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4 The earliest occupation of the Russian Plain: a short note

The Russian Plain extends from the White Sea and Barents Sea in the north to the Caspian and Black Sea in the south. It is bordered by the Carpathian mountains in the south-west and the Ural in the east (Fig. 1). From this immense area we know only a small number of Lower Palaeolithic sites, basically for two reasons. In the first place, it used to be generally believed that the Russian Plain was not occupied by humans before the Middle Palaeolithic, and therefore no systematic survey and research took place, while the few possible Lower Palaeolithic finds were subject of heated discussions. Secondly, discovering Lower Palaeolithic sites is very difficult as a result of significant changes in landscapes since the Lower Palaeolithic. The inland glaciations covered large parts of the Russian Plain, and twice the ice went down to 50° latitude in the Don and Dnepr valleys. The enormous amount of melting water coming from the glaciers led to transgressions of the Caspian and the Black Sea. Especially large scale transgressions are represented by the Akčagyl horizon during the Late Pliocene, the Apšeron horizon during the Early Pleistocene, and the Baku horizon during the first part of the Middle Pleistocene (for the terminology see Ljubin and Bosinski, this volume). These large transgressions created a connection of the Caspian and the Black Sea through the Manyč depression, and a separation of the Caucasus region from the Russian Plain (Fig. 2). This yields the question whether the oldest occupation of the Russian Plain came from the Caucasus region or from Europe.

The Early Pleistocene sediments are mostly covered by younger deposits up to 20-40 m thick. In the middle latitudes the former presence of glaciers almost excludes the preservation of Lower Palaeolithic sites, while in the south the sites were also destroyed by the Caspian and Black Sea transgressions. Therefore there is only a narrow strip of land where Lower Palaeolithic sites may be discovered (Fig. 2). Surface finds and artefacts from uncertain stratigraphy can not prove the Lower Palaeolithic occupation of the region. Apart from contested surface finds and artefacts without a clear stratigraphical context (Boriskovskij 1953), there are only a few finds which may be considered Lower Palaeolithic, and all of them are

from the southern part of the region, south of 50° latitude (Fig. 1-2).

Gerasimovka

This site is located on the shore of the Gulf of Taganrog (Mius) near the village of Gerasimovka (Praslov 1968). An old terrace 45 m above the present sea level is covered by the following deposits (from top to bottom):

- Recent Chernozem
- Loess-like loams, in the upper part a thin layer of volcanic ash.
- Last interglacial (Mikulín) soil
- Compact-reddish-brown soil as it is known all over the Russian Plain and characterizing the Lichvin Interglacial.
- 5 m of laminated loams and sands with many saltwater molluscs, predominantly Caspian types of *Didacna* (*Didacna baericrassa*, *D. pseudocrassa*, *D. miussica*, *D. parvula*). In addition, there are some freshwater molluscs: *Unio crassus*, *U. batavus pseudocrassus*, *Anodonta piscinalis*, *Sphaerium rivicola*, *Viviparus fasciatus*.
The saltwater molluscs date the layer to the Baku transgression of the Caspian Sea, respectively the Čauda transgression of the Black Sea.
- Sands containing freshwater molluscs and small mammals including *Mimomys*, *Ellobius*, *Microtus*, *Lagurus*.
- In a coarse gravel with many flint pebbles at the base of the sands remains of *Mammuthus trogontherii*. From this horizon with flint pebbles about a dozen heavily weathered and severely abraded, rolled artefacts was collected (Fig. 3). A bigger core from quartzite (Fig. 3,3) is worked on both faces and looks like a chopping tool. In addition there are three side-scrapers from flint (Fig. 3,1-2) as well as flakes. The stratigraphy of the site suggests that this small assemblage dates from the Lower to Middle Pleistocene transition.

