Fieldnotes From the 2003 Russian Far East Archaeological Expedition

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In August 2003, I had the pleasure of participating in the Russian Far East Archaeological Expedition of the Far Eastern National University, Vladivostok (Fig. 1). This joint Russian-Japanese project is shedding new light on the Upper Paleolithic and early Neolithic cultures of the Maritime Region (Fig. 2). Like archaeological field projects elsewhere, the expedition serves to uncover new discoveries from the distant past and as field training for young scholars at regional universities. As the sole American working in this joint Russian-Japanese expedition, I learned not only a great deal about the past of the region, but also of working with two contrasting cultures of the modern world.

In 2003, fieldwork was concentrated at two sites along the Illistaya River Basin. The first site, Gorbatka-3, was adjacent to our field camp (Fig. 3). Gorbatka-3 has an Upper Paleolithic occupation that dates to around 13,000-11,000 years before present and a Neolithic occupation that dates to around 8,000-6,000 years before present. The Gorbatka-3 site is located on an ancient ridgeline facing south and overlooking the Illistaya River basin. The view from the site is incredible and would have been a strategic location for monitoring large game movements along the valley floor (Fig. 4).

Located along the ridge top, the Gorbatka-3 site has witnessed very little deposition of new sediments over the millennia resulting in very shallow and disturbed cultural deposits. Vertical stratigraphy of the archaeological deposits is negligible and disturbance from roots, ice wedges, animals, and of course humans, has essentially erased whatever vertical separation may have existed in the past. However, the site is extremely rich in artifacts. In a single 1 x 1-meter excavation unit, I encountered nearly a complete assemblage of Upper Paleolithic stone tools. These included obsidian microblades, microblade cores, bipolar cores, scrapers, blades, and utilized flakes (Fig. 5). Bipolar cores are common and are simply small river gravels that were struck by a hammerstone while resting on a stone anvil to produce flakes for cutting and scraping tasks. Microblade and flake tools are the most common tool types due to the small fist-sized gravels of obsidian that were collected along streams in the nearby mountains.
added to that list: Boris Starostin, Director of the Kraevedenia Research Institute, Far Eastern National University; Anatoly Kuznetsov, Chair of Social Anthropology, Far Eastern National University; Alexander Krupyanko, Far Eastern National University; Tatsuo Kobayashi, Kokugakuin University, Tokyo; Shinji Ito, Kokugakuin University, Tokyo; Natsuyo Sakanashi, University of Tokyo, Japan; to name only a few.

The 2004 Expedition planned to move to the Zirkalnaya River Valley to explore other early sites in the region. But with the arrival of “Baby Gillam #2” in August 2004, the fieldwork was postponed for another time. As they say in the football program, “There’s always next year!” and I plan to join my friends and colleagues again in 2005. In the interim, I’ve been working on improving the geographic models of obsidian trade during the Upper Paleolithic Period and begun a new modeling project with colleagues on the distribution of early populations throughout Asia. None of these efforts would have been possible without the kind support of the Paleoethnographic Research donors. Thanks for your continued support!

Anonymous Donors - Thank You!
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Private donations are being sought for ongoing research on the Upper Paleolithic of the Russian Far East. This research seeks to shed new light on cultures that may be ancestors of those that migrated to North and South America during the last Ice Age. If you would like to assist this research, a tax-deductible donation can be made payable to the USC Educational Foundation to support this research. Please note “Paleolithie Research” on any contributions and send c/o Chris Gillam, SC Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of South Carolina, 1321 Pendleton Street, Columbia, SC 29208; gillam@sc.edu; (803) 777-8044.

Fig. 7: Japanese excavations at the Osinovka site. (Photo courtesy of Christopher Gillam)

Fig. 8: View from the Osinovka site; sparsely vegetated borrow pit is in the foreground. (Photo courtesy of Christopher Gillam)

Fig. 9: Singing the night away during the August 15th celebration. (Photo courtesy of Christopher Gillam)

Fig. 10: View from the Osinovka site; sparsely vegetated borrow pit is in the foreground. (Photo courtesy of Christopher Gillam)