

Current Middle & Upper Palaeolithic research in the southern Caucasus

NICHOLAZ TUSHABRAMISHVILI, DANIEL S. ADLER, OFER BAR-YOSEF & ANNA BELFER-COHEN*

Since 1997 an international research team has been reinvestigating Ortvale Klde, a Palaeolithic rockshelter located in the Georgian Republic (FIGURES 1 & 2). The main goals of this new collaborative project have been to document Middle and Upper Palaeolithic patterns of lithic reduction, land-use and mobility, and to date the Middle–Upper Palaeolithic chronological boundary. To date, five seasons (1997–2001) of excavation and analysis have been conducted. During this time we have recovered large samples of lithic and faunal material, identified the stratigraphic boundary between the Middle and Upper Palaeolithic and collected over 100 charcoal, bone and lithic samples for dating via Accelerator Mass Spectrometry (AMS), Thermoluminescence (TL) and Electron

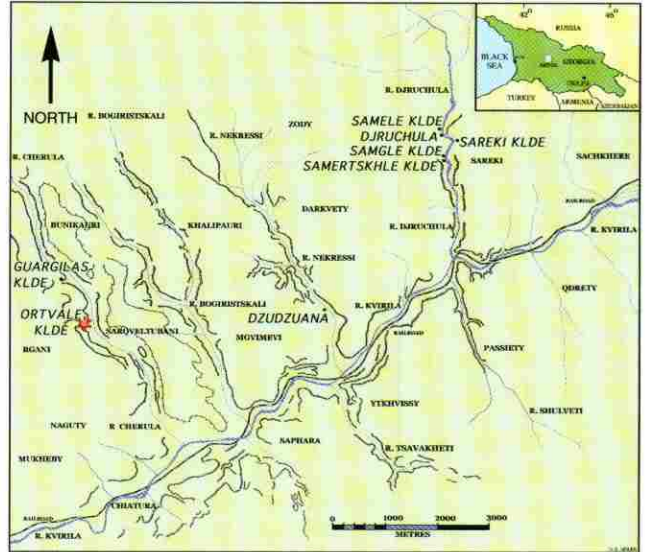
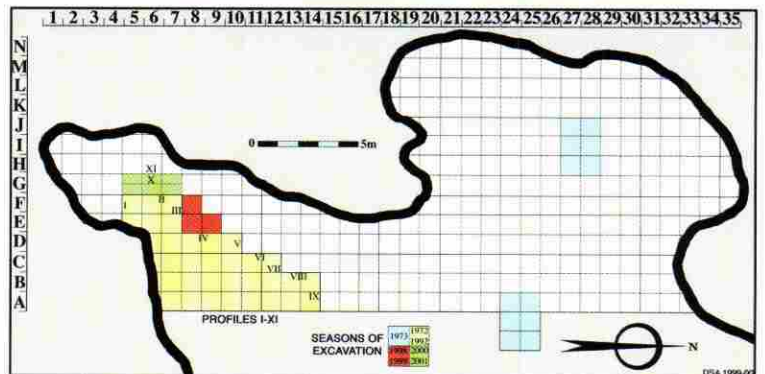


FIGURE 1 (top). *Map of the Georgian Republic with detail of the Kvirila River Valley and important Palaeolithic localities (italics).*

FIGURE 2 (middle). *View of Ortvale Klde from the east.*



FIGURE 3 (bottom). *Composite section from the southern chamber (sub-layers not indicated).*



* Tushabramishvili, Georgian State Museum, Department of Archaeology, 3 Purtseladze St., 380007 Tbilisi, Georgian Republic. Adler & Bar-Yosef, Harvard University, Department of Anthropology, Peabody Museum, 11 Divinity Avenue, Cambridge MA 02138, USA. dsadler@fas.harvard.edu obaryos@fas.harvard.edu Belfer-Cohen, Institute of Archaeology, Hebrew University, Mt. Scopus, Jerusalem, 91905 Israel. belfer@h2.hum.huji.ac.il

Spin Resonance (ESR). Although aspects of our research remain incomplete, we can offer several preliminary observations that help place the Palaeolithic record of the southern Caucasus within a broader regional context.

Previous research in the Georgian Republic led to the identification of several distinct Middle Palaeolithic cultural variants based on perceived differences in lithic and faunal assemblages (Liubin 1977; 1989), but these groupings were developed without the benefit of reliable chronometric estimates. In addition, several important 'transitional' assemblages from the region, now known to be the result of mixing, have led to the notion of a local transition from the Middle to the Upper Palaeolithic.

Ortvale Klde is a perfect setting in which to address these issues. Thus far we have completed the excavation of 6 sq. m in the southern chamber. This work has led to the documentation and recovery of ~30,000 lithics, ~5,000 faunal remains and numerous micromorphological and mineralogical samples, the systematic studies of which are on-going. During the re-excavation of Ortvale Klde we identified five Middle and three Upper Palaeolithic layers (FIGURE 3). The Middle Palaeolithic layers (10-9 & 7-5) all contain lithic assemblages characterized as uni-directional Levallois industries dominated by scrapers with a high incidence of truncated faceting. Previous palaeontological analyses indicate that the faunal assemblage is dominated by *Capra caucasica* (~85%). Our on-going zooarchaeological analysis is testing this claim while also investigating hunting and faunal processing behaviours. The Upper Palaeolithic assemblages are dominated by small backed bladelets, endscrapers and several bone points, but they cannot be characterized as Aurignacian. Based on our current excavations, no case can be made for a 'transitional' industry at the site.

AMS and TL estimates allow us to date the Middle Palaeolithic occupations to ~44-35,000 years ago (Layers 7-5). The older occupations in Layers 10-9 are currently being dated via TL, and

Layer 8 is sterile. These same methods allow us to date the Upper Palaeolithic occupations (Layers 4-2) to ~32-21,000 years ago. These data suggest the persistence of Neanderthals in the region and the late arrival of Upper Palaeolithic peoples.

Based on our initial research at Ortvale Klde we believe that Neanderthals occupying the southern Caucasus were members of a larger prehistoric social and mating network demarcated by the Caucasus Mountains to the north and the Taurus-Zagros to the south (Adler & Tushabramishvili in press). Interactions with Neanderthal populations in the northern Caucasus are only suggested by several finds from Mezmaiskaya Cave. It also appears that the southern Caucasus served as one of the last large territories occupied by Neanderthals. The abrupt shift from the Middle-Upper Palaeolithic at Ortvale Klde cannot be characterized as an *in situ* cultural transition. Instead it appears Upper Palaeolithic peoples entered the region approximately 32,000 years ago without significant, if any, overlap with Neanderthal populations.

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