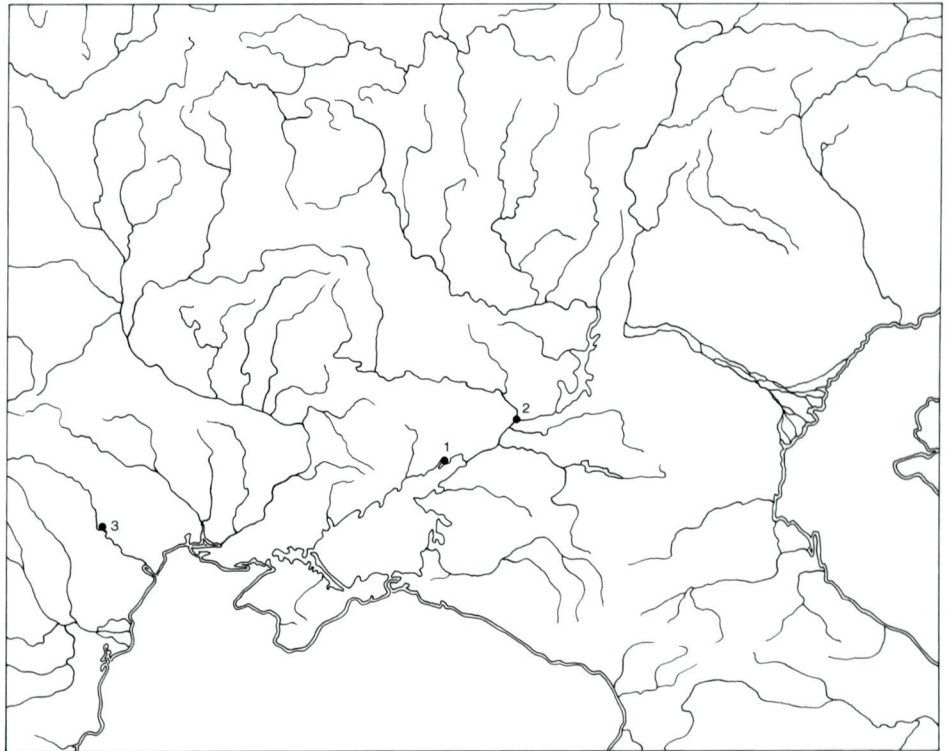


Fig. 1. Distribution of Lower Palaeolithic sites mentioned in the text. (1. Gerasimovka; 2. Chrjašči, 3. Pogreby and Dubossary).

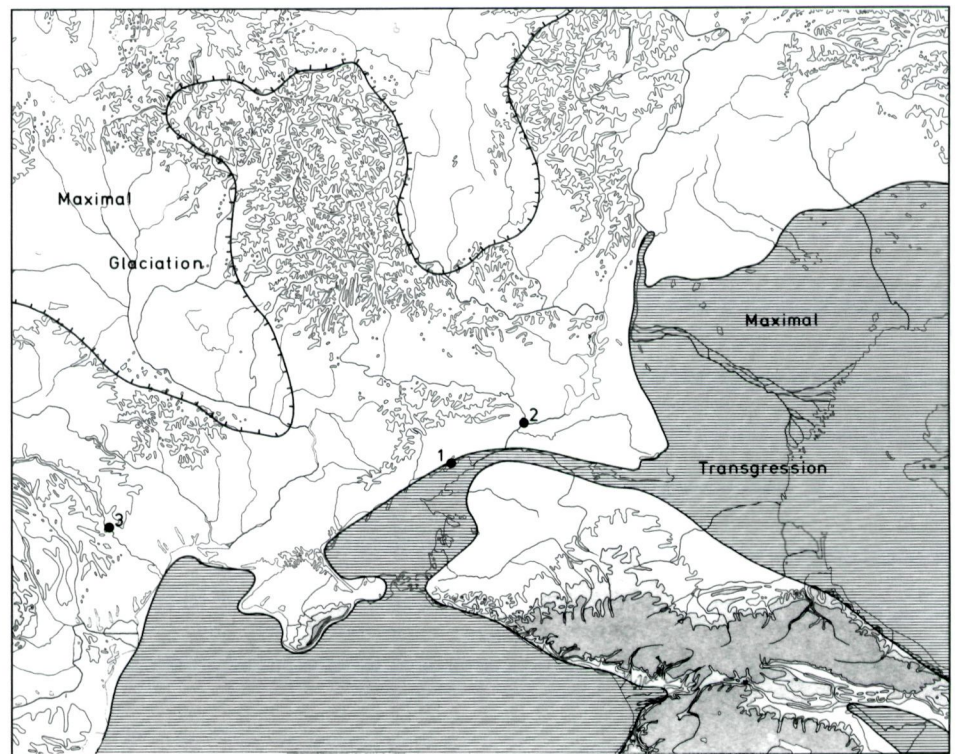


Fig. 2. Maximal glaciation and maximal transgression on the Russian Plain, and distribution of Lower Palaeolithic sites mentioned in the text (1. Gerasimovka; 2. Chrjašči, 3. Pogreby and Dubossary).

