Perceived Landscapes and Built Environments: The Cultural Geography of Late Paleolithic Eurasia

Sergey A.Vasil'ev, Olga Soffer, and Janusz K. Kozlowski (eds.)
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This volume offers a Late Paleolithic view of the Eurasian landscape through the study of human-built habitats. Based on papers presented at two symposia of the XIV Congress of the U.I.S.P.P. held at the University of Liège in Belgium on 2–8 September, 2001, the volume consists of 17 relatively short chapters alternately in English and French. This review offers my perspective on the volume, not as an archaeologist, but as cultural anthropologist-geographer with a long-term fascination with the manner in which humans construct landscapes that communicate people's behaviors in material form. The authors of the contributions are researchers whose experience in Paleolithic interpretation for the most part extends over more than 20 or 30 years, often on the same subject and at times on the same site. Thus, the authors bring to their shovels, towels, and grids an ever-deepening appreciation of Paleolithic efforts to bequeath a human presence on this planet

The editors of the volume suggest that the chapters can be grouped within two broad themes: (1) how to delimit enclosed spaces on living floors; and, (2) how to compare the living structures in the different regions of Eurasia.

DELIMITING ENCLOSED SPACES ON LIVING FLOORS

Leading the first grouping of contributions is Dick Stapert's "ring and sector" model of analysis. Here, a circle is drawn around the hearth with a series of sectors radiating from the circle. By cutting the sectors in turn into vertical divisions, the excavator rigorously samples the activity areas circling the hearth, ranging from the drop zone around the hearth to a toss zone against the cave or tent wall. Despite what appeals to me as an ingenious method, Stapert ruefully observes in the conclusion that the method places a static view on a dynamic distribution of living through time.

Likewise, the next author, Natalia Leonova, uses hearths and the associated living spaces around them to help identify an open-air site in the East European steppe zone, a region thought by many to be lacking in long-term dwelling places. She draws upon her intensive research at the micro-spatial level: (a) to establish clear parameters of habitats not necessarily so prominent as elsewhere; (b) to recognize that hearths even inside a single dwelling had different usages—some for tool use, others for cooking; (c) to detect the differential spacing of tool-types within the dwelling suggesting different activities; and, (d) to secure evidence that primary knapping occurred in areas immediately outside the dwelling. Thus, working intensely at the micro-level, she establishes long-term occupancy in a macro-region, the steppes.

The following chapter likewise concentrates on micro-distribution of artifacts and features, but here the focus is on the living floor of a three-hearth occupation at a single cave in Abauntz, Spain, during the Middle Magdalenian. Using factor analysis, the authors, Pilar Utrilla and her colleagues, Carlos Mazo and Rafael Domingo, distinguish several functional zones around the hearths. These include areas for working hides, knapping stone, and sleeping clustered together with spouse and kids. One puzzle is the presence of post molds within an environment securely sheltered from the inclement weather. Does the spatial distribution of the post molds imply social boundaries of inclusion and exclusion? Indeed, two large post molds amid large rocks situated along directly opposite walls of the cave suggest a curtain dividing two areas with the rocks supporting the posts. The other post molds are smaller and run parallel to each other along one wall. These perhaps supported a structure to protect the occupants from the cave's humidity. Two line drawings illustrate the post mold use.

Next are three contributions (Soffer, Iakovleva, and Kozlowski) on sites associated with a substantial amount of mammoth bones. All three ask if the mammoth bones were a product of "die-offs"—a mammoth cemetery—piled up by natural depositions, or an accumulation of human activity. All three authors opt for human labor.

In an excellent overview Olga Soffer presents a neat typology for sorting mammoth bone sites, and in comparing her sites with a number of others, raises the question of utilitarian versus ritual use. Based on the lithics, she concludes that while nearly all mammoth-bone constructed houses served a domestic purpose, some reveal sorting of bones so as to produce tightly symmetrical walls that are mirror images of each other. She adds that the appearance of such visually stunning edifices on the vast, undifferentiated periglacial steppes bespeaks a cultural landscape that to both archeologist and inhabitant convey the unique, perhaps even mystical, human presence.

Ludmilla Iakovleva surveys the large sites with constructed mammoth bone structures on the Don and Dnieper Rivers of the eastern European plain. This rich zone suffers the drawback of excavations carried out in different times with different strategies and models. Her recent work argues that careful attention may permit a more complete recovery of Upper Paleolithic lives without the biases intro-

duced by the application of extraneous ethnographic cases to archaeological data.

The last article on mammoth bone sites, by Janusz K. Kozlowski, addresses once more the question of natural accumulation vs. anthropogenesis. Applying data from a Gravettian site, Krakow-Spadzista Street, currently under excavation, he reviews the case for human deposition. Evidence indicates that people exploited mammoths in various ways and in different temporal periods. The earlier levels show, through lithics and cut marks, that larger pieces of mammoth were butchered, while other bones suggest that carrion was transported to the area. Later depositions that contain fewer lithics and bones seem to denote short-term camps. In sum, the presence of mammoth bones came about through human action, not for house building but for consumption.

In one of the longer chapters, Nigel Goring-Morris and Anna Belfer-Cohen describe people in the Levant ca. 42k to10k bp. This temporal sequence covers the Upper Paleolithic into the Natufian. The authors point out that long-term occupancy in the region by no means progresses evenly for the shift from a hunting and gathering stage into one with fixed settlements. For one thing, the size of circular structures ranges from those too small to those too large for a nuclear family. For another, the archaeological data show people responding to the stresses of sedentary life—more people in less space—by experimenting with various living arrangements and equally varied practices for burying the dead, a continued presence within the community. This contribution is one of the most nuanced in its interpretation(s).

