

**ВОЛЬШОЙ ШИГИРСКИЙ ИДОЛ В КОНТЕКСТЕ ИСКУССТВА
КАМЕННОГО ВЕКА СЕВЕРНОЙ ЕВРАЗИИ – THE GREAT SHIGIR IDOL
IN THE CONTEXT OF THE STONE-AGE ART OF NORTHERN EURASIA¹**
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Russia has a long tradition of research into Stone-Age art and prehistory. Prehistoric cultural artefacts made of organic materials have often been preserved extremely well in the marshland environments of its boreal forests. Furthermore, the availability of ‘living’ ethnographic material, providing a wealth of excellent analogies, has helped a great deal in interpreting archaeological finds.

The artefact known as the ‘Shigir Idol’, discovered in 1890 in a peat bog between Yekaterinburg and Nizhny Tagil on the eastern side of the Central Urals, is exceptionally important. Over the last century, a number of attempts have been made to determine the age of this carved larch-wood statue, which is of a type that Hungarian researchers would be most likely to recognise from literature on the Finno-Ugric peoples.⁴ Initially, based on typological similarities, it was dated variously to the Iron Age, the Bronze Age or the Neolithic period, but the latest absolute radiocarbon dating efforts have led to a re-evaluation of the part the wooden statue plays in the prehistory of Northern Eurasia. The conference was organised in order to discuss this issue, and the presentations all concerned the context of the idol within the Mesolithic and Neolithic periods of the Eastern European arboreal zone and the Urals.

At the end of the Pleistocene, the Eastern European arboreal zone and the Urals underwent major environmental change in concert, which resulted in rapid warming beginning 10,300 years BP; and it is also considered the boundary between the Palaeolithic and the Mesolithic period.⁵ In all probability, the Central Urals became suitable for human habitation at the very end of the Palaeolithic or the beginning of the early Mesolithic periods. Such conjecture seems to be supported by the Shigir Idol, archaeological material from caves on the



Fig. 1. The “great Shigir idol” in the Sverdlovsk Regional Museum

¹ We would like to take this opportunity to thank Prof. Mikhail Zsilin (Russian Academy of Science, Moscow) for the invitation to participate in this conference.

² Buda Castle Property Development and Operation Non-profit Ltd., Budapest

³ Dobó István Vármúzeum [The István Dobó Castle Museum], Eger

⁴ MOSINSZKAJA 1980.

⁵ SAVCHENKO 2003.



Fig. 2. A showcase in the Shigir collection of the Sverdlovsk Regional Museum

eastern side of the Urals and the dating of the Shigir collection held at the Sverdlovsk Museum.⁶ Over the last century, a number of attempts were made to date the Shigir Idol, many people conjectured that it was from the Iron Age, the Bronze Age or the Neolithic period. But the first absolute dating confirmed that it was from the Mesolithic, and the latest Accelerator Mass Spectrometry (AMS) tests performed on samples from within the statue, performed in 2014, put the date a little further back; today the research group believes that the statue was made at the beginning of the Mesolithic period.⁷ Based on the new dates, the Shigir Idol can be considered the most ancient Mesolithic wooden sculpture in the world. In addition, it is assumed that the region also had advanced bone and stone industries at the time, with Mesolithic links pointing to the Eastern European arboreal zone (all the way to the Upper Volga area, the region of present day Estonia and Finland) and the Ust' Kama culture and Yangelka culture of the Southern Urals.⁸

The international conference on the issue of the Shigir Idol was organised cooperatively by the German and Russian institutes of archaeology and culture (Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Niedersächsische Landesamt für Denkmalpflege, the Ministry of Culture of Sverdlovsk Oblast, the Sverdlovsk Regional Museum of Local Lore, the Institute of History and Archaeology of the Urals Section of the Russian Academy of Sciences and the Institute of Archaeology of the Russian Academy of Sciences). Many presentations were given on research concerning the large Shigir find discovered at the end of the 19th century. In addition to the AMS dating of the idol carved from larch wood—which is 2.8m tall in its present condition, Thomas Terberger—there were presentations on the analysis of tool markings on the idol (Mikhail Zhilin), the dendrochronological examination of the material of the object (Karl-Uwe Heussner), and the interpretation of the motifs carved into it (Svetlana Savchenko). There is no consensus among researchers on the cultural

⁶ САВЧЕНКО et al. 2011; ЧАИРКИН–ЖИЛИН 2005.

⁷ ЖИЛИН et al. 2016.

⁸ ЖИЛИН 2001; ZHILIN et al. 2014;



Fig. 3. Professor Mikhail Zhilin and Svetlana Savchenko (in front) presenting the pieces of the Shigir exhibition of the Sverdlovsk Regional Museum

or the chronological classification of the find, and the scientific debate about these questions continued at the conference. The most widely supported view, based on the results of the most recent AMS measurements, is that the Shigir Idol was made during the Mesolithic period, but in her presentation Ekaterina Kashina explained some aspects of the object that might bring that supposition into question. In her view, due to the find's circumstances of discovery (in the course of mining activities), its archaeological context is unknown, while the stylistic parallels of its ornamentation suggest a later date, most probably the Copper Age.

The remaining presentations at the conference concerned the various representations of the spiritual culture of the Eurasian Stone Age (primarily figurative imagery and abstract motifs), and the theories concerning the symbolic behaviours and cognition of the communities of the period that have been elaborated on this basis. Our own presentation concerned the small number of archaeological artefacts (e.g. the Istállóskő bone flute, the Bodrogheresztúr 'lunar calendar' and the fossilised snail shells from the Danube Bend) that can be considered Upper Palaeolithic art in a wider sense, and the possible reasons for the lack of further objects known to us that can be associated with the same field of study.

The scholars presenting their research at the conference also included Olaf Jöris (Forschungszentrum und Museum für menschliche Verhaltensevolution, Neuwied), who studied representations of the human form from the Upper Palaeolithic in order to shed light on aspects of social identity; Ludmila Lbova (Russian Academy of Sciences, Siberian Section, Novosibirsk), who classified Siberian Upper Palaeolithic jewellery on the basis of production technologies and morphology, and attributed varied social significance to the classes; and Peter Vang Petersen (Nationalmuseet, Copenhagen) who shared his research results on the possible role, primarily the memetic meaning of the zigzag motifs of the late Upper Palaeolithic and the Mesolithic (appearing, amongst others, on the Shigir Idol as well). The Estonian researcher Tõnno Jonuks (Eesti Kirjandusmuuseum, Tartu) interpreted the carved elk antler figurine found on its own on the bottom

of the River Pärnu in relation to the Oleni Island cemetery in Lake Onega. In the final presentation of the conference, Sabine Reinhold (Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Eurasien-Abteilung, Berlin) contrasted the human figures of the Eurasian stone stelae that appeared in the Copper Age with the Early Bronze Age with Stone-Age examples, highlighting the transformation of social values such as status and self-representation.

The conference summarised and presented the latest results and the future challenges of research in the region, placing particular emphasis on Stone-Age spiritual culture and social archaeology. For Hungarian researchers, the range of issues covered may be relevant from the perspective of Finno-Ugric prehistory and archaeology. In the future, it would be worthwhile to incorporate these latest research data into the study of Uralian Finno-Ugric prehistory.

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