
New evidence of personal ornamentation in the Epipalaeolithic of Central Asia

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Résumé

Personal ornaments, made of various organic and mineral raw materials, represent an essential element of cultural assemblages among the early occupants of Central Asia. Previously, many ornaments from this territory were identified from archaeological sites without radiocarbon dates or surface assemblages with problematic context. As a result, traditions of manufacture, raw material selection, and use of these items – along with their complex social, cultural, and aesthetic functions – have gone unnoticed or unstudied. Here we analyze the new findings of personal ornaments obtained during the excavation of four stratified archaeological sites of Central Asia: Obishir-5 and Surungur in Fergana Valley, Aigyrzhal-2 in the Central Tien Shan, and Oshhona in Pamir mountains.

The oldest evidence of symbolic activity for the low-mountain area of Central Asia occurs in the Fergana valley in the Early Holocene layers of the Obishir-5 site (10.8–8.2 ka cal BP). The Obishir collection includes one pendant made of a *Canis* tooth and five artifacts made of talkite, serpentinite, and marble, produced through grinding and drilling. The stone ornaments are ovoid, subtriangular, and subrectangular pendants, a labret-like item, and a pendant blank. For the manufacture of stone ornaments, inhabitants of the Obishir-5 used raw material transported to the site over a distance of 4.5 km. At the Surungur site, there is one elongated bead made of the diaphysis of tubular bone (~9,5–8 ka BP). In the highlands of Central Asia, the earliest evidence of personal ornaments occurs from the Aigyrzhal-2 site (13.4–13.0 ka cal BP). The pendants made of a *Cervus* incisor have a curved profile and circular cut-marks in the root. At the Oshhona site, five bone ornaments occur from this stratigraphic unit dated to 7,6 ka cal BP. This collection includes two pendants with perforations made of the *Capra/Rangifer* tubular bone and an *Ovis/Cervidae/Saiga* tooth, two elongated beads made rabbit/leporid, Felidae, and Murida tubular bones.

Our research shows that in the Early and Middle Holocene period in Central Asia, a tradition of personal ornament production already existed in a developed form. Applying use-wear analysis and experimental data, we reconstructed the main techniques for manufacturing beads and pendants at the Obishir-5, Surungur, Aigyrzhal-2, and Oshhona sites. Our research demonstrates that cultural adaptation to the diverse environments of Central Asia manifested in the selection of raw materials for personal ornaments, which appear consistently at Early Holocene sites from lowland territories to high mountain zones across the entire region. Comparison of the personal ornaments from Fergana Valley, Tien Shan, and

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Pamir with collections from other areas of Central Asia dating to this period indicates that locally-available raw material was primarily selected for the production of non-utilitarian items, leading to regional differences in the use of bone, stone, and shell between high elevation and lowland areas.

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Mots-Clés: Central Asia, Epipalaeolithic, Personal ornaments, Use, wear analysis, Technological analysis