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PLEISTOCENE ART OF THE WORLD

Short articles



## AN OVERVIEW OF ASIAN PALAEOART OF THE PLEISTOCENE

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A survey of the present state of secure knowledge of Pleistocene palaeoart in the continent of Asia indicates firstly that, in comparison to Europe, this subject has been severely neglected; and secondly, that the known geographical distribution and the paucity of credible instances are the result of such factors as the intensity of research activities and taphonomic factors. The only reasonably informative data derives from a very few areas where research has been focused, and the nature of the Pleistocene finds illustrates significant taphonomic bias. Whereas the rise of Asian and African palaeoanthropology was rendered possible by the rejection of the Piltdown fake evidence, no such revolution has occurred in the Pleistocene palaeoart of these continents. Clearly palaeoart has been created in Asia since Lower Palaeolithic times, but even its Upper Palaeolithic component is entirely inadequate to draw any justified conclusions.

The portable palaeoart from central Siberia includes the 33 human-like figurines from Mal'ta and Buret'; the 13 flying-bird pendants from Mal'ta plus one specimen from Buret'; three more bird pendants; 5 nailshaped pins and further decorative items. Four sites have provided perforated disc beads (Afontova Gora II, Krasnyi Yar, Buret' and Mal'ta) and perforated animal teeth have been reported from Verkholskaya Gora and Afontova Gora II. Incised engravings on portable objects are usually geometric (Mal'ta, Oshurkovo, Afontova Gora II, Afontova Gora III, Irkutsk Hospital, Voennyi).

Altogether, more than 100 palaeoart or art-like finds have been reported from Siberia, including from 5 sites on the Angara/Belaya river (Buret', Krasnyi Yar, Ust'-Kova and Verkholskaya Gora), 8 on the upper Yenisey (Afontova Gora II, Afontova Gora III, Maininskaya, Dvouglaзка Cave, Tachtik, Kokorevo, Novosselovo and Atchinskaya), 2 sites on the upper Ob river (Ust'-Kanskaya and Denissova Cave), 2 from south of Lake Baikal (Oshurkovo and Tolbaga), 1 on the Irtysh River (Cherno-Ozer'e), and another from the mouth of the Indigirka river (Berelekh). The animal head carved on a projection of a second vertebra of a woolly rhinoceros from Tolbaga is one of the oldest naturalistic sculptures known in the world. Only 2 apparently figurative two-dimensional images are known from the Pleistocene of all Asia: the "mammoth" engravings found on a juvenile mammoth tusk from Berelekh and on a perforated ivory plaque from Mal'ta. Of interest are also the stone and bone beads from Strashnaya Cave (Tolbor) and the perforated ostrich eggshell from Podzvonkaya.

Only one specimen of intricately produced palaeoart has so far been reported from China, the engraved deer antler fragment from Longgu Cave, Hebei Province. It is directly dated to  $13065 \pm 270$  BP. Simpler examples of palaeoart from China include over 120 perforated objects and 5 polished tubular sections made from long bones of a large bird species from the Upper Palaeolithic of the Zhoukoudian Upper Cave; and from the Shiyu site an older fragment of a stone disc. Early palaeoart is also scarce in Japan, limited to a drilled stone disc from the Debari site; a polished triangular stone object from the Deguchi Kane-zuka site; and the engraved kokeshi pebbles from Kamikuroiwa rockshelter.



Distribution of known Pleistocene palaeoart finds in Asia.

Pleistocene rock art from Asia has only been demonstrated in India so far: 11 Lower Palaeolithic petroglyphs in Auditorium Cave, the central site of the vast Bhimbetka rock art complex; and the 530 cupules in Daraki-Chattan Cave, safely dated to an Oldowan-like Lower Palaeolithic occupation layer overlain by Acheulian deposits. The Indian Upper Palaeolithic has yielded an engraved ostrich eggshell fragment from Patne, about 25 000 years old, and 3 beads of the same material, from Bhimbetka and Patne. The grooved animal teeth from Billa Surgam III were probably also beads.

The modified scoria pebble from the Acheulian of Berekhat Ram in Israel is one of the two earliest protofigurines known, being more than 233 000 years old. Two probable disc beads from Gesher Benot Ya'aqov are also of the Acheulian. More recent is a chert artefact with apparent markings from the Mousterian of Quneitra. The incised bones of Kebara Cave are also of the Mousterian. The Upper Palaeolithic of the Levant has provided several palaeoart finds, and some linear engravings in caves of Mount Carmel have been attributed to it. Portable finds provide more reliable evidence, such as those excavated in Hayonim Cave. They comprise an engraved bone fragment, perforated animal teeth, and a limestone slab that is engraved on both sides.

Another limestone cobble, from Urkan-e-Rub and dated to between ca. 19 000 and 14 500 BP , bears complex geometric arrangements of engraved lines. The region's Natufian tradition has yielded figurines, beads, pendants and decorated sickle hafts from one of the Mt Carmel sites, the El-Wad Cave. Other Natufian finds include pestles of presumed phallic shapes from some sites, including Kebara Cave, which also produced an engraved limestone slab; a presumed sculpture from Ain Sakhri Cave; another stone figurine from Wadi Hammeh; and a long bone object decorated on both ends from Nahal Oren.

The map showing the distribution of the known occurrences across Asia suggests that the two minor site concentrations, in central Siberia and the Levant, coincide with regions that have witnessed concerted archaeological efforts.





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