

Book reviews

ERIK TRINKAUS, ALEXANDRA P. BUZHILOVA, MARIA B. MEDNIKOVA & MARIA V. DOBROVOLSKAYA. *The people of Sunghir: burials, bodies, and behavior in the Earlier Upper Paleolithic*. xi+339 pages, numerous colour and b&w illustrations, and tables. 2014. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 978-0-19-938105-0 hardback £115.



The latest book in Oxford University Press's human evolution series is a description and palaeobiological analysis of the skeletal evidence from Sunghir, east Russia. The site is chronologically placed in an Interpleniglacial phase of the Mid-Upper Palaeolithic (*c.* 28 kya), and belongs to the Gravettian technocultural complex. Although this culture extended with a remarkable degree of uniformity from Western (e.g. Balzi Rossi, Arene Candide) to Eastern Europe (e.g. Dolní Věstonice, Kostenki), human remains, and especially burials, are extremely rare. Having yielded a number of discoveries, from isolated skeletal elements to spectacularly elaborated burials, the importance of the Sunghir site for understanding the cultural and biological adaptations of the 'Hunters of the Golden Age' (Roebroeks *et al.* 2000) cannot be overemphasised. As outlined in the preface, a number of research articles on the palaeobiology (cf. Holt & Formicola 2008 on issues of activity levels, health, diet, growth and development) of the Sunghir people have been published, as well as two edited volumes (Zubov & Kharitonov 1984; Alexeeva *et al.* 2000). Research papers, however, are limited in length and usually do not contain raw data, and the two edited books are in Russian (with short English summaries in the most recent). The present volume, addressed to the broader anthropological community, is therefore a welcome addition.

The book is structured into 19 chapters, 10 of which are dedicated to the detailed description of skeletal remains, from heads to toes. The preface and the first brief chapter address the purpose of the volume,

while Chapter 2 provides a history of excavations, a description of the site's geographical location, stratigraphy and chronology. The sections dealing with the cultural background of the site and the environmental (faunal, floral and climatic) framework are concise, and make reference to previously published work (some of which is in Russian). Readers unfamiliar with studies on the archaeological and environmental context of the late Pleistocene should refer to the ample literature provided (e.g. Roebroeks *et al.* 2000). A longer section deals with dating methods and results, and succeeds in reassuring the reader that the three main burials at least are roughly contemporaneous and firmly radiocarbon dated to *c.* 28 kya.

Chapter 3 concerns mortuary behaviour at the site and is particularly important for later considerations on palaeopathology and selective funerary practices. The relative positions of the burials and isolated remains are reconstructed as well as possible (unfortunately, a portion of the site was explored using mechanical excavators and some material was lost), and a detailed account of associated grave goods is provided. The spectacular burials 1–3 are obviously the focus of this chapter, with their straightened mammoth tusks, figurines and thousands of ivory beads. Unfortunately, the available photographs of the original depositions are grayscale. Taphonomic details, such as the use of manipulated human remains as grave goods (the femur Sunghir 4), and the possibly intentional removal of skeletal elements from one of the burials, are documented. The chapter then discusses the central place of Sunghir with reference to the main themes regarding Upper Palaeolithic funerary behaviour, such as an emphasis on the pathological evidence, especially in multiple burials, and an age and sex distribution skewed towards male adolescents.

Chapters 4–16 constitute the bulk of the volume and provide an inventory and thorough description of the Sunghir human remains. Numerous tables detailing osteometric measurements are presented, including relevant entries from the classic Martin system, as well as a great number of other measurements in districts not covered in detail by Martin (e.g. the vertebral column, hands and feet). Several discrete, non-metric traits are recorded and high-

quality pictures are provided, often accompanied by radiographic images. Individual cross-sectional parameters and drawings of the cross sections at various levels of the diaphysis are provided for the long bones. These chapters constitute an invaluable source of comparative data for any researcher in human palaeobiological variation and prehistoric functional adaptations. In addition to raw data, bivariate plots and comparative tables of a number of skeletal measurements, discrete traits, enthesopathies and cross-sectional geometry compare Sungghir with a large comparative sample, which includes virtually all of the accessible Early and Middle Pleistocene Eurasian remains, as well as some more recent samples.

Chapter 17 is dedicated to the numerous abnormalities present in the Sungghir skeletal series, from developmental and degenerative pathologies, to unusual discrete traits. The perimortem injury present in the first thoracic vertebral body of Sungghir 1, probably due to the intentional or accidental penetration of a projectile or handheld blade, is described in detail. The most interesting individual in this respect is Sungghir 3, a late juvenile (9–11 years old) and probable female. Despite the abnormal anteroposterior curvature of the femora, for which a secure diagnosis is still not available, functional adaptations in the rest of the skeleton suggest that she was an active member of her social group. The use of biomechanical and musculoskeletal functional adaptations to infer whether and how individuals showing signs of pathology, and possibly disability, participated in the subsistence activities typical of their group (or whether they were ‘cared for’) is a promising field of inquiry. The authors elegantly hint at the contribution that the Sungghir remains may offer to the debate by referring to “Late Pleistocene humans with little alternative to active participation in the social group and its economics” (p. 288).

Chapter 18 is a summary of the dietary analyses performed on the Sungghir human remains, while the final chapter briefly reviews the contribution of the site to current debates on Mid-Upper Palaeolithic palaeobiology and population dynamics. From issues of consanguinity and population stability, to reflections on systemic stress, trauma, degenerative disease and survival, the authors outline once again the importance that Sungghir has for understanding of lifestyles and cultural practices of these ‘Hunters of the Golden Age’. Overall, this book is an important

contribution to the discipline of palaeoanthropology in general, and is certainly a mandatory addition to the library of any researcher in Palaeolithic human variation.

References

- ALEXEEVA, T.I., N.O. BADER, R.M. MUNCHAEV, A.P. BUZHILOVA, M.V. KOZLOVSKAYA & M.B. MEDNIKOVA (ed.). 2000. *Homo Sungghirensis. Upper Palaeolithic man: ecological and evolutionary aspects of the investigation*. Scientific World: Moscow (in Russian with English summaries).
- HOLT, B.M. & V. FORMICOLA. 2008. Hunters of the Ice Age: the biology of Upper Paleolithic people. *Yearbook of Physical Anthropology* 51: 70–99.
- ROEBROEKS, W., M. MUSSI, J. SVOBODA & K. FENNEMA (ed.). 2000. *Hunters of the Golden Age. The Mid-Upper Palaeolithic of Eurasia (30,000–20,000 BP)*. Leiden: Leiden University Press.
- ZUBOV, A.A. & V.M. KHARITONOV (ed.). 1984. *Sungghir anthropological investigations*. Moscow: Scientific World (in Russian).

VITALE STEFANO SPARACELLO
Department of Archaeology,
Durham University, UK
(Email: vitale.sparacello@durham.ac.uk)

PAUL HALSTEAD. *Two oxen ahead. Pre-mechanized farming in the Mediterranean*. xi+372 pages, numerous b&w illustrations, and tables. 2014. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell; 978-1-4051-9283-5 hardback £60.



In *Two oxen ahead*, Halstead highlights both the underappreciated diversity of Mediterranean agriculture and illuminates the interconnection of a wide array of variables that influence decisions concerning all

aspects of farming in the Mediterranean. Drawing on more than two decades of interviews with, and observations of, Mediterranean farmers in a diversity of regions that include mainland Greece, the Cyclades, Cyprus, Spain, France and Italy, Halstead creates a richly nuanced account of Mediterranean farming in the recent past. In turn, the author’s personal field observations and anecdotes lay the

© Antiquity Publications Ltd.