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Short articles



FIGURATIVE AND DECORATIVE ART OF KOSTENKI: Chronological and Cultural Differentiation

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The modern model of the differentiation of Kostenki' group of Palaeolithic sites (Voronezh district, Russia), based on the new excavation of last decade, consist of four chronological groups:

- Initial Upper Palaeolithic (IUP: 42-29 ka) included two cultural unities: Spitsyanean and assemblage of Kostenki 14 (cultural layer IVb);
- Early Upper Palaeolithic (EUP: 36-32 ka), structure of which is typical for European EUP as an association of Aurignacian and local "transitional" (here Streletskian) culture;
- Early Middle Upper Palaeolithic (eMUP: ~28 ka) identification of which is connected with Gravettian appearance, but in Kostenki together with Gorodtsovian;
- particular East European cultural unity, unknown in the West;
- recent Middle Upper Palaeolithic (rMUP: 23-20 ka) as an association of Gravettian of 5 varieties and series of cultural traditions of non-Gravettian attribution.

The backgrounds for cultural differentiation of Kostenki Palaeolithic, as everywhere, are technological features of lithic assemblages. But theirs others components (bone assemblages, dwellings constructions, arts...) do not coincide or not always with cultural entities, based on lithics. The principal aim of this paper is the attempt to order the objects of figurative and decorative arts including personal ornaments in theirs relation to traditional lithic-based cultural unities.

25 cultural layers of 15 Kostenki' sites provide evidences of symbolic activity, which can be classified as:

1. undoubtedly figurative art objects;
2. sculptural artefacts of non-clear definitions;
3. personal ornaments objects from natural origin with holes for suspension are also included here;
4. decorations on tools, personal ornaments, artefacts of non-clear functions or fragments of bones, mammoth tusks and soft stones.

Arts of IUP group (42/?/-36 ka)

Two cultural unities of the most ancient chronological group – Spitsyanean (Kostenki 17, cultural layer II) and Kostenki 14, cultural layer IVb – provide a numerous series of ornamental objects. For lower cultural layer of Kostenki 17 these are perforated teeth of polar fox; suspensions on stone, fossil shells and belemnites. Assemblage of lower cultural layer of Kostenki 14 (Markina gora), quite differs from Spitsyanean according to technology and typological tool-kit, provides the more variable association of symbolic activity, including anthropomorphic sculptural object, bead on shell of Mediterranean origin (Columbelidae), decorative bone tool, series of flint tools with natural holes (figure). The most important for the last site is the association of figurative, ornamental and decorative arts at the most ancient manifestation of Upper Palaeolithic.



EUP. Aurignacian. Kostenki 14 (cultural layer in volcanic ash) 14C: 35 ka; Cal: ~ 40 ka bp

IUP stratum. 14C: 36-37 ka; Cal: ~ 41-42 ka bp

Kostenki 14 (cultural layer IVb)

Spitsyean
Kostenki 17 (c.layer II)



Kostenki: bone and art assemblages in chronological and cultural context.

Arts of EUP group (36-29 ka)

As everywhere in Europe EUP in Kostenki has bimodal structure, one component of which is Aurignacian of pan-European distribution; another is local variant of “transitional” industry-Streletskian.

Aurignacian assemblages (Kostenki 1, cultural layer III, ¹⁴C ~32 ka non Cal; Kostenki 14, cultural layer in volcanic ash, ¹⁴C 32-35 ka non Cal) provide a similar lithic inventory with Dufour bladelet of Roc-de-Combe variety, but different artistic associations. Common for both is the presence of beads on a local variety of fresh water shells Neretidae and perforated suspensions on polar fox’ teeth. Distinctions concern the most expressive part of personal ornaments: perforated sea shells and pointed decorations on bone fragments for Kostenki 1-III; for Kostenki 14 (layer in volcanic ash): a unique suspension on fossil and series of long beads on polar fox tubular bones, decorated by circular and spiral ornaments. Very important appears to be analyses of spatial distributions of the last kind of personal ornament: they were identified in the cultural layer XI (transitional) of Denisova cave (Altai), and some sites of west European Aurignacian (Isturitz, La Souquette, Les Cottés...).

Streletskian sites in contrast provide very poor decorative assemblages, the most important of which is the single perforated stone pendant from the cultural layer V of Kostenki 1 and cultural layer Ia of Kostenki 12.

Arts of the early MUP group (~28-29 ka)

As everywhere in Europe the beginning of Middle Upper Palaeolithic associates in Kostenki with appearance of Gravettian but in particular context together with Gorodtsovian, particular East European cultural entity.

Early Gravettian assemblage of the cultural layer II at Kostenki 8 (Telmanskaya st.) provide a very banal ornamental and decorative assemblage without particular objects and motives. In contrast Gorodtsovian sites provide very rich and diagnostic decorative assemblages. Gorodtsovian for the moment seems to be a variable cultural entity united according to numerous “Mousterian” component, non-Aurignacian and non-Gravettian affiliation and particular “fossil director” – large “shovels” made on mammoth bones with “nail-like” heads of the haft. The most numerous and variable collection of decorative objects comes from the cultural layer II of Kostenki 14 (Markina gora) which includes small beads and pendants of three varieties on mammoth tusk with drilled holes; a decorated point (fibula) with zoomorphic head; bone tools, mostly fragmented, decorated by complex bands of geometric ornament.

According to current stage of our knowledge, based mostly on series of radiocarbon dates, the break from 27 to 23–22 ka is put in evidence in Kostenki chronological sequences. After this break a number of recent Gravettian variants appear together with sites of non-Gravettian affiliation, in which artistic assemblages provide another stylistic and aesthetic system of values.

Conclusion

1. Objects of sculptural, ornamental and decorative arts appear together at the most ancient manifestation of East European Upper Palaeolithic (IUP stratum) in the cultural layer IVb of Kostenki 14.

2. In general, all kinds of art are in good accordance with cultural unities defined on lithic backgrounds, in contrast to cultural entities of more recent Palaeolithic epochs, where the situation is more complex and complicated.





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