

The Discovery of Palaeolithic Handaxes in Western Turkmenia : A Preliminary report

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NOTES ET VARIÉTÉS

THE DISCOVERY OF PALAEOLITHIC HANDAXES IN WESTERN TURKMENIA : A PRELIMINARY REPORT

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Ranov as a possible handaxe (5). Made from local soft limestone, it was heavily rolled and this fact, together with some other features, leads one to suppose that this artifact might not be a handaxe, but would more likely be a core (the present author knows some tortoise cores from Kopetdag which can easily be confused with handaxes). Unfortunately, the tool was not published or described in detail. It should be added that there are no finds of handaxes in adjacent regions to the south (Afghanistan, North-Eastern Iran), although we know a lot of tools of this type have been found in areas lying further north (Mangishlak peninsula, Northern shore of the Aral sea...), all of which were collected on the surface.

The question of whether the handaxes are present in western regions of Central Asia is a major one. It is known that pebble cultures without handaxes, but with choppers and chopping-tools occurred in the eastern part of Central Asia mountains from at least the Middle Pleistocene up to the Holocene (Gissar culture). These cultures, as initially proposed by A.P. Okladnikov (6) and then elaborated by

- (1) OKLADNIKOV, 1966.
- (2) LOUBINE, 1984.
- (3) KLEIN, 1966.
- (4) TOLSTOV, 1958.
- (5) LUZGIN and RANOV, 1966.
- (6) OKLADNIKOV, 1966.

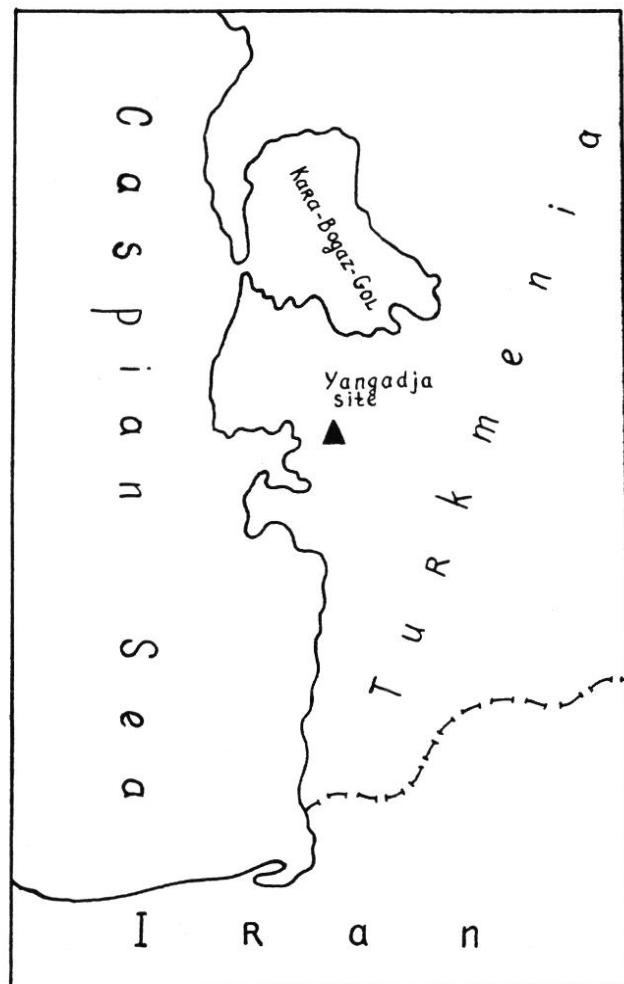


FIG. 1. — Map with the locality of Yangadja site.

V.A. Ranov (7), are rooted in Southeast Asian traditions. On the other hand, the influence of European and Near-Eastern traditions and the occurrence of handaxes in Pleistocene cultures has been

- (7) RANOV, 1984.

