

The Palaeolithic of the Balkans. Proceedings of the XV World Congress of the International Union for Prehistoric and Protohistoric Sciences (Lisbon, 4–9 September 2006), Vol. 17, Session C33

Andreas Darlas and Dušan Mihailović (eds.)
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Either for historical reasons or simply for a lack of research interests, the Balkans still remains a poorly documented and poorly understood region for the Paleolithic. Besides recent research in Croatia and a better documented record from Bulgaria and Greece, relatively little research has been conducted in the region. However, during the last decade the number of investigations has increased, and an occasion to share and review this current research occurred during the XVth UISPP Conference in Lisbon in 2006, in Session C33. This volume is a result of that session. The greatest number of papers deals with the record from Greece, which may reflect the fact that the most research in the region has been conducted in the south of the Balkans. Other papers deal with new results obtained from archaeological investigations in Croatia, Serbia, Macedonia, and one overview paper deals with the Upper Paleolithic in the Balkans as a whole. Eight papers report research on Lower/Middle Paleolithic periods and one covers the Middle-to-Upper Paleolithic transition, while research on the Upper Paleolithic is represented by three papers.

As one of the possible migration routes for the dispersal of archaic humans from Africa into Europe, the Balkans offers a good opportunity for finding human fossil material and Paleolithic sites documenting the early colonization of Europe. With this goal in mind, a survey project was organized in north-central Greece, and the paper by Harvati et al. gives preliminary results of the 2-year systematic survey of the Aliakmon river terraces that preserve Late Pliocene and Pleistocene fluvial sediments. Pockets of fossiliferous terraces are preserved within the main erosional system. Two localities yielded faunal remains, one corresponding to the Late Pliocene/Early Pleistocene and the other to the Middle Pleistocene. Only scarce surface finds of lithic material, concentrated in two localities, were collected, and these mainly show Lower Paleolithic affinities. Although limited, these results show the potential for discovering such finds in the region.

Apostolikas and Kyparissi-Apostolika present the results of a survey of the shores of the artificial Lake Plastiras (Western Thessaly) where archaeological material was exposed as a result of water level fluctuations. The lake lies on a plateau that is located at 800m elevation and is connected with the lower plain by two gorges, a road still used today by the local pastoralists. Difficulties arise when an

attempt is made to interpret less than 200 surface finds with no precise stratigraphic context. These artifacts are compared with the other Middle Paleolithic site in Thessaly—Theopetra—with the conclusion being that the production of elongated blanks is characteristic for both of these sites. Any differences in raw material use, however, are hard to assess, since the assemblages are not comparable in terms of numbers and context. As the authors acknowledge, examining the seasonal settlement strategies between these close-by sites would be an interesting endeavor, but such questions could only be investigated with the excavation of sites at Lake Plastiras.

The paper by Sitlivy, Sobczyk, Karnakas, and Koumouzelis on the Middle Paleolithic industries of Klissoura cave presents an analysis of the lithic collection from the 2001–2006 excavations of one of the most impressive Middle Paleolithic sequences in the region. The preliminary results of the analysis of the inter-assemblage variability are presented based on a sample of almost 38,000 lithic artifacts coming from 14 Middle Paleolithic layers. The analysis is comprised of qualitative descriptions of major tool classes and their relative abundance throughout the levels. Besides apparent uniformity between the Middle Paleolithic layers, the only trends observed are the use of blade/bladelet core reduction in the lowermost layers and an increase in Upper Paleolithic type tools in the uppermost layers. Reasons for such homogeneity or causes of the changes among the industries in the sequence still remain to be explained and more detailed comparisons and interpretations within the broader framework of the Greek or European Middle Paleolithic would be a much appreciated addition.

Starting in 2003, investigations into the Paleolithic of Serbia yielded several new Middle Paleolithic sites which are presented in the paper by D. Mihailović. Different types of sites were discovered, such as temporary occupations at Hadži Prodanova Cave, and the richer in artifacts and multilayered sites of Petrovaradin and the Balanica Cave complex. In the lithic industries, several elements have been recognized, such as Charentian with Quina affinities, the use of quartz, Levallois technology, and certain bifacial elements. These elements show chronological ordering, as in Balanica, where Quina Charentian with quartz precedes Levallois Mousterian, while Charentian with Levallois and some bifacial implements overlap at Petrovaradin.

These elements are considered to be cultural phenomena, although their technological or typological differentiation is not clear. In this regard, distinction between two types of Charentian would be helpful; the one with a high percentage of scrapers and frequent Levallois technology, and Quina Mousterian with specific Quina core reduction and thick scrapers with scalariform retouch. Mihailović provides a tentative view on newly discovered lithic assemblages without trying to make a final interpretation of the meaning of this industrial variability and thereby leaving the window open for further regional or chronological differentiations.

Salamanov-Korobar presents the results of the first research on Paleolithic sites in Macedonia (FYROM) including systematic excavations of Golema Pesht cave, a multilayered site containing two Middle Paleolithic and two Upper Paleolithic layers. The industries of the former layers are made mostly of quartz with small Levallois cores and denticulate tools. One of the preliminary dates has an infinite age and the other is at ~47 ka C14 BP, thus it can be expected that these layers are even older. The author provides a lengthy overview of the neighboring Mousterian assemblages, but makes no final and definite conclusion on the place of Golema Pesht industry within the regional Paleolithic.