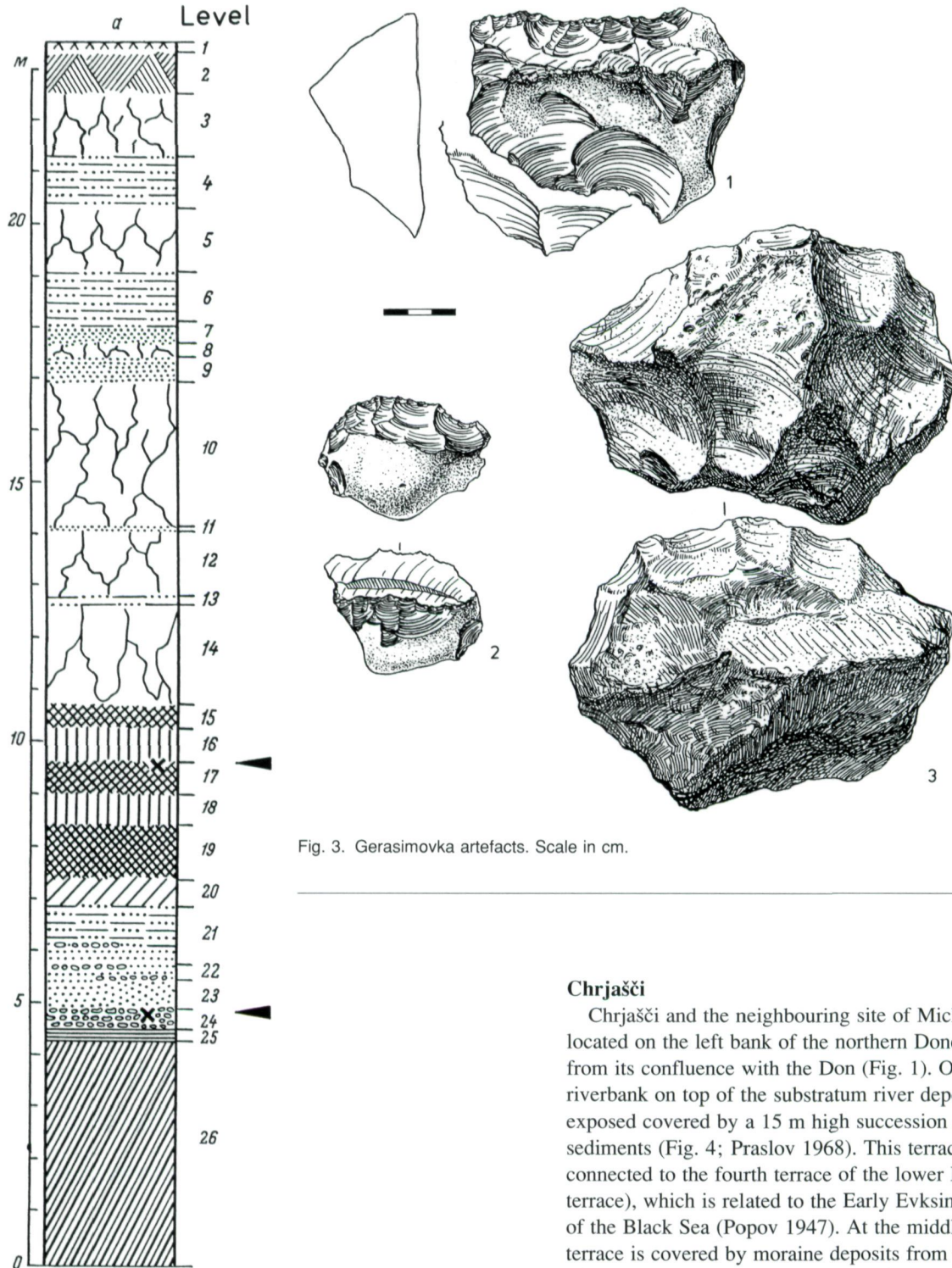


Fig. 3. Gerasimovka artefacts. Scale in cm.

