

Siberia

The Siberian region, as compared to Europe, is relatively poor in Palaeolithic art. This could be explained by the fact that at the end of the Palaeolithic period the Western and partly also Central Siberia lied under a vast body of water (see Figure 2), but also by the fact that the region has not been adequately explored. The most important art finds come from the Yenisei and Angara watershed, the prehistoric settlements of Malta and Buret; single art objects have also been discovered at the Yenisei and south of Lake Baikal.

Afontova Gora is located at the Yenisei in the city of Krasnoiarsk, and is the westernmost of all Siberian sites. Two stone discs with scratched surfaces, three ivory spherical objects, stone and bone discs, beads, jewellery made of hare bones, pendants made from the teeth of reindeer and arctic fox and two bone and horn objects with pierced holes (Figure 48) have been found in its cultural layers. The finds are preserved at the State Hermitage Museum and are 20.9 millennia old (PSSSR 1984: 357).

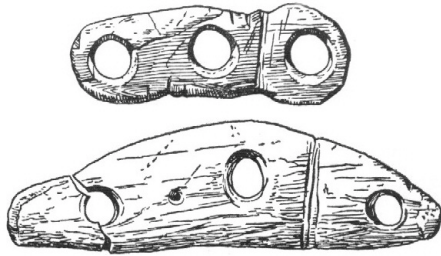


Figure 48. Three-holed objects of Afontova Gora II (Abramova 1962: LIX).

The Upper Palaeolithic settlement of **Ust-Kova** is situated in the mouth of the Kova River, the left tributary of the Angara. The lower strata of this three-layered site are surprisingly old (28–32.9 millennia) among the prehistoric settlements of Siberia. More than 3 thousand stone objects, over ten thousand bone fragments and some prehistoric art finds have been discovered in its central, 23.9 millennia old cultural layer. The most intriguing discoveries are a mammoth figurine covered with remnants of red ochre and a geometrical figure, which is believed to be a stylised representation of a nesting bird. The same layer has revealed bone beads and pendants of animal teeth (Vasilevski & Drozdov 1983). The ivory mammoth figure (8.4 x 4.8 x 2.3 cm) is so far unique among the finds from Siberia (Figure 49).



Figure 49. The mammoth figure from Ust-Kova (Vasilevski & Drozdov 1983).

Malta is the richest site of prehistoric art in Siberia. It is located in the district of Bratsk, some 85 km northwest of Irkutsk, on the left bank of the Angara's tributary Belaia. The settlement was discovered in 1928 and became known not only for prehistoric art finds, but also for remnants of houses and a child's burial with lavish grave goods. Directly after the discovery and later, in 1956, a well-known archaeologist and anthropologist M. M. Gerassimov conducted archaeological excavations at the site. The settlement of Malta was first estimated to be 22 millennia old; later radiocarbon dating, however, revealed that the age of the settlement is 14.7 millennia (PSSSR 1984: 314–315). Objects found from this site are preserved in the State Hermitage Museum and the Moscow National History Museum.

The prehistoric settlement of Malta is rich in female figurines of mammoth ivory (about 30 all together), most of which have preserved intact. Women are depicted partly in the manner used in Eastern Europe: often naked, some relatively corpulent. Most of the figurines are still slender-shaped.



Figure 50. An ivory female figurine with detailed facial features from the prehistoric settlement of Malta (Yelinek 1982: 315).

Female figurines discovered from Malta differ from the East-European Palaeolithic Venus figures by clothing, realistic depiction and more detailed facial features. The shapes of European Venus figures are often exaggerated, little attention is paid to the face and clothing. The most artistic Malta find is an 8 cm tall ivory figurine found in 1956, which depicts an older naked woman (Figure 50).

The figure has a highly distinctive face, expressing even the woman's mood. The face has nostrils, eyes, chin, mouth, even wrinkles around the mouth. Long curly hair frames its face, breasts and buttocks are distinguishable on a disproportionately small body. Limbs are not accentuated; even the figure's hands resting in its lap are vaguely modelled. The legs taper towards the feet and end in a pierced conical tip, suggesting that the figurine was worn upside down as a pendant.



Figure 51. A 4 cm tall dressed female figurine in mammoth ivory from Malta (Abramova 1962: XLIV).

The numerous female figurines found in Malta make clear references to the Palaeolithic

style of clothing. Figurines are clad into relatively constricting fur overalls with a hood (Figure 51). Some authors consider the lunula-pattern used on figurines' clothing a manifestation of moon cult.

On some figurines only heads are elaborated in greater detail. These stick-like anthropomorphic art objects can only tentatively be accepted as feminine (Figure 52).

