Quaternary International xxx (2012) 1–20

Contents lists available at SciVerse ScienceDirect

Quaternary International

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/quaint

Preliminary reassessment of the Aurignacian in Banat (South-western Romania)

Valéry Sitlivy [a,*], Victor Chabai [b], Mircea Anghelinu [c], Thorsten Uthmeier [d], Holger Kels [e], Loredana Niţă [c], Ion Băltean [f], Andrei Veselsky [b], Cristian Ţuţu [g]

[a] Institute of Prehistoric Archaeology, University of Cologne, Weyertal 125, 50923 Köln, Germany
[b] Crimean Branch of the Institute of Archeology, National Ukrainian Academy of Sciences (NUAS), Yaltinskaya Street 2, 95007 Simferopol, Ukraine
[c] Department of History and Letters, Faculty of Humanities, Valahia University of Târgovişte, Str. Lt. Stancu Ion 35, 130115 Târgovişte, Romania
[d] Institute of Prehistoric Archaeology, University of Erlangen, Kochstraße 4/18, 91054 Erlangen, Germany
[e] Department of Geography, RWTH Aachen University, Germany
[f] Heritage Advice S.R.L., Str. Nicolae Titulescu 1, 280/B/63, 510096 Alba Iulia, Romania
[g] Str. Tineretului 4, 29/D/80, 130073 Târgovişte, Romania

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Available online xxx

ABSTRACT

Despite its richness, the Romanian Paleolithic record has remained for decades relatively poorly known to the broader scientific community. The situation swiftly changed after the find at Oase Cave, which brought the Romanian paleoanthropological and archeological record into intensive focus, spurring several international research projects devoted to the regional Early Upper Paleolithic. The present paper provides the first summary of recent research undertaken in the neighboring area of Oase, the Romanian Banat, particularly focused on the Aurignacian open air occupation at Coşava.

A detailed attribute analysis of both old and recently excavated Aurignacian collections from Coşava, supplemented by a comparative overview of the allegedly similar industry at Românești-Dumbrăviţa, is presented. An initial chronological assessment of the Banat Aurignacian by means of several OSL samples from Românești is also proposed.

The results of the lithic analysis, much like the new chronological estimations (in excess of 30 ka BP) confirm the early assignment of the Banat assemblages to the Krems-type Aurignacian, but also dismiss the unusually young chronology initially attributed to these settlements. While several features, including the constant presence of Krems/Dufour tools, point strongly to an archaic stage of the Aurignacian technocomplex (Protoaurignacian/Aurignacian 0), other elements (carinated forms, twisted bladelets, and Aurignacian blades) recall more 'classical' features conventionally associated to the Aurignacian I. No coherent chrono-stadial trend or functional requirements can explain these 'mixed' features in the Banat industries with the data at hand. Their presence nevertheless points to the internal variability of these early Aurignacian occurrences.

1. Introduction

Despite a rich archaeological and paleoanthropological record, to which many generations of scholars have contributed and which has been periodically revised (e.g. Păunescu, 1989, 1993, 2000, 2001; Chirica et al., 1996; Cârciumaru, 1999; Chirica, 2001; Borziac et al., 2006; Cârciumaru et al., 2007a; Borziac and Chirica, 2008; Chirica and Văleanu, 2008), the Romanian Paleolithic has remained poorly known to the broader scientific community. One of the main reasons for this is the long period of political isolation, which led to delay in adopting new approaches and models for prehistoric research. For the Paleolithic, this resulted in diminishing theoretical and methodological compatibility between the Romanian data and the cultural and chronological frameworks commonly used in Western, Central or Eastern Europe (Anghelinu, 2003, 2006; see also Horvath, 2009). Although the local Paleolithic record had long attracted scientific attention aimed at incorporating it into the Western European framework, or correlating, classifying and comparing lithic assemblages, particularly those belonging to the Late Middle Paleolithic and onset of the Upper Paleolithic (e.g. Gabori, 1976; Allsworth-Jones, 1986; Yevtushenko, 1998; Djindjian et al., 1999; Djindjian, 2000; Chabai et al., 2004; Sitlivy and Zięba, 2006), Romania is still perceived as a peripheral zone and almost

