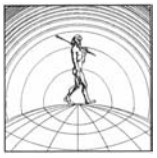

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EARLY PALEOLITHIC OF EURASIA: NEW DISCOVERIES

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NEW DATA ON THE EARLY PALEOLITHIC OF ARMENIA

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Since the time of J. de Morgan, who was the first to discover Paleolithic in Armenia (at the end of the XIX century), the search for the Early Paleolithic sites in the region has been rather passive. During a century five generations of archaeologists restricted themselves with collecting surface finds, represented by spectacular Upper Acheulean artifacts made of obsidian. These works were carried out in Central Armenia only, in the areas with outcrops of high quality obsidian, near the volcanic cones of Arteni, Atis, Gutansar, etc.

In 2003-07 the Armenian-Russian archaeological expedition headed by S.A. Aslanyan worked in the medium-altitude mountains of the Lori area in the north of the Armenian volcanic upland. The discoveries done in the course of this work have sharply extended our knowledge of the early prehistory of Armenia. A new area rich in raw materials has been found: local Acheulean industries were based on volcanic rocks like dacite and andesite. The surface finds, while being as numerous as they are in central Armenia, included not only Upper Acheulean tools, but also much more archaic forms. Finally, stratified Acheulean sites have been found for the first time in Armenia.

Both surface and stratified occurrences were found in the environs of dacite outcrops at the foot of the eastern slope of the Djavakhetsky ridge, near the villages of Blagodarnoe, Noramut, Dashtadem, Pahgahpyur. The collection of surface finds is dominated by Upper Acheulean handaxes and Levallois products, but there is also a number of conspicuous archaic forms, including big massive handaxes without any traces of fine retouching on their edges, primitive pick-like forms, large chopping-cutting tools on plates, as well as unusual big beaked tools. These artifacts are of clear pre-Upper Acheulean appearance. They represent the first evidence for the presence of much older Acheulean industries in the southernmost part of the Caucasus.

Even more important is the discovery of stratified Acheulian sites, including both single-layer (Dashtadem 3) and multilayer (Muradovo, Kurtan) ones. The site of Dashtadem 3 (1902 m above sea level) yielded Upper Acheulean of the Levallois facies. The artifacts were confined to a thick (up to 1 m) layer with traces of soil formation and formed a compact accumulation. The area of 30 square meters excavated by E.M. Kolpakov gave over 2500 artifacts represented by various tools (including 49 handaxes) and numerous waste products.

Muradovo (1649 m above sea level) is a multilayer site, discovered due to the fact that the Pleistocene deposits containing Acheulean artifacts have been washed out by a recent streamlet. The excavations conducted by V.P. Liubin and

E.V. Belyaeva exposed these deposits for the depth of 3 m, revealing 6 lithological layers. Layers 1-2 yielded Upper Acheulean materials of the Levallois facies; layer 3 gave an Acheulean assemblage which appears to be somewhat less developed (non-Levallois flaking, presence of choppers alongside with handaxes and side-scrapers); and layers 4-5 gave single artifacts of an even more archaic type: a chopper, a pick, a core-like end-scraper (fig. 1).

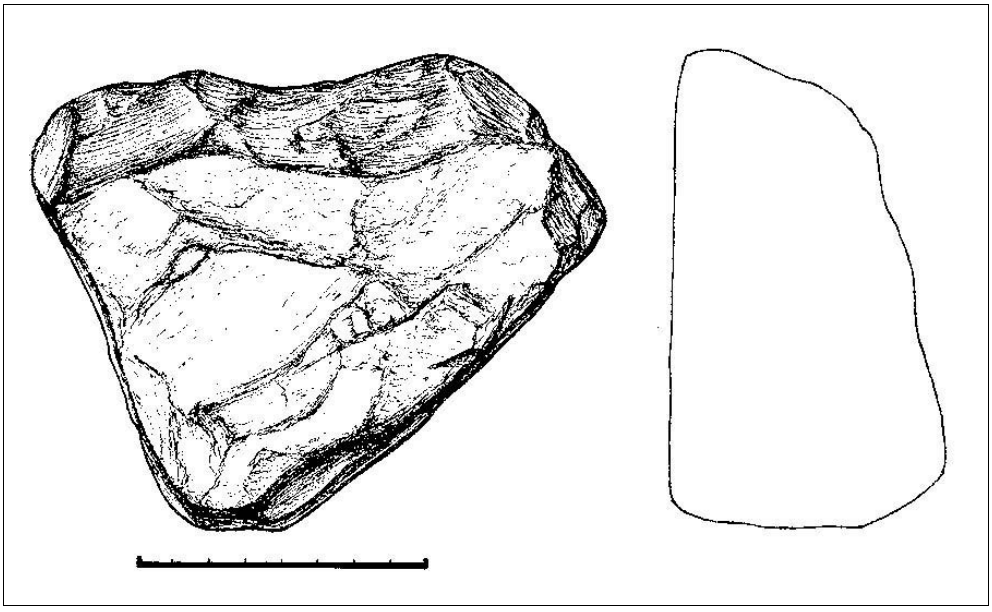

Fig. 1. Muradovo, layer 5 – core-like scraper

Kurtan is situated in the southeastern corner of the Lori plateau (about 1300 m above sea level). This is a vast clay-sand quarry, revealing 15 m of Pleistocene deposits underlain with doleritic basalts (as in Dmanisi). A step-like probe done in 2007, exposed 5 m of these deposits and revealed 7 lithological horizons. Two of them gave artifacts of the Acheulean aspect made of local rhyolite.

In addition, the expedition explored the environs of the Nurnus village in Central Armenia, where the Early Pleistocene faunal remains (Etruscan rhinoceros, late hipparion) confined to diatomic sediments overlain with a basalt flow were found in the 30es-40es of the last century. Some very archaic tools were found in an old diatomic quarry. They include a chopper and a core of opoka, as well as a core-like scraper and a pick of basalt). This discovery shows that traces of early hominid presence in Armenia should be sought for even in the deposits buried under lavas.