GETTING BACK TO BASICS:
A RESPONSE TO OTTE “COMMENTS ON MEZMAISKAYA”

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Marcel Otte recently argued (In “Comments on Mezmaiskaya, North Caucasus”, Eurasian Prehistory, this issue) that the Early Upper Paleolithic (EUP) at Mezmaiskaya Cave can be defined as Aurignacian (versus Golovanova et al., 2006). This raises an old methodological problem concerning the correct use of scientific terms and the definition of the Aurignacian. Lithic definitions such as Aurignacian and Gravettian, which were originally based on specific materials, have been rather more loosely applied to assemblages distant in time and space. We believe that the wider application of these original terms not only simplifies them by a subjective reduction of their primary determining attributes, but also confuses our understanding of cultural processes within and between various regions.

To get back to the basic definition of the Aurignacian, it is necessary to return to Sonneville-Bordes’ (1950) classic publication on this subject. Based on the original materials (Sonneville-Bordes, 1950: 146–150), the Aurignacian is defined as a blade industry – most tools are made on blades. Further, the Aurignacian toolkit is defined by the following characteristics: 20.5 to 72.7 percent endscrapers, between 7.1 and 35.0 percent Aurignacian scrapers (including typical carinated and nosed endscrapers), 28.9 to 43.0 percent burins, 4.0 to 34.4 percent retouched blades, and two types of bone points – split and beveled-base points. Bladelets with Dufour retouch are less common and do not occur not in all Aurignacian assemblages.

In comparing the new EUP assemblages from Mezmaiskaya Cave with coeval or slightly earlier industries (e.g., Chatelperronian, Uluzzian, Aurignacian, and Ahmarian), Golovanova (2000: 175) finds the Mezmaiskaya materials to be most similar to the Ahmarian tradition, and particularly the lithic assemblages from Abu Noshra and the Lagaman, dating between 30 and 35 ky BP (Gilead, 1991). This preliminary conclusion is based on the prevalence of micro-laminar (bladelet) debitage, a high percentage of tools made on bladelets (compared with 45.7 percent at Lagama), and a rather low representation (about 20 percent) of endscrapers and burins. It is important to note that only the later Ahmarian assemblages provided a basis for this comparison. Moreover, despite many similarities, the EUP industry from Layer 1C at Mezmaiskaya is not identical to the Ahmarian.

Ongoing excavations of EUP levels in Mezmaiskaya Cave now permit a more accurate comparison with the Ahmarian. Typical el-Wad points with fine lateral retouch, which are very characteristic of the Ahmarian assemblages from Lagama (Bar-Yosef and Belfer 1977: fig. 23) and Qafzeh Cave, layer E (Bar-Yosef and Belfer-Cohen 2004: figs. 11–12) are absent from Mezmaiskaya. By contrast, typical Gravette points with straight backs made by blunted retouch are the most common point type in the EUP levels at Mezmaiskaya (Fig. 1). Various bone tools, which are poorly represented in the Ahmarian (possibly due to poor bone preservation), are characteristic of the EUP of Mezmaiskaya. These tools include points, awls, needles (including eyed needles), and pendants made from ungulate teeth. Moreover, in layers 1B and 1A (dating from about 32 to 28 ky BP), bone tools with geometric ornamentation, plaque beads made from mammoth tusk, and pendants made from Black Sea seashells appear.

A comparison of flaking techniques also distinguishes the EUP of Mezmaiskaya from the Aurignacian. At Mezmaiskaya, bladelet and even
micro-bladelet production is more common than the large blade production typical of the Aurignacian. Contrary to assertions by Otte (this issue) and unlike the true Aurignacian in France, blades are relatively infrequent (~17 percent of laminar blanks) in the EUP of Mezmaiskaya (Golovanova et al., 2006: 65: fig. 21).

Otte comment (Eurasian Prehistory, this issue) also requires that we get back to the basics of the definition of Dufour retouch. J. Bouyssonie
Fig. 2. Backed bladelets from Mezmaiskaya Cave (Golovanova et al., 2006: fig. 22), and Dufour bladelets from Dufour Grotto (Brezillon, 1971: fig. 115) and Yafteh Cave (Otte et al., 2007: fig. 6)

(see Brazillon 1971: 266–267) first defined Dufour as a type of bladelet “finement retouchées, par retouches alternes”. We think that Otte reference to Dufour bladelets at Mezmaiskaya comes from an inappropriate redefinition of these pieces originally defined as backed bladelets (see Golovanova et al., 2006: fig. 22: 12–18). Following the original definition of J. Bouyssonie, bladelets with Dufour retouch are completely absent in Layer 1C at Mezmaiskaya, as are any bladelets with ventral retouch (fig. 2).

Otte identification (Eurasian Prehistory, this issue) of Arjeneh points at Mezmaiskaya (Golovanova et al., 2006: fig. 22: 1–11) is also not quite correct. Although, both Arjeneh points from Yafteh Cave (Otte et al., 2007: fig. 6: 1–3) and
points from Mezmaiskaya are made on bladelets, their retouching is essentially different. While retouch in the Yafteh assemblage is fine and semi-abrupt, it is more modifying and abrupt at Mezmaiskaya. Moreover, Arjeneh points are not a key component of the typical Aurignacian. On the contrary, some of these tools are similar to el-Wad points made on bladelets (Fig. 1), which are characteristic for the Levantine Ahmarian (e.g., Bar-Yosef and Belfer-Cohen 2004: figs. 11–12).

