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STONE AGE RESEARCH IN THE QO‘SHRABOT DISTRICT IN 2024

O‘ng‘alov Lazizbek Amiriddin o‘g‘li
Doctoral Student, Year 3,Samarkand State University.

ABSTRACT

This article presents the results of Stone Age research conducted by the Department of Archaeology at Samarkand State University in the Nurata mountain ranges. Over the past five years, research in this region has entered a new phase, with activities by the research team focused on this transformation. As a result of these investigations, several Neolithic archaeological sites and findspots have been identified. The article also discusses newly discovered Neolithic and Paleolithic sites.

KEYWORDS: *Nurata mountain range, Neolithic, Paleolithic, Zardolisoy, Ganam finds, Olmaliqsoy finds, blade, microblade, debris, Minishkor.*

INTRODUCTION

Research on Stone Age archaeological sites in Uzbekistan has entered a new phase. The discovery of previously unknown Stone Age monuments during this period supports this assertion. One such newly explored region is the Nurata mountain range. Until recently, there were no recorded Stone Age finds from the parts of the Nurata range located within the Qo‘shrabot district. The Nurata mountain ranges, with their rich mountainous ecosystems, have attracted human attention throughout history. The presence of water-abundant streams and plains in the region made it favorable for primitive communities transitioning to a stone-tool-based economy.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHODS

The first discovery of Stone Age materials in the territory of Qo‘shrabot district dates back to 2018, as a result of archaeological investigations jointly conducted by scholars from the Samarkand Institute of Archaeology and the Department of Archaeology at Samarkand State University (Avanesova N., Luno E., Ergashev O., Kholmatov A., 2020, pp. 12–20). In the following years, more comprehensive research was carried out by Stone Age archaeologists under the leadership of O.T. Ergashev, in collaboration with the Department of Stone Age Archaeology of the Samarkand Institute of Archaeology.

As a result of these studies, nearly 20 Neolithic sites and findspots were recorded in the region (Saifullaev B., Ungalov L., 2023, pp. 62–67). From 2023, limited excavations have been ongoing at the Neolithic site of Zardolisoy. Due to unfavorable weather conditions during the previous field season, excavation work was postponed to the following year (Saifullaev B.K., Ergashev O.T., Khoshimov Kh.B., Rajabov A.Yu., Berdikulov M.T., Ungalov L.A., et al., 2024, pp. 383–388).

The cultural materials of Stone Age communities in this area are considered promising for answering fundamental questions about the prehistory of Uzbekistan. This article focuses on the findings and outcomes of fieldwork conducted in 2024.

Modern cartographic techniques were utilized to delineate previously surveyed zones and to analyze the landscape using topographic maps. Previous research results were examined, and it was observed that only in the Zardolisoy Neolithic site were cultural layers—although disturbed—still yielding artifacts. In contrast, test pits (1x1 m and 1x2 m) dug at other findspots such as Ko‘rbuloq, Qumoloqli, and Ko‘kqovg‘a produced no finds, indicating that the cultural layers in these areas had been severely eroded or destroyed.

A.V. Vinogradov, in his research on Neolithic sites in the Khorezm region, proposed a conditional classification of sites based on the degree of preservation and erosion of their cultural layers, which proved practical for guiding methodological approaches. According to his typology, sites are divided into three categories:

Type I – Sites where the cultural layer was completely destroyed in antiquity, either due to immediate post-abandonment natural processes or early environmental factors. Such sites often retain only surface artifacts, mixed with aeolian sediments.

Type II – Sites where the cultural layer was relatively recently eroded. These often still contain partially preserved remains such as pottery fragments, bones, and traces of dwelling structures like hearths or pits.

Type III – Sites with partially preserved cultural layers, where archaeological conclusions based on surface materials can be verified through stratigraphic excavation.

Based on Vinogradov’s methodology, the Neolithic artifacts found in the Nurata mountain range are technologically and typologically synchronous with the Kaltaminor culture. Given the region’s mountainous setting and climatic similarity, this

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classification framework serves as an essential analytical basis for our research.

It is also important to note that, unlike the desert regions of Khorezm, many findspots in the Nurata range are still subject to modern human activity. This includes their continued use for seasonal grazing and agriculture, which complicates archaeological investigation.
Consequently, many of the sites we identified correspond to Vinogradov's **Type I** classification — locations where the cultural layers have been lost, and only surface finds remain.

Despite the lack of stratified contexts, conclusions can still be drawn based on surface materials. In analyzing these artifacts, we employed several key methodologies: M. Brezillon's **technical-typological** method, J. Pelegrin's **technological analysis of flint knapping**, and D.A. Timofeyev's framework for evaluating **mechanical erosion and physical alterations**.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

During the 2024 archaeological fieldwork season in the Qo'shrabot district, survey investigations were carried out in the areas of the Olmoliqsoy, Ho'kizto'ydisoy, Oqqo'rg'onsoy, and Qumoliqlisoy streams, as well as in the steppe regions of Ityemas, Qizilqosh, and Sassiqbuloq, located within the Minishkor and Pangat neighborhoods.