Three papers are dedicated to the environment and climate reconstruction during Neanderthal period occupations at Kalamakia cave (Peloponnese). Lebreton, Psathi and Darlas (in French) give preliminary results of palynological data, and compare these data with the fauna. They see two phases, one dry and one with pre-steppic Mediterranean forest. These data are used to infer the ages of the deposits with the most probable age being Oxygen Isotope Stages 3 and 4. Roger and Darlas present two papers, one on avifauna (in English) and one on microvertebrate remains (in French). The two papers follow a similar structure that includes a description of species with habitat information for each. None of these remains show signs of anthropic modifications or use, and the data are interpreted in paleo-environmental and paleo-climatic contexts. Both lines of evidence point to an open environment with a dry and temperate climate, which is in accordance with the pollen data. It still remains unresolved what the Neanderthal subsistence was within this environment, and more faunal analysis, as noted in the palynology paper, needs to be done in order to advance this subject.

One paper deals with the Middle-to-Upper Paleolithic transition period. Brajković and Miracle look at the archeozoological data of Vindija cave, a site well known for its significance in discussions concerning this period. Nevertheless, in spite of obstacles existing as a result of limitations in the excavation methods and subsequent curation conditions, they manage to address questions of ungulate faunal composition, agents responsible for accumulation of the fauna, and potential differences in subsistence practices of Neandertals and modern humans. One of the major conclusions of this work is that the shift in subsistence activities is mainly related to local ecological factors rather than to a

shift in the use of the cave by the two different hominins.

Another faunal study, by Kotjabopoulou, examines three Upper Paleolithic sites in the mountainous region of Epirus (NW Greece) with dates ranging from circa 25–9ka C14 BP. This study aims to reconstruct the land use and mobility patterns in a landscape that is often considered as a marginal and “difficult to deal with” environment. Looking at taphonomy, species representation, transport and seasonality, she infers that different variants of high mobility strategies were employed. Working within a framework that is seldom seen in archeozoological studies, one that considers that subsistence not only follows the rules of costs and benefits but is a social institution as well, she concludes that these differences in levels and kinds of mobility are not a mere response to any economic variables but rather reflect distinct cultural traditions.

Darlas and Psathi’s paper (in French) presents new data from six sites discovered on the Mani peninsula of the southern Peloponnese. While one of them has Aurignacian and Gravettian industries, the other sites mainly contain Gravettian/Epigravettian artifacts. These first insights into the lithic industries and faunal assemblages are encouraging for future investigations of the region, especially given that these six sites are among 50 caves, found during the initial survey, that contain Pleistocene deposits.

Being the first Gravettian site in the central Balkans, Šalitrena Cave is an excellent reference site for the region. A paper by B. Mihailović introduces the preliminary results of excavations in 2004 and gives a first insight into the Gravettian industry. This industry is most probably dated to the advanced period of Gravettian, between 25 and 21 ka C14 BP. Even though it is geographically closer to Gravettian in the Eastern Balkans (e.g., Temnata Dupka and Kozarnika), it shows more similarities with Willendorf II in Austria. Besides this, the author is still cautious about making further inferences about these similarities as more analysis is to be done. Kozłowski’s paper, however, takes a broader look at the Upper Paleolithic in the Balkans, and more specifically at the replacement of the Aurignacian by industries with backed bladelets and at how the Gravettian industries of the Balkans relate to such industries in the Middle Danube region. Following a more culturally focused approach, Kozłowski sees no environmental factors that can affect the end of the Aurignacian type industries and the emergence of the Gravettian. According to his view, there are no phylogenetic relationships between these industries, they differ in technology, with the Gravettian placing importance on double-platform cores; they show differences in the intensity of site use; and, lastly, they overlap chronologically over a long time span. With all this taken together, the Gravettian appears to be an intrusive element in the region. A chronological ordering of the Gravettian industries in the Balkans (29–28 ka BP and a later phase 24–18 ka BP) and in the Middle Danube (27–25 ka BP) suggests that the Balkan area served as a refugium for the Middle Danube Gravettian during the cold phases. Later on, early Epigravettian with shouldered points emerged in the Balkans and Adriatic area, apparently coming from the Middle Danube

as well. Despite the major interpretation that Kozłowski's paper offers, it still lacks more evidence and discussion of certain aspects, such as more data on the role of the environment in these processes or support for the chronological overlap between Aurignacian and Gravettian.

Readers interested in an up-to-date and state-of-the-art presentation of Paleolithic research in this area, which up to now has been poorly documented, will find this volume useful as it gives insights into the most recent research. Most of the papers present new data with only preliminary analysis, emphasizing the potential significance of sites/finds rather than providing full interpretation within a wider context. The analysis presented is not always fully integrated into the existing data set and some papers lack a definite conclusion on the place of the Balkans in the broader European picture. As the volume has as its goal to provide reports rather than the larger ambition of producing major conclusions on paleoanthropology or archaeology, this should not be seen as a fault. The BAR series is a place for publishing site report types of papers, and in that

way the volume fulfills a definite need. Moreover, most of the papers, even though of a preliminary character, present a solid, in-depth analysis of the material. The volume also sends a message of awareness about what the region has to offer and provides some expectations of more extensive research in the future. Among the site reports and their rigid and modest style, the paper by Kotjabopoulou stands out, given its discourse that brings in socioeconomic and cultural landscape topics.

Considering the fact that not many authors are native English speakers, the volume's prose is satisfactory, yet certain papers could benefit from additional English proof-reading. Furthermore, the volume needed some slight editing for a few typos and spelling errors, while most of the illustrations and photos are satisfactory. Certain papers lack maps or the topographic position of sites and areas and/or stratigraphic sections of the sites. Apart from these shortcomings, one will find in this volume much-needed information on the state of investigations into the Paleolithic of this less well known part of Europe.