Of the Aurignacian components described by Otte, only endscrapers remain. Indeed, there are few Aurignacian-type endscrapers made on blades at Mezmaiskaya (Golovanova et al., 2006: fig. 23: 11). However, the majority of endscrapers in Layer 1C are made by semi-abrupt retouch on massive or technical flakes. No typical Aurignacian carinated or nosed endscrapers or husked burins are found in the EUP levels of the cave.

Among the bone tools from Mezmaiskaya cave, there are several types not characteristic of the Aurignacian. These include bone needles, pendants made from ungulate teeth or mammoth tusk, and bone tools with geometric ornamentation. Only one biconical bone point is nearly complete – all other points are broken. It is worth noting that biconical points occur not only in the Aurignacian, but also in the Gravettian assemblages in France (Sonneville-Bordes 1950). Moreover, according to Golovanova’s (2007) survey of the published data, only biconical projectile points are known from the Upper Paleolithic of the Caucasus. On the contrary, the split-base bone points so typical of the Aurignacian have not been found in this region.

Otte (Eurasian Prehistory, this issue) buttress their argument that Mezmaiskaya has an Aurignacian component by citing Russian and Ukrainian authors (Amirkhanov, 1986; Cohen and Stepanchuk, 1999) that claim to have identified the Aurignacian within the EUP of the Northern Caucasus. It is important to note, however, that both articles reach this conclusion based on materials from the old excavations in Kamennomostskaya Cave. The Aurignacian characteristics of this assemblage are the following indices: nearly 36.0 percent blades, 18.8 percent tools on large blades, 22.3 percent endscrapers and burins, and 2.3 percent blunted backed bladelets and points on bladelets (see Golovanova, 2000: 172). Excavation in Kamennomostskaya Cave was carried out more than 40 years ago, and the material is undated and seems to be non-homogeneous. Unfortunately, the cave and its deposits have been completely destroyed by a limestone quarry, and it is impossible to test the reliability of the published results.

By contrast, the modern excavations in Mezmaiskaya and Korotkaya caves (Blajko, 2007) have uncovered a very early (~32 ky) appearance of micro-blade (bladelet) lithic industries in the Northwestern Caucasus. Over the past 10 to 15 years, research in the Caucasus has essentially changed our understanding of the Upper Paleolithic in this region. In our opinion, modernization of excavation techniques has significantly contributed to this change. The careful documentation of micro-stratigraphical divisions and comprehensive application of sediment water screening have produced a whole range of micro-artifacts (both lithics and bone), which are completely absent in older collections.

It is clear, if we get back to the basics of the Aurignacian, that Layer 1C of Mezmaiskaya is not representative of this industry. Using such attributes as the presence of bone projectile points or of endscrapers on large blades with continuous flat retouch, some authors have expanded the

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### Table 1
Comparison of EUP lithic indices at Mezmaiskaya Cave, layer 1C and Yafteh Cave (calculations by Golovanova based on published data of Otte et al., 2007)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Blades/bladelets: Percent of total flakes</th>
<th>Bladelets: Percent of all tools on bladelets</th>
<th>Tools on bladelets: Percent of total tools</th>
<th>Endscrapers/burins: Percent of total tools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mezmaiskaya, Layer 1C</td>
<td>73.2</td>
<td>82.8</td>
<td>57.6</td>
<td>25.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yafteh Cave</td>
<td>79.7</td>
<td>69.4</td>
<td>66.7</td>
<td>19.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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definition of the Aurignacian – or rather, the Aurignacoid – to many Upper Paleolithic industries that are quite different from the typical Aurignacian of France. This broad definition masks important differences between localities and regions.

As in the Northwestern Caucasus, researchers studying the EUP of Georgia (particularly at Dzudzuana Cave and Ortvale Klde Rockshelter) also note the similarity of these assemblages to the Levantine Ahmarian, and reject their affiliation with the Aurignacian (Meshveliani et al., 2004; Bar-Yosef et al., 2006). Further, these authors point out the differences between the Georgian EUP and that at Mezmaiskaya by noting the higher percent of blunted backed bladelets at the latter site.

Thus, we can conclude that the EUP assemblages from Mezmaiskaya Cave belong to a cultural area of widespread bladelet industries found from the Levant to the Caucasus between 40 or 38 and 30 ky. As a group, these industries are distinguished by a very high level of bladelet production in the flaking technique and by the fact that one of the largest and most variable groups of tools is made on bladelets. In the Levant, this industry type is called Ahmarian.

In our opinion, materials from Yafteh Cave in Iran (Otte et al., 2007) belong to the same group of industries and are similar to the Later Ahmarian and to Mezmaiskaya Cave in the following general characteristics (see Table 1): a flaking technology oriented to the production of blades (especially bladelets – 48.3 percent of the total assemblage from Yafteh), a clear abundance of bladelet tools, and a rather low percentage of endscrapers and burins. Although, predominance of bladelets with Dufour retouch (47.4 percent of the total tool assemblage) and Arijeneh points (19.3 percent) both determine the specificity of the EUP materials from Yafteh Cave against the Ahmarian or Mezmaiskaya.

In general, we conclude that the time period between 40 or 38 and 30 ky was significant for the dispersal of essentially new EUP blade and bladelet-based industries, particularly across the region including the Zagros, Levant and Caucasus. The study of the character, origin and spread of these industries will continue to occupy archaeologists in the future. The continued application of modern excavation techniques and comprehensive publication will improve our understanding of inter-assemblage variability within this area.

Acknowledgments

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