 tools respectively. Chistyakov commented that the %s of tools to debitage were surprisingly high, and this he took to be a reflection of the fact that this was a permanent occupation site. There was very little re-sharpening of worn or slightly damaged tools, and this suggested that the inhabitants had no problem in obtaining raw material (Chistyakov, 1996, 79-80, 141-142). There is a contrast here with the position at Malaya Vorontsovskaya. Typologically, the two layers were very similar. Denticulates were more frequent than sidescrapers, hence the site in general was classified as a Denticulate Mousterian of Levallois facies. Chistyakov agreed therefore with the earlier definition of the industry given by Vekilova on the basis of the material which she excavated (after Zamyatnin).

Kepshinskaya

The stratigraphic situation is as summarised in the SUERC volume. Layer 3 is the Middle Palaeolithic layer, separated by a stratigraphic hiatus from layer 2 above. As stated already, there were only about 30 artefacts from layer 3. Chistyakov comments nonetheless that there was a complete absence of denticulates, and that although there were a couple of Levallois points, the collection as a whole could be regarded as a Typical Mousterian, in the Bordean sense.

Malaya Vorontsovskaya

The stratigraphic situation is as described in the SUERC volume. In this case, there are complications arising, not only from the fact that the site has been excavated by different people over many years, but also because there are significant differences between the front part and the rear of the cave. Layer 1 contained archaeological material of different ages: above, Cherkessian pottery, below, a few Upper Palaeolithic type flints. Layers 2, 2a, 2b, 3, Z, Z1, and 4 were classified as Middle Palaeolithic.

According to Chistyakov (1996, 21) 3556 stone artefacts were recovered in the excavations up to 1984. (NOTE. The figure of 3666 given in SUERC, page 146, is obviously a misprint). In addition, 434 more were recovered by Chistyakov in 1986 (Chistyakov, 1996, 133). Chistyakov’s analysis related solely to the earlier material. The technological and typological indices established by him for layers 2, 3, and 4, on the same principles as before, were as follows.

Layer	IL	Ilam	IFl	ILty	IR
2	6.2	18.5	41.7	4.3	36.9
3	6.9	13.3	51.3	14.4	45.6
4	6.9	14.0	48.9	13.6	35.2

The same figures are reproduced by Golovanova and Doronichev (2003, 108). The %s of tools to debitage were quite high, and in this respect there is a parallel to Akhshtyr. Most of the tools (88.6%) were small (up to 5 cm) which may be explained by a severe lack of raw material and therefore much utilisation and re-utilisation (unlike Akhshtyr). Some of the artefacts also showed signs of natural damage, including pseudo-retouch and polishing, and overall there was a high degree of fragmentation. For these reasons Chistyakov conceded that “the original character of the industry was probably different” from what it now appears to be (Chistyakov, 1996, 24, 138). On the face of it, the indices quoted above are significantly different from those recorded for Akhshtyr. Technologically, as Chistyakov said, this is a non-Levallois non-blade industry with a high index of platform faceting. Sidescrapers were more common than denticulates, hence Chistyakov characterised this industry in general as a Typical Mousterian of non-Levallois facies, although “enriched” with denticulate tools. This differs from Liubin’s previous definition of the industry as a Denticulate Mousterian of Levallois facies, occasioned by the fact that, as Chistyakov explains it, he had a larger and more representative collection of material to work with than was at his predecessor’s disposal (Chistyakov, 1996, 24-25).

Overall appraisal

Chistyakov summed up his conclusions by saying that the Mousterian of the Sochi area was more variegated than had hitherto been thought. It could not be described in a single phrase as a Denticulate Mousterian of Levallois facies (a Khostinskaya or Akhshtyrskaya culture). He distinguished four variants. (1) was a Typical Mousterian of non-Levallois facies, as at Malaya Vorontsovskaya and Kepshinskaya, (2) was a Denticulate Mousterian of Levallois facies, as at Akhshtyr and Navalishinskaya. (3) and (4) represented Denticulate and Typical Mousterian of non-Levallois and Levallois facies respectively, as known at Khostinskaya and in Abkhazia.

The conclusions come to by Golovanova and Doronichev, using Chistyakov’s figures, differ from this. They single out a Khosta group or Khostinian relying upon Liubin’s original identification of its characteristics as a Denticulate Mousterian of Levallois facies (Golovanova and Doronichev, 106-108). The apparent difference between Malaya Vorontsovskaya and Akhshtyr is dismissed as a consequence of the high rate of breakage and intensive use at the former site. They also remark upon the presence of so-called Aurignacian endscrapers, a category that was not recognised as such by Chistyakov (Golovanova and Doronichev, 2003, Fig. 18; cf. Chistyakov, 1996, 92, where he says that endscrapers in general are so characteristic of Denticulate Mousterian sites that it could almost be called an “Endscraper Mousterian”). In general they characterise this entity as “an original later Middle Palaeolithic “transitional” industry, which has no analogies in the Northern or Southern Caucasus”). In their overall summing up (Golovanova and Doronichev, 2003, 130) they suggest that “the absolute age of the Khostinian might be tentatively placed between about 60-50 and 30 ka B.P.”. They go on to compare it with the Bachokirian, in Bulgaria, which the excavator himself, J.K. Kozlowski, regards as Upper Palaeolithic.

The weaknesses of Golovanova's and Doronichev's position should be apparent from the foregoing. The combining of all the Sochi area sites into a single entity is at least disputable, in the light of Chistyakov's analysis. It depends on how far you judge the characteristics of the industry at Malaya Vorontsovskaya to have been "distorted" by use and re-use and by taphonomic factors, and what you judge the now unknown starting point to have been. The authors' identification of Aurignacian endscrapers and their elevation of them into "the most striking peculiarity" of the industry, as well as their general characterisation of it as "transitional", are highly questionable. The comparison to the Bachokirian in my opinion has no justification, and it would be interesting to know Liubin's opinion on that point.

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