In 2018, during the initial field season, the first Paleolithic findings were identified in the Moykamar cave located in the Minishkor area (Avanesova N., Luno E., Ergashev O., Kholmatov A., 2020, p. 12–20). This discovery served as a foundation for continued research.
Minishkor and Pangat neighborhoods are located on the southern slopes of the northern Nurata mountain range, at the foothills of Jalpoq Mountain. The area of Minishkor lies at elevations between 800 and 1250 meters above sea level, at coordinates 40°40.565'N and 66°28'42.43"E.

As part of the 2024 investigations, 23 Paleolithic stone artifacts were collected for the first time from the Minishkor and Pangat areas, and GPS coordinates were recorded and mapped. The finds were located near previously identified Paleolithic sites from 2018. Based on preservation state and production techniques, the collected materials were divided into four assemblages (Saifullaev B.Q, Ergashev O.T., Imomov A.A., Rajabov A.Y., Ungalov L.A., et al., 2024, pp. 92–97).

As a result of archaeological surveys conducted between the villages of Minishkor and Pangat on the southern slopes of the northern Nurata mountains, for the first time in Uzbekistan, materials representing various stages of the Paleolithic were identified. It can be stated that the Nurata mountains were inhabited almost continuously throughout the entire Paleolithic.
During the Pleistocene epoch, as in other parts of Central Asia, the landscape of the northern Nurata mountains was wetter, more water-abundant, and richer in flora and fauna than today. This is evidenced by the presence of Quaternary deposits, workable stone raw materials, and the region's favorable paleogeographic conditions (open access to the Kyzylkum desert, nearby lakes, springs, and rivers). The attractiveness of the Nurata mountains' environment drew the attention of humans from the earliest periods of history. In recent years, very ancient and unique Paleolithic stone tools have been discovered in the area.

New Neolithic Sites Identified in the Qo'shrabot District

The Stone Age research in the Qo'shrabot district has provided the first significant data for exploring this stage of regional history. As previously mentioned, our team began investigations in 2018. In subsequent years, survey efforts expanded, resulting in the identification and mapping of several new sites, primarily located in the neighborhoods of Minishkor, Pangat, and Mullalim. Based on chronological and typological features of the finds, the sites have been attributed to the Neolithic period (Saifullaev B., Ungalov L., 2023, pp. 62–67).
In the 2024 field season, our surveys in the Minishkor area focused on springs and water sources. The objective was to determine the spread and possible connections between newly identified sites and the Zardolisoy site. Initial reconnaissance was conducted in April 2024, with participation from Samarkand State University scholars O.T. Ergashev, doctoral student L.A. Ungalov, and graduate student R.Q. Abduraimov.

During the survey, a new Neolithic site was documented in the Olmoliqsoy area. The following artifacts were collected: two flint blades characteristic of the Neolithic (brown flint), and one bifacial tool fragment made of quartz. The first blade measures 20×14×3 mm, with a flat striking platform and visible percussion bulb and scar. Its dorsal scars are parallel and unidirectional, while the ventral side shows micro-retouch along the lateral edges. The second blade (20×17×5 mm) lacks a preserved proximal end but has similar parallel dorsal scars and a slightly curved profile.
A second new site was recorded at Korizbuloq, a major spring in the village of Ganam, located about 3 km southeast of the Zardolisoy site. Here, two additional blades, one technical flake, and one debris fragment were collected from the surface. Based on raw material and technological features, the artifacts are consistent with those from nearby sites.

CONCLUSION

The role of Stone Age archaeology is indispensable in reconstructing the most ancient stages of human history—from the primitive era to the emergence of early production economies. The adaptation of early human communities to different environments was shaped through extensive migratory processes. Investigating and identifying traces of Stone Age cultures requires not only careful attention but also persistent and methodical fieldwork.

After nearly six years of field surveys, our research team has successfully identified traces of early Stone Age cultures in the Nurata mountain range. We employed both local knowledge and

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Geographic Information System (GIS) technologies to guide the search. Initial data collection involved gathering information from local residents about the region's geography, water sources, and landscape features, which was then supported by archival research and literature reviews. Field surveys followed, during which the exact coordinates of each site were recorded using GPS devices, and all measurements, conditions, and characteristics were logged.

Modern technologies enabled us to map the locations of the Stone Age sites in the Nurata region and visualize their chronological and cultural distribution. The analysis of the stone artifacts was conducted using the typological and technological methods developed by M. Brezillon, J. Pelegrin, and D.A. Timofeyev.

In conclusion, the northern Nurata mountain range was likely inhabited by representatives of Acheulean industries, most probably belonging to the second migration wave of Homo erectus from Africa. This settlement may date back to approximately 500,000–400,000 years ago and continued with minimal cultural change until around 300,000 years ago. Later, Middle and Late Paleolithic cultures from the Central Zarafshan valley reached this area. The Acheulean artifacts discovered here are among the oldest in all of Uzbekistan.

The wide distribution of Neolithic communities in the Nurata region is further confirmed by new findings. The anthropological remains from the Zardolisoy site are especially important for understanding the material culture and everyday life of the Neolithic populations of this mountainous region.

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