
New research on the Paleolithic of Kazakhstan: introducing the PALAEOSILKROAD project

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Abstract

Central Asia is a place of extreme environments and geography, featuring high mountains flanked by deserts. Several times during the Pleistocene, dramatic climate events exacerbated difficulties for animals and humans alike and may have influenced settlement patterns and dispersals. Beeton et al. (2014) proposed that continuous habitation in the steppe would have been virtually impossible during cold and dry periods, with people retreating to mountain foothills, whereas warmer and wetter periods would have led to population expansions. These ecological models suggest that the piedmont zone would lend itself to the most fruitful exploration for new sites. Moreover, it likely served as a dispersal pathway, much in the same way as during the time of the later Silk Road. We present here the research strategy and preliminary results of the 2017 campaign of the five year German-Kazakh PALAEOSILKROAD project. PALAEOSILKROAD aims to discover new sites in the Tian Shan, Dzungar, and southern Altai foothills in Kazakhstan and use them to examine if and how 1) humans were able to survive in the foothills throughout the last glacial cycle (ca. 110-11 500 years ago), with particular attention paid to the Last Glacial Maximum, and 2) how periodic advances of mountain glaciers in the Tian Shan, Dzungar, and Altai may have motivated dispersals, population segmentation, and behavioral adaptations. The first field campaign of 2017 focused on the reexcavation of the Upper Paleolithic site of Maibulak, as well as on survey in the Almaty province and in the East Kazakhstan province.

Keywords: Paleolithic, survey, dispersal, paleoclimate, settlement

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