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: vsitlivy@uni-koeln.de (V. Sitlivy), v.chabai@bigmir.net (V. Chabai), mircea_anghelinu@yahoo.com (M. Anghelinu), Thorsten.Uthmeier@ufg.phil.uni-erlangen.de (T. Uthmeier), holger.kels@geo.rwth-aachen.de (H. Kels), loredana_nita2003@yahoo.com (L. Niţă), ion.baltean@heritageadvice.ro (I. Băltean), veselsky@rambler.ru (A. Veselsky), tutuarheo@yahoo.com (C. Ţuţu).

1040-6182/$ – see front matter © 2012 Elsevier Ltd and INQUA. All rights reserved.
http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.quaint.2012.07.024

systematically excluded from discussing the Middle to Upper Paleolithic transition. The narrow focus on typological description of the lithic assemblages by Romanian authors and the poor chronology available has kept much of the regional information out of the mainstream debate, while most synthetic interpretations and critical overviews have come from Western researchers carrying out projects in this country (e.g. Honea, 1984, 1986, 1987; Mertens, 1996; Otte et al., 2007; Riel-Salvatore et al., 2008; Horvath, 2009; Noiret, 2009).

In recent decades, several international field projects carried out in various parts of Romania have yielded significant new results and fresh perspectives: Prut Valley and Moldavia (e.g. Otte and Chirica, 1993; Otte et al., 1996a, 2007; Noiret, 2004, 2009; Tuffreau et al., 2009), South Carpathians (Otte et al., 1996b; Cârciumaru et al., 2000, 2002; Patou-Mathis, 2000–2001; Moncel et al. 2002), Bistrita Valley (Cârciumaru et al. 2006, 2007b; Steguweit et al., 2009), Danube Valley (Alexandrescu et al., 2004) and North-western Banat (Tuffreau et al., 2006, 2007). Systematic dating programs meant to complete the initial dating campaign in the 1980s (Honea, 1984, 1986, 1987) have also been undertaken (Bălescu et al., 2003), although the amount of available data remains insufficient.

The situation further improved after the discovery of the oldest Anatomically Modern Human (hereafter AMH) fossil remains in Europe at Oase Cave (Southern Banat) in 2002, followed by direct dating, detailed paleoanthropological analysis and publication (Moldovan et al., 2003; Trinkaus et al., 2003, 2005, 2006, 2009). The lack of an associated archaeological context, in combination with the traditional view of a long persistence of the Middle Paleolithic in the area and the very late Upper Paleolithic chronology documented across Romania (Cârciumaru, 1999; Păunescu, 2000, 2001) made the story all the more exciting. The initial Oase discovery led to systematic research at Oase Cave (Lazarovici et al., 2005; Bălțean et al., 2008), followed by different analyses (Richards et al., 2008) and have spurred several scientific projects: a paleoanthropological project re-examining 'forgotten' human fossils from Romanian caves and their direct dating (Olariu et al., 2002, 2004, 2005; Soficaru et al., 2006, 2007; Harvati et al., 2007; Alexandrescu et al., 2010) and new research in Banat (Bălțean et al., 2008), thus bringing the Romanian record into the broader Afro-Eurasian discussions on the origins and dispersal of AMH (Trinkaus et al., 2006; Zilhão et al., 2007). Regardless of the disputable authorships of European 'transitional' industries (e.g. see Peresani, 2008; Hoffecker, 2009; Benazzi et al., 2011) and given the time frame of Oase moderns (*ca.* 35 ka ^{14}C BP), the earliest cultural entity to which one would likely assign the initial dispersal of AMH into Europe is the Protoaurignacian; for at least some authors, the latter extends throughout the continent (including the Danube valley and Romanian Banat) to the Near East, matching the Early Ahmarian (Tsanova, 2006; Zilhão, 2007).