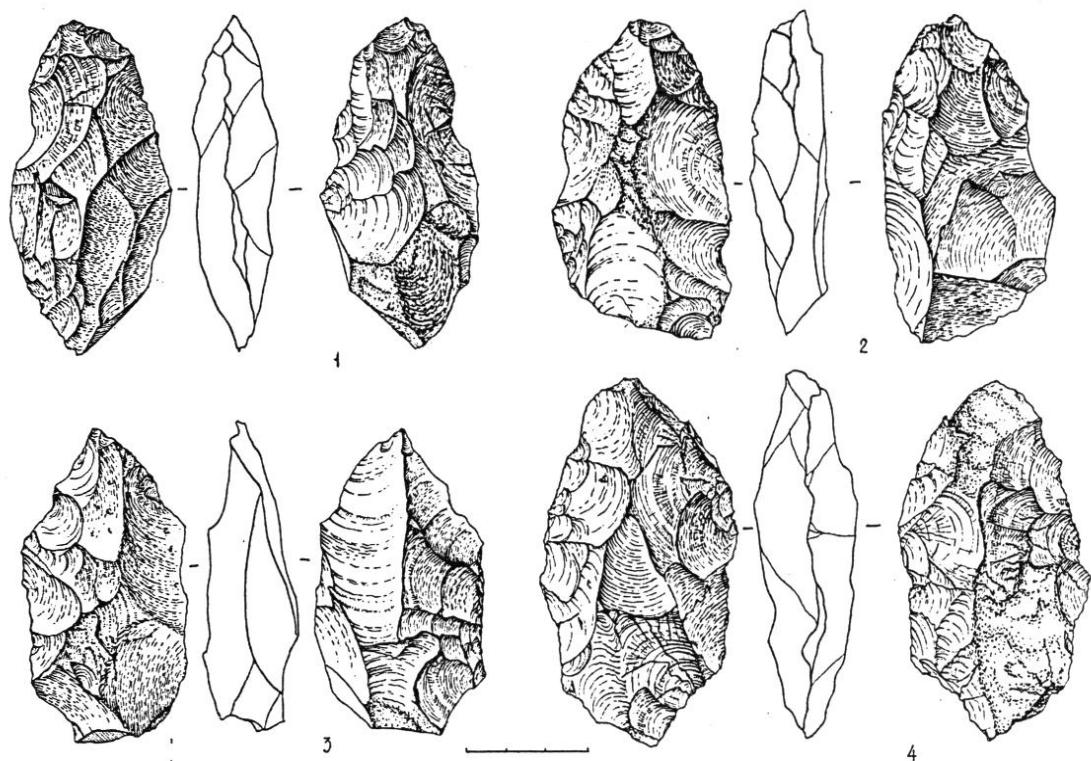


FIG. 2. — Bifaces from the site of Yangadja, Western Turkmenia.

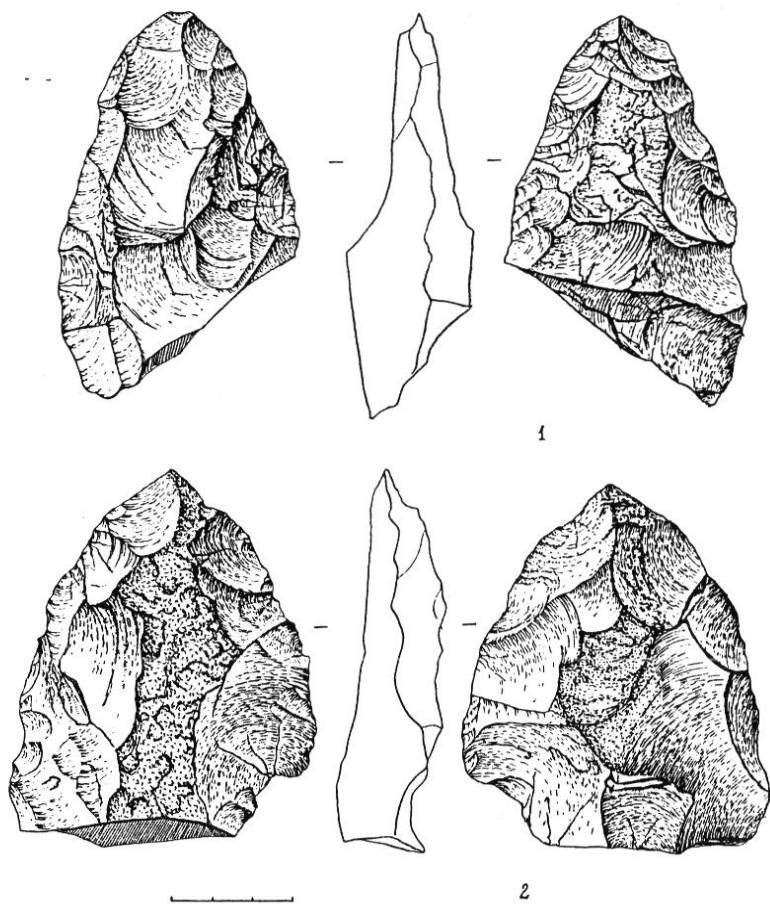


FIG. 3. — Broken bifaces from the site of Yangadja, Western Turkmenia.

