

PALEOENVIRONMENT. THE STONE AGE

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**A PALEOLITHIC CACHE AT TOLBOR (NORTHERN MONGOLIA)\***

*This study presents analyses of a unique assemblage of lithic artifacts, 57 large flakes, discovered in the Ikh Tulberiin Gol River valley of Northern Mongolia. The assemblage represents the first Paleolithic cache ever discovered in Mongolia and is an isolated find, not directly associated with a habitation or logistic activity site. Results of use-wear analysis suggest most of the flakes were unused, with only a few minimally used for processing wood. GIS analyses of the local landscape indicate that the placement of the artifacts was likely symbolic, rather than utilitarian or for storage, lying in an east-west linear viewshed of the primary mountain pass to an adjacent river basin. Based on the context of the discovery as an isolated find and technical-typological features of the artifacts, the assemblage is interpreted as a cache of tool blanks that was purposefully and symbolically positioned on the landscape relative to the primary mountain pass by Upper Paleolithic hunter-gatherers.*

**Keywords:** *Northern Mongolia, Paleolithic, cache, technology, use-wear analysis, hunter-gatherers.*

**Introduction**

The Ikh Tulberiin Gol River valley (southern tributary of the Selenga River, Northern Mongolia) (Fig. 1) has been the focus of a highly productive joint Russian-Mongolian-American archaeological project in recent years. In 2002, the first archaeological survey conducted there resulted

in the discovery of dozens of promising sites containing artifacts of the final Pleistocene to Early Holocene age. In subsequent years, primary excavations were conducted at two multicomponent stratified sites, Tolbor-4 (2004–2007) and Tolbor-15 (2008–2011). The main results of those studies are published elsewhere (Derevianko et al., 2007; Gladyshev, Tabarev, 2009; Gladyshev, Olsen, Tabarev, 2010; Gladyshev et al., 2010; Gladyshev, Tabarev, Olsen, 2010; Gladyshev, Gunchinsuren, Rybin et al., 2011).

In 2010, in order to systematize the record of previously known sites and to discover new ones, an

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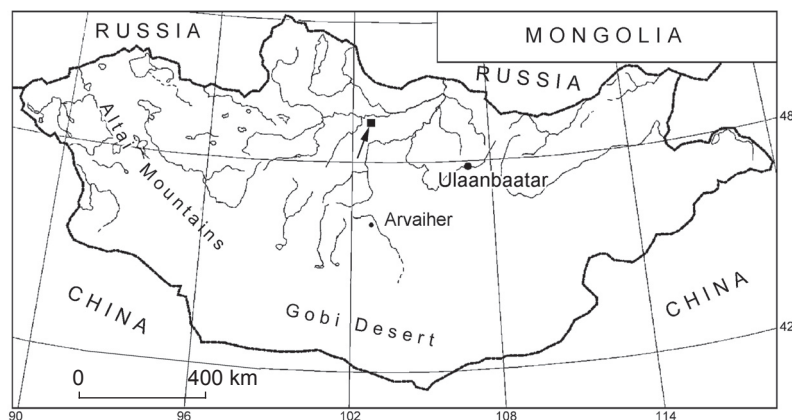


Fig. 1. Map of Mongolia showing the location of the Ikh Tulberiin Gol River valley.

On a gently sloping train of the ravine's southern side ( $49^{\circ}14'07''$  N;  $102^{\circ}56'04''$  E; roughly 40 m elevation above the water's edge) (Fig. 2, 1), a group of large flakes were found clustered in a small area. A few flakes were exposed on the surface, but the majority of artifacts remained buried in the soil (Fig. 2, 2). Upon preliminary clearing of the area, a small excavation unit (50 cm by 50 cm) was made and the artifacts were unearthed. All artifacts were located in a single layer of grayish-brown loess, within the interval of 1–15 cm from ground surface, in an area measuring approximately 30 cm by 30 cm (Fig. 3, 1). The density of the

in-depth survey of the west side of the middle and lower Ikh Tulberiin Gol valley was carried out. This section of the valley is represented by several terrace-like slope-wash covers (deluvial trains) dissected by deep canyons, ravines, and dry stream beds. Artifacts were discovered at all levels, starting from the high floodplain to higher terraces and tributary watersheds. An intense pilot survey of sites with the greatest concentration of artifacts led to the discovery of three sites (Tolbor 16–18) with up to 3 m deep deposits.

An assemblage comprising 57 large flakes encountered during these intensive surveys is of a special interest. Based on the artifact distribution and their character, this assemblage represents the first known Paleolithic cache in Mongolia. Preliminary data on this cache are published in several articles (Gladyshev, Olsen, Tabarev, 2010; Gladyshev, Popov, Tabarev, 2010; Gladyshev, Gunchinsuren, Popov et al., 2011; Gladyshev et al., 2011). A detailed analysis of findings here and additional surveys conducted in 2011–2012 provide new information about the Tolbor cache.

### Techno-typological characteristics of the cache

The assemblage designated as the Tolbor Paleolithic cache was discovered in the course of survey conducted on the slopes of a deep (up to 15–17 m) ravine with traces of springtime water flows. Judging by the character of the channel and rounded pebbles, a rather powerful stream (western tributary of the Ikh Tulberiin Gol) could have existed there. A few unimpressive artifacts were collected from the slopes. Two test pits made on the most level ground yielded almost no finds and the soft sediments normally associated with final Pleistocene artifacts were deflated and only 15–25 cm thick.



1



2

Fig. 2. The Tolbor Paleolithic cache.

1 – cache site, southeastern view; 2 – concentration of flakes prior to clearing.

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