
Neolithisation process and new cultural geography in Central Asia

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Abstract

In Central Asia, the time-span between the Final Pleistocene and the Early Holocene is marked by many sites, associated with various cultures, spread out all over the territory in different environmental contexts, from steppe areas in Kazakhstan to mountains valleys in Tajikistan, and through arid areas or plains in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. These sites are considered as "Mesolithic" or "Epipalaeolithic" according to their potential link with the previous Upper Palaeolithic traditions. Above all, they illustrate the emergence of a new cultural geography of Central Asia which will develop during the Neolithic and even the Eneolithic periods (7th-4th millennia BCE), as our research into the Neolithisation processes in Central Asia tends to demonstrate. Moreover, the technological analysis of lithic assemblages from these sites leads us to point out the crucial role of the appearance of new technics. The latter may arise from local innovation or proceed from different ways of acquisition (transmission, importation, imitation...). Two main networks of relationships can be identified – the Eastern-Western from the Far Eastern area to Central Asia, and the Northern-Southern within Central Asia and with some South Asian cultures – while significant cultural frontiers seem to appeared. The hypothesis of new peopling, as well as adjustment to new climatic change or environmental conditions, could be also discussed in the light of new studies. Central Asia is frequently viewed through the prism of two geo-cultural domains, the Steppes in the North and the Oases in the South, emphasizing two lifestyles: pastoral nomadism and sedentary farming respectively. We consider that this dichotomy took root during the Neolithisation processes, which emerged in Central Asia in different and original ways. The characterization of the new cultural geography of Central Asia, which takes place with Mesolithic and tends to stabilise with the development of Neolithic and Eneolithic complex societies, contributes to consider and explain this dichotomy from different angles, starting from Prehistory.

Keywords: Neolithisation, Central Asia, Lithic, Prehistory, Cultural geography

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