As a dispersal following the 'Danube corridor' is still one of the main scenarios (Conard and Bolus, 2003; Mellars, 2006; Zilhão, 2007) for the appearance of AMH populations and their likely cultural correlate (i.e. Aurignacian *sensu lato*) in Europe, a proper reevaluation of the archaeological record in the proximity of the Oase Cave was required. The present paper discusses the preliminary results of the recent research which have taken place in the Banat area, particularly focused on the Aurignacian sites of Coşava I and Românești-Dumbrăvița I.

2. The study area

Due to its geographic position and diverse topographies, several distinct zones have been identified for Paleolithic cultures in Romania (Djindjian, 2000; see also Anghelinu and Niță, submitted for publication). These were linked to the broad cultural areas of Europe: Eastern Romania to the North Pontic zone, the western areas to Central Europe and the southern part to the circum-Mediterranean zone. Banat is a micro-region bordered to the south and east by high mountains representing a kind of refuge influenced by both Mediterranean and continental climates, reflected in the fauna and flora (Mogoşanu, 1972). This region is largely accessible from Central Europe to the west, where the Mureş, Bistra and Bega river valleys provided natural connections with the large Carpathian Basin, while for Oltenia, the likely connection was by following the Danube and the north–south oriented Timiş-Cerna corridor, where the Tincova settlement is actually located. The Mureş valley bordering the historical Banat to the north also provides a natural communication passage to Central Transylvania.

Gradually shifting from a mountain landscape to the east and south to open plain to the west, the Banat geomorphological setting is dominated by hilly piedmonts, plains and local terrace steps. Quaternary deposits are to be found as thin loess-like sediment cover (see also Kels et al., in preparation). Except for the occurrences in the Carpathian caves, all Paleolithic settlements yet known belong to low energy/highly eroded open air depositional contexts.

3. The Banat Paleolithic record – a brief outline

The Paleolithic record known so far in Banat is not particularly rich (Fig. 1). Apart from the Aurignacian, there are few traces of other industries: 'Quartzitic Paleolithic', Mousterian and Gravettian/Epigravettian. Nearly all of the Paleolithic sites known were discovered during the 1950s–1960s, mostly due to the energy of Ion Stratan, excavated and published by Mogoşanu (1972, 1978), and recently inventoried by Păunescu (2001) and Bălțean (2011a, b).

3.1. The Middle Paleolithic

The Middle Paleolithic is represented by small, mostly quartz/quartzite-based assemblages (which traditionally, after Mogoşanu, were assigned to the so-called 'Quartzitic Mousterian' of the Southern Carpathians, i.e. a variant of the Eastern Charentian). These assemblages have been recovered from uncertain stratigraphic position in two caves and two open-air sites.

Layer I at Hoţilor Cave yielded 83 (Mogoşanu, 1978) or 130 (Păunescu, 2001; see also Bălțean, 2011a, b) debitage products (flakes, often cortical, including naturally backed flakes and 29 formless or exhausted cores) and 25 tools (various simple scrapers and notches). A preliminary evaluation based on drawings of quartzite artifacts suggests non-Levallois Mousterian, with side-scrapers and retouched flakes, lacking bifaces. At Livadiţei Cave, only 18 pieces were recovered, including simple, double and convergent sidescrapers, one modified by semi-Quina retouch (Păunescu, 2001), as well as a Neanderthal phalanx.

At the open-air site of Românești-Dumbrăvița I, the lowermost level I (beneath the Aurignacian sequence) was classified as Late Mousterian (Păunescu, 2001). This assemblage includes 48 quartzite artifacts: three Mousterian unretouched points (?), flakes used as scrapers, simple flakes, two 'quasi-prismatic' cores, two atypical endscrapers (Mogoşanu, 1972), sidescrapers (simple, transverse, canted), choppers and naturally backed flakes (Păunescu, 2001). If the Late Middle Paleolithic assignment is correct, a potential ancestor for this industry may come from the open-air site of Zăbrani in the Arad region, recently re-excavated and attributed to the Early Weichselian. Curiously, half of the artifacts from the three Mousterian layers here were made on quartzite

Please cite this article in press as: Sitlivy, V., et al., Preliminary reassessment of the Aurignacian in Banat (South-western Romania), Quaternary International (2012), http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.quaint.2012.07.024