New Research on the Middle and Upper Palaeolithic of Western Ukraine

Philip Nigst (Division of Archaeology)

Modern human dispersal into Eurasia, its relation to Neanderthal extinction, and the Middle to Upper Palaeolithic transition, are some of the liveliest debated issues in Palaeolithic archaeology. The first appearance of Early Upper Palaeolithic technocomplexes (e.g. Aurignacian and Bohunician) is of crucial importance for the discussion about the timing and nature of the Neanderthal replacement debate.

The Middle Dniestr Valley Survey Project, directed by Philip Nigst and Larissa Koulakovska (Museum of Archaeology, Institute of Archaeology, Kiev) is designed to contribute to this debate by focusing on the Middle and Upper Palaeolithic of western Ukraine. In 2011–2012 we conducted two field seasons surveying along the Dniestr river. The survey work resulted in an inventory of newly discovered Middle and Upper Palaeolithic sites from which we collected micromorphology, pollen and radiocarbon samples. Test-pits and sections have been excavated at three sites to explore their potential for future work. New fieldwork at the site of Beregovo I (Transcarpathian region, western Ukraine) was begun by Philip Nigst and Vitaly Usik (Museum of Archaeology, Institute of Archaeology, Kiev) in 2010 and has been focusing on enlarging the collection of lithics, and providing an environmental and chronostratigraphic background for the archaeology at the site. In total, about 20 sq.m have been excavated so far. The lithic collection is characterized by a rich bladelet/micro-blade collection, some of them Dufour bladelets, pointing towards a Proto-Aurignacian. Samples for dating and reconstruction of environment are in the processing stage.

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Nomads and Farmers in Medieval Hungary

Susanne Hakenbeck (McDonald Institute)

Being on the western fringe of the great Eurasian steppes, the Carpathian basin has been a gateway into Europe since the Bronze Age. Due to its comparatively small size and ecological variability, it was not suitable for large-scale nomadic pastoralism; nevertheless, horse-based nomadic populations, from the Scythians to the Mongols, were repeatedly drawn to the area by the portable wealth and luxury items that could be obtained from the elites of the Mediterranean. The Hunnic migrations in the fourth and fifth centuries AD — widely characterized as an influx of aggressive ‘Barbarian hordes’ — have long been credited with bringing about the end of the Roman Empire. However, the reasons for their movements are poorly understood, and little archaeological research has been done that questions the widely accepted narrative.

Thinking of practice as the basis of social identity, this project examines changes in subsistence economies — nomadic-pastoralism or farming — over the lifetimes of individuals in different populations from across the late Roman frontier zone. In collaboration with Dr Tamsin O’Connell and Dr Erzsébet Főthi (Hungarian Natural History Museum), I am using stable isotope analysis together with an analysis of burial practice to investigate whether widely held concepts are supported by new scientific data, or whether the reality was more complex. Could a farmer be buried as a Hun? Could a pastoralist be given a Roman burial?

The project is funded by the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research.