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# Re-envisioning the Central Asian Epipaleolithic: changing interpretations and paradigms

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## Abstract

Bracketed by the Zagros, Hindukush, Altai, and Himalaya Mountains, Central Asia was a likely migration route for early peoples moving into North and East Asia. Because of its central geographic setting, the area also channeled cultural and technological influence and exchange between adjoining regions in early prehistory. Early studies of the technocomplexes of the Late Pleistocene – Early Holocene carried out in Central Asia during the 20th century suffer greatly from the absence of absolute dates. Soviet-era scholars relied primarily on typological reconstruction, classifying all sites from this period into supposedly synchronous Mesolithic (with geometric microliths) and Epipaleolithic (without geometric microliths) assemblages.

Our study reveals key similarities, suggesting that the Tutkaul, Obi-Kiik, Darai-Shur, Shugnou (l. 0), and Istiiskaya cave (l. 3–4) techno-complexes belong to a single Epipaleolithic culture – which we refer to as the Tutkaulian – split into a three-stage developmental sequence. We argue that the Tutkaulian, defined by bladelet technology and an abundance of geometric microliths, with a chronological progression from rectangle to lunate forms, has its origins in the local Upper Paleolithic culture (Kulbulakian) and emerged through repeated episodes of cultural exchange with earlier or synchronous Levantine and Zagros industries. Based on a series of radiocarbon ages from Istiiskaya cave (l. 3–4), Kulbulakian culture, we presume chronological frame for Tutkaulian to be 20–13 ka BP.

The analysis of the Obishir-5, 1, Oshhona, Istiiskaya cave (l. 2–1), Aygirjal-2, and Alamishik show the similar characteristics. Consequently, we define these industries as belonging to Obishirian culture. The dominance of narrow-faced and prismatic cores focused on manufacturing bladelets using pressure technique is noticeable. The tool assemblage is dominated by microblades retouched on ventral side as well as by a variety of end-scrapers the presence of borers points with unifacial and bifacial retouch made on flakes, and isolated specimens of backed bladelets is also observed. Based on a series of radiocarbon ages from the sites existed within a time span ranging from 13 ka BP to 7 ka BP.

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Here we propose to define two chronologically sequential Epipaleolithic cultures in Central Asia, between which there are no technological or typological similarities. It is evidenced for alternately occupation of the area by different human groups or gradual displacement of Tutkaulian by the Obishirian inhabitants in the Epipaleolithic. In both cases the previous Epipaleolithic model describing cohabitation of the region by two human groups must be rejected.

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