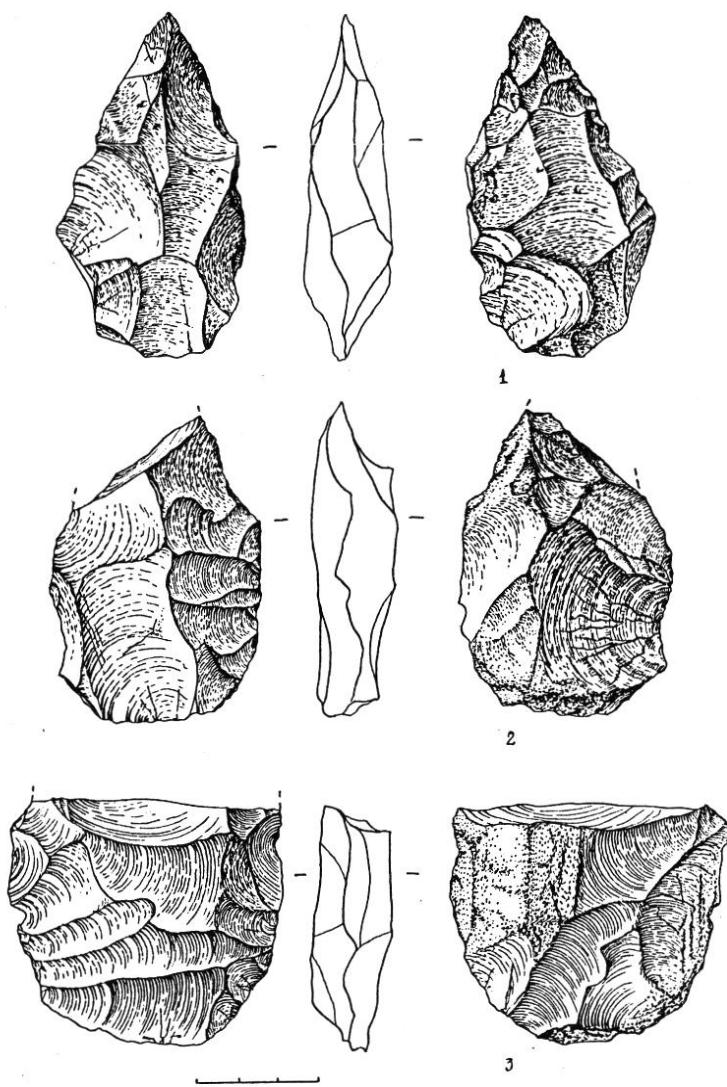


FIG. 4. — Broken bifaces from the site of Yangadja, Western Turkmenia.

postulated for western regions. However, real evidence of such occurrences, as I have shown before, were practically absent.

Such evidence appeared just now. In 1987, a research team from the Institute of Archaeology (Leningrad) was engaged in field reconnaissance in Western Turkmenia. During the brief examination of the giant palaeolithic workshop on the southern slope of Krasnovodsk plateau, not far from Yangadja railway-station (fig. 1), a section with some biface tools, and identified handaxes among them, came to light. From this section, located on distinct hills, only bifaces, flakes and a few shapeless cores were collected; there was no other tool. So far, the total number of bifaces is no more than twenty, and only part of them are true handaxes: some are, perhaps, half-finished products intended to be points or something else (fig. 2). However, at least four of the bifaces are finally or almost finally

prepared handaxes, some of which, unfortunately, came to us broken (fig. 3 and 4). All the tools from the site are made of local flint, available in the area. It is worth mentioning that the surface of all the artifacts from the biface complex are covered by intensive desert patina. This feature is indicative of the relative age of our surface finds, because no traces of desert patina were found on the neolithic tools made of the same flint, which are scattered in the vicinity. Obviously, such an observation does not enable to determine precisely the age of the handaxes, but it is evident that it should be looked for in the Pleistocene period. It can be hoped that future complex archaeological-geological investigations will help clear up the dating problem, but if we are to consider the handaxes from a typological point of view, then, the conclusion about the conformity with acheulean tools of the type is, as it seems to me, a quite realistic one.

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