Another intriguing group of miniature sculptural art objects consists of ivory bird

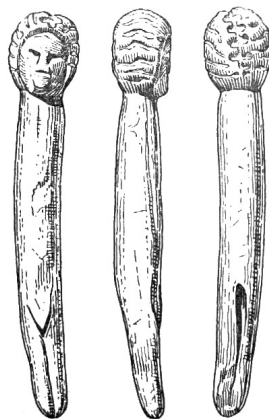


Figure 52. A stick-like female figurine in ivory (Abramova 1962: XLIV).

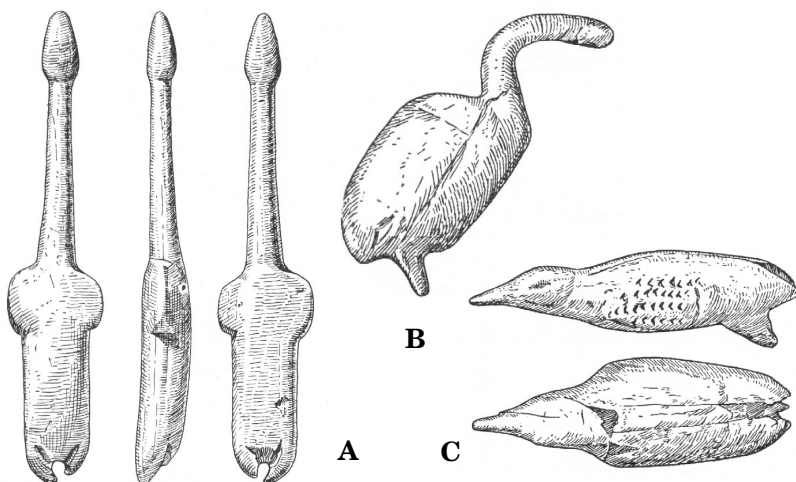


Figure 53. Ornithomorphic figures in mammoth ivory from Malta: A – representation of a flying swan, B – representation of a standing swan, C – a partridge (Abramova 1962: LII–LIII).

figures, depicting mostly flying swans. The heads and necks of these figures are extremely elaborately modelled. Compared to the rest of the body, the birds' wings are relatively small. The rounded end of the body has a drilled hole, which allowed to use the figurine as a pendant. The edges of the opening are indented, depicting a bird's stretched-out feet during the flight (Figure 53 A). So far, no analogous bird representations have been discovered anywhere else in the world except Buret. The Malta site revealed 13 such bird figures, the largest nearly 15 cm and the smallest 4.5 cm tall. One of the flying swan figures was found in a child burial as a grave good.

One swanlike figure carved in ivory depicts a standing bird. The figure's leg is pierced, which enabled to use it as a pendant (Figure 53 B). Two other birds have not been depicted flying – one is a swimming ornithomorph of indistinguishable prototype, and another, a carefully elaborated expressive work of art, depicts a partridge (Figure 53 C).

Engraved animal representations have been discovered on two ivory plates. One (8.2 x 3.6 cm), with some notches and depressions, dis-

plays an engraved mammoth. The other, 14.1 x 8.5 cm large plate with a drill-hole in its centre features three snake figures, a motif quite rare in Palaeolithic art. Judging by the wide head of two snakes, their prototype appears to be the cobra. The other side of the plate is covered with spirals of depressions, the largest of which proceeds from the central pierced hole. The largest spiral is surrounded by smaller double spirals of depressions (Figure 54).

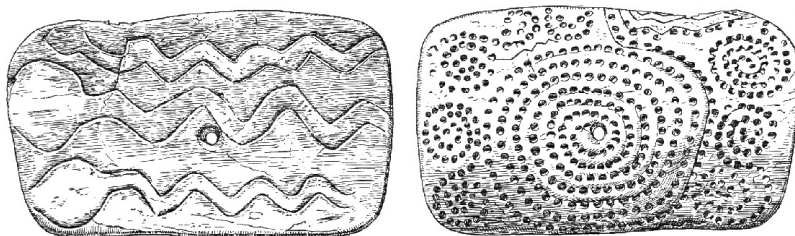


Figure 54. Engravings on an ivory plate (Abramova 1962: L 2, LI 2).

Numerous rods, hairpins, spindles and other objects of round and flat diameter ornamented with lunula patterns or patterns of depressions have been found from the Malta site. Items of jewellery – headbands, bracelets, breast-ornaments, necklaces, pendants, etc. – are particularly numerous. Headbands (one was discovered on a buried child's skull) and fragments of headbands are made of ivory tiles and are generally ornamented with a pattern of depressions. Bracelets are of the same material; in one bracelet semiprecious mineral has been used. Ivory plates with pit-ornamentation and snake motifs, as described above, may have been worn on clothes as breast-ornaments. Numerous are pendants and beads, mostly round but some also triangular, made of mammoth ivory, reindeer antler, pipe bone of birds, vertebrae of fish and stone. A good example of such finds is a complete necklace, found as a grave good of the child burial. The necklace consists of one central and six secondary pen-



Figure 55. Necklace from the child's burial (Abramova 1962: LVI).

dants and 120 flat beads. The surface of the pendants is entirely covered with pit-ornamentation (Figure 55).