Chrjašči

Chrjašči and the neighbouring site of Michajlov are located on the left bank of the northern Dnepr, about 10 km from its confluence with the Don (Fig. 1). On the steep riverbank on top of the substratum river deposits (sands) are exposed covered by a 15 m high succession of loamy-sandy sediments (Fig. 4; Praslov 1968). This terrace can be connected to the fourth terrace of the lower Don (Mariinska terrace), which is related to the Early Evksin transgression of the Black Sea (Popov 1947). At the middle Don this terrace is covered by moraine deposits from the Don-lobe of the maximum glaciation (Dnepr; Popov, Griščenko *et al.* 1964). This dates the terrace to the Lichvin Interglacial. From the Mariinska terrace freshwater molluscs are known:

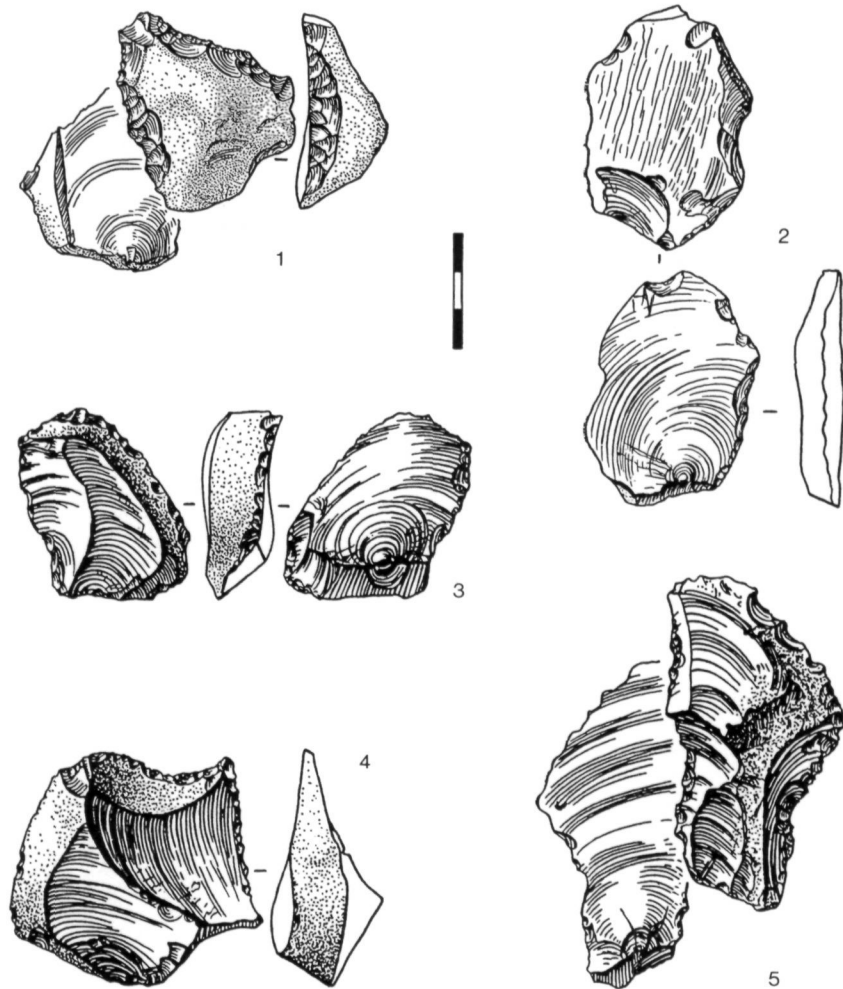


Fig. 5. Chrjašči. Artefacts from level 24. Scale in cm.

Theodoxus fluviatilis, *Valvata naticina*, *Planorbarius corneus*, *Planorbis planorbis*, *Galba palustris*, *V. viviparus*, *V. contectus*, *Corbicula fluminalis*, *Sphaerium rivicola*, *Pisidium amnicum*. Especially *Corbicula fluminalis*, *Theodoxus fluviatilis* and *Lithoglyphus naticoides* are species characteristic of Middle Pleistocene interglacials. In addition *Corbicula fluminalis* occurs in this region only in the deposits of the Mariinska terrace and the Early Evksin sediments of the Black Sea.

At Chrjašči, sands (level 24; Fig. 4) corresponding to the Mariinska terrace yielded about 60 quartzite and flint artefacts (Fig. 5-6). The finds were collected from the sections; six flakes were found during excavation in level 24. The artefacts are mostly flakes, sometimes with use

damage at their edges (Fig. 5). There are also 4 cores and 7 retouched tools including a quartzite one with a bifacially shaped working edge (Fig. 6,2). In the sediments above the terrace sands three palaeosols are present (Fig. 4). At the Michajlov find spot, 2 km from Chrjašči, Middle Palaeolithic artefacts were found in the lowermost soil (Praslov 1968). At Chrjašči itself the middle soil (level 18) contained about 20 artefacts, including 4 retouched tools (Praslov 1968).