COMPARING LIVING STRUCTURES IN EURASIA

The second group of chapters is oriented to regional and site reviews and begins with a regional survey of Portugal's Côa Valley, a World Heritage site. Authored by Thierry Aubry, François-Xavier Chauvière, Xavier Mangado Llach, and Jorge David Sampaio, this intriguing chapter identifies the sources of flint utilized at this site, which is famous for its rock engravings of Pleistocene fauna. Some lithic raw material comes from the surrounding 12 sq. km, still others from a region of 500-2000 sq. km, and the remaining from an even greater distance. Despite the absence of faunal remains, these lithic data intimate a seasonal ebb and flow of different groups moving in and out of the valley, constituting something of an interaction sphere though time.

At the Grotte de Fumane (Lessini Mountains in Italy), Alberto Brogolio et al. concentrate their discussion on the early Aurignacian habitation of the cave (34k–32k bp). They address the particularities of the Aurignacian occupation including flint sources, tool types, and subsistence strategies, which include Mediterranean shellfish. Having dealt with the subject at length in other publications, here the authors have relatively little to say about the underlying Middle Paleolithic (38k–34k bp), except to reiterate the sharp displacement of the Middle Paleolithic Neandertals by the Upper Paleolithic Aurignacian modern humans.

From two decades of work at the massive Magdalenian site at Pincevent, France, Michèle Julien contributes substantially to the interpretation of the area first brought to the world's attention by Leroi-Gourhan's excavations. The author distinguishes among the 80 or so hearths, for example, the personal spaces of the interior domestic habitation zone versus the more peripheral jumble of scattered refuse associated with public spaces.

In his chapter, Harald Floss compares the open-air settlements of the Middle Rhine Valley with the well-known cave habitations in the archaeological-rich Swabian Jura area. People lived successfully in both regions throughout the Upper Paleolithic. Using a three-page table, for instance, he contrasts the manner in which the two sites are situated in their surrounding environmental zones. The most important distinction is location of suitable raw material. Here, people choosing a site for open-air settlement have the advantage of taking that factor (raw material sources) into consideration, while cave sites severely limit the options people have because caves are fixed locations in the landscape. The use of open-air settlements suggests a growing sense of human control over natural features.

In a short, packed overview of the Gravettian settlement of Moravia, Jiří Svoboda stresses the internal hierarchy of particularly large sites. In addition, he warns that intensive human occupation itself may destroy the temporal integrity of excavation levels. Using experimental archaeology, his research team constructed circular huts, and Svoboda reports in the most noncommittal, cryptic manner that the "dwellings were occupied during the winter."

Returning to Moravia, this time to the Magdalenian, Martin Olivia opines that the relatively quick spread of the Magdalenian people along the watercourses in the Moravian Karst indicates a expanding system of communication that allowed people to more effectively exploit natural resources.

In a brief report, Vasile Chirica, Ilie Borziac, and Mădălin Vãleanu summarize their work and that of others on the Aurignacian and Gravettian periods in the Carpathians and along the Dniester River. The Gravettian levels had far more hearths and workshops, with the latter showing greater specialization. The difference between the two periods may in part be due to the Gravettian floors overlaying and thereby destroying the earlier Aurignacian strata, but also without a doubt, the richness of the Gravettian reflects greater activity of an increasing population in the region.

In the adjacent region of the Desna Valley, Valentina Beliaeva revisits the Pouchari 1 site, one of several that dot the valley, and which M.-J. Roudinskii, the famous Ukrainian archaeologist, unearthed in the early 1930s. The site dates from 21k–19k bp. In general, the author concludes that occupation of the site was brief, the evidence of sustained hunting is limited, and the site has little in the way of specialized tools.

The volume closes with an account of the Upper Paleolithic in Siberia. In his short report on these far reaches of the Late Paleolithic, Sergey A. Vasil'ev cautions that in

many cases the presence of dwellings is not without controversy. With such cautions in mind, however, he identifies several sites during Late Upper Paleolithic in the region of Lake Baikal and the upper Yenisey River. Often these are circles, or ovoids of slabs, presumably placed to anchor in place the hides covering the house poles. In some sites, one can spot the remains of hearths in more or less the center of the enclosures, however, in other examples, a single hearth is located asymmetrically against one side of the circle, and in places, multiple hearths form a line within the apparent enclosure—hinting at the presence of a large social group. Ending his chapter on the same careful tone, Vasil'ev concludes that much remains to be done both in the number of sites excavated and in the quantitative analysis of spatial displays within the sites.

FINAL REMARKS

This volume effectively communicates the Upper Paleolithic Eurasian landscape, be it within a single site or a distribution of sites within a region. Implied, if not stated out right, the volume also provides perceptions about those groups who lived in the environment that they themselves built in Upper Paleolithic times. The volume's contributors accomplish this leap across time through interpreting the manner in which spatial displays as well as the objects themselves play against each other: the sites against the countryside, the hearths against the walls, the mirror image of mammoth bones in dwellings. The authors appear reluctant, however, to go to the next level of interpretation, that is, the experiential, emotional side. No doubt, many feel the reluctance is justified. Yet, Sarah Tarlow (2000), in her excellent examination, argues that if archaeologists and other students of material culture consider the social, communicative aspect of emotions, the path may be open to this next level and thereby enrich still further our understanding of the human presence in the Upper Paleolithic. In the meantime, the authors in this volume provide fellow professionals and those outside archaeology, such as this reviewer, with a comprehensive, in-depth view of the cultural geography of the Upper Paleolithic landscape.

REFERENCE

Tarlow, S. 2000. Emotion in Archaeology. *Current Anthropology* 41: 713–745.