Buret is another famous site of Palaeolithic art in Siberia, located on the right bank of the Angara, near its tributary Belaia. During 1936–1940 A. P. Okladnikov studied this prehistoric settlement. Finds discovered from Buret are analogous to those found in Malta although despite the fact that both settlements existed almost at the same time. Buret is considerably poorer in finds of prehistoric art. Its cultural stratum has been estimated 14.8 millennia old, which contradicts to the 22 millennia dating based on stratigraphy and finds (PSSSR 1984: 314–315).

The most exemplary art finds discovered from Buret are five female figurines, four of mammoth ivory and one of serpentine, analogous to those found from Malta. One 12.2 x 1.9 cm stick-like ivory figurine is very well preserved and has a slender body, leaning forward from the waist, and relatively detailed facial features. The figure's mouth, nose and slightly slanted eyes are clearly distinguishable. The rest of the body is covered with lunula pattern (Figure 56). Primitive facial features can also be seen on another female figurine.

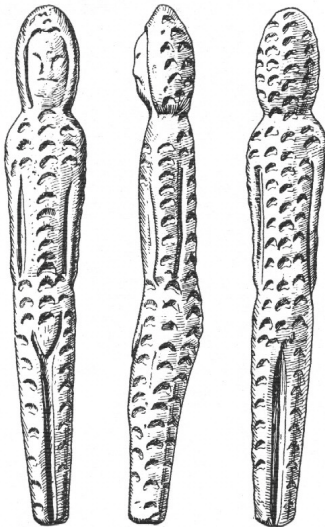


Figure 56. A female figurine with lunula ornamentation from Buret (Abramova 1962: LVII).

An analogue to swan figures found in Malta and a waterfowl head carved of reindeer antler were also discovered from Buret. The latter may have served as an element of a larger wooden sculpture. Jewellery is represented by a nephrite disc and serpentine spindles.

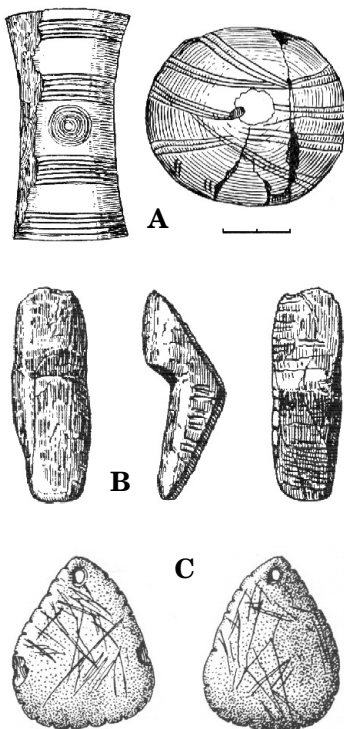
There are other, though less known sites of Palaeolithic art in Siberia. The very first Palaeolithic art objects of Siberia were discovered in 1871 from **Irkutski Gospital**, among them 5 small ivory cylinders decorated with perimetric line pattern (Figure 57 A). Ornate discs of mam-

moth ivory, a spherical object and various pendants were also found there. Unfortunately, all these objects were destroyed during the 1879 fire in the Museum of Irkutsk. Another Palaeolithic settlement was discovered near Irkutski Gospital: **Verholenskaia Gora**, located on the right bank of the Ushakova river. Object finds from this site, which included pierced discs, an egg-like object of mammoth ivory, fragments with geometrical ornamentation and pendants of deer's incisors, were destroyed in the above mentioned fire as well.

The only known object of Palaeolithic art found in the Altai Mountains is a polished oval bone pendant discovered in the **Ust-Kanskaia** cave. South of Lake Baikal, on the left bank of the Selenga River 18 km downstream of Ulan Ude lies the Palaeolithic settlement of **Oshurkovo**. During the 1958 excavation a triangular bone pendant (Figure 57 C) and a fragmentary bone object with zigzag ornamentation were found there.

On the right bank of the Angara, 200 km downstream from Irkutsk, 12 km before the village of Malyshevka lies a multistratal Palaeolithic settlement **Krasnyi Yar**. In 1957 a stylised bone figure depicting a sitting man, its sides and back covered with line pattern (Figure 57 B) was found at this site. Representations of a horse and ox discovered on the rock paintings of **Shishkino**, located 18 km downstream from the town of Kachug on the upper course of the Lena river, have also been dated to the Upper Palaeolithic period by Okladnikov. This claim, however, has not been reconfirmed by others.

Figure 57. Prehistoric art from less known settlements in Siberia: A – Irkutsk Gospital, B – Krasnyi Yar, C – Oshurkovo (Abramova 1962: XLIII, LIX).



CONCLUSION & COMMENTS --->