Pogreby and Dubossary

Other possibly Lower Palaeolithic finds come from Moldavia in the southwestern corner of the Russian Plain (Fig. 1) (Anisjutkin 1987; 1989). Near the town of

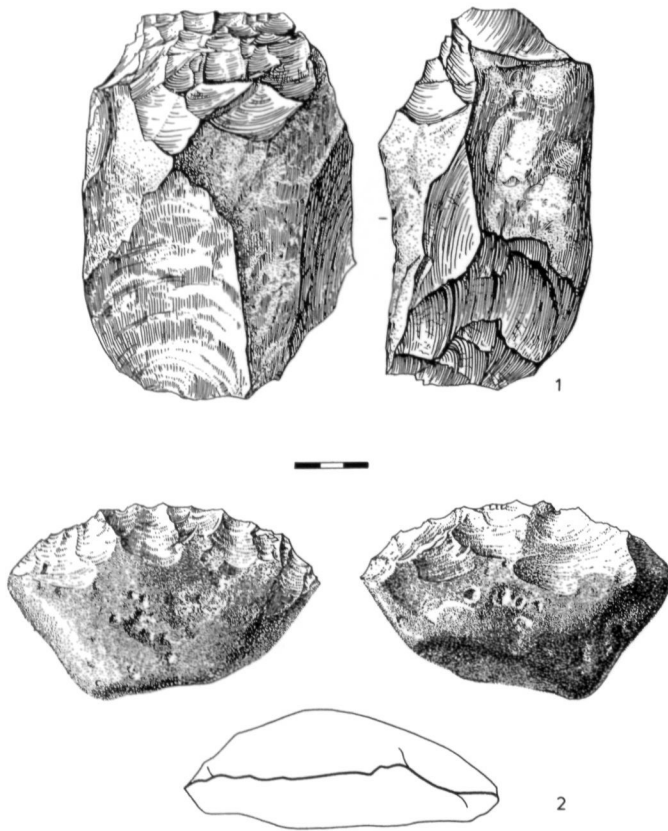


Fig. 6. Chrjašči. Artefacts from level 24. Scale in cm.

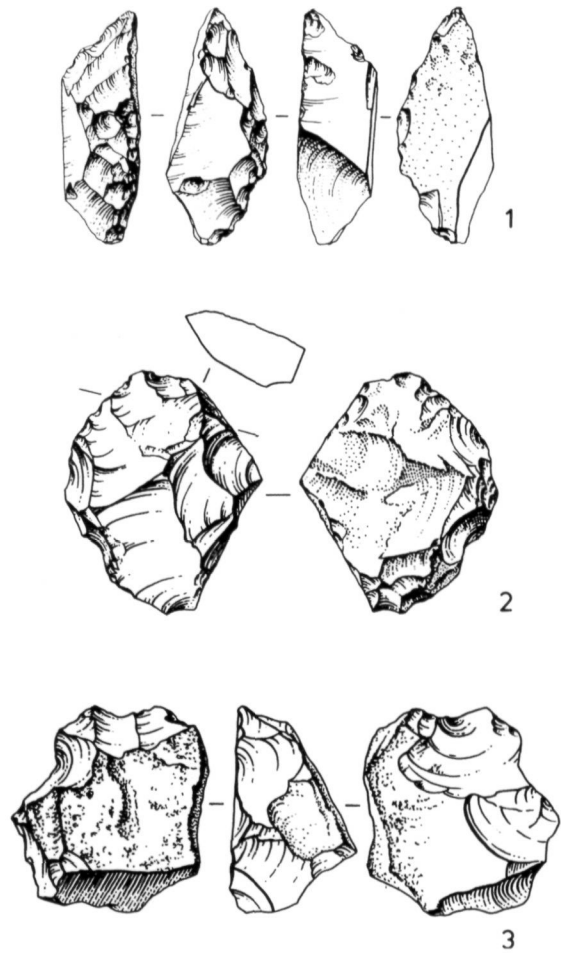


Fig. 7. Pogreby artefacts. After N. K. Anisjutkin. Scale in cm.

Dubossary artefacts were discovered in a soil of the cover sediments of the 6th Dneestr terrace. The reddish-brown soil is situated above the sand of the river terrace and covered by thick loess deposits. The soil is assigned to the Lichvin Interglacial.

At Dubossary most of the finds are from the surface. At the neighbouring site of Pogreby the artefacts (Fig. 7) come from the soil itself. Together with the lithic artefacts a tooth fragment of *Mammuthus trogontherii* was discovered (Anisjutkin 1987; 1989).

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