Neanderthal occupation of Altai Mountains in the Late Middle Paleolithic.

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Abstract

In recent years, the Altai Mountains became a focus area for prehistory, as it was shown that several groups of hominins such as the Denisovans, Neanderthals and anatomically modern humans coexisted in the Late Pleistocene. However, so far there is no archaeological, palaeontological or palaeoanthropological evidence for the character of the possible interactions between these groups. Neither do we have clear evidence for possible consequent or phased occupation by the same human populations of different contemporary sites in the Altai. Our latest investigations have focused on filling this gap, and to correlate different occupation events at several sites likely settled by the same population of Neanderthals during MIS4 to MIS3 transition. To do this we conducted a comprehensive study of raw material procurement, hunting strategies, and tool manufacturing technologies at Chagyrskaya and Strashnaya caves, located in adjoining river valleys. The lithic industry from Chagyrskaya cave were interpreted to be a part of the "Sibiryachikha" variant of the Middle Paleolithic that is very similar to the European Eastern Micoquian technocomplex and unlike any other Middle Paleolithic sites in Siberia. The Middle Paleolithic industries from Strashnaya cave were initially interpreted as a homogenous complex similar to one better known from the middle section of Denisova cave cultural sequence (Levalloisian). Our detailed techno-typological and spatial analyses of the Middle Paleolithic lithics from Strashnaya cave show that a short-term but obvious occupation of "Sibiryachikha" Neanderthals can be defined in the upper part of MP sequence of the cave. New data on Neanderthal contacts between Chagyrskaya and Strashnaya caves, combined with information from the Sibiryachikha (Okladnikov) cave excavated earlier, makes it now possible to address questions dealing with mobility patterns, landscape exploitation models, and subsistence strategies of the Altai Neanderthals. This study was supported by Russian Science Foundation (Project 14-50-00036)

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