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PALAEO-WEEK IN DRYANOVO (BULGARIA)

Two international conferences and an exhibition about the Upper Palaeolithic

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Owing to its geographical position, the territory of Bulgaria has often played an important role in the history of Europe. From the perspective of prehistory, the Neolithisation process and the rich metalworking of the Copper Age are particularly well known. For a long time, however, little was known about the Palaeolithic period, although the mountain ranges of the Balkans contain key cave sites. One of these is Bacho Kiro Cave, which opens in a picturesque valley near Dryanovo (Fig. 1). The stalactite-filled passages of the cave are a well-known tourist attraction. The human bones discovered during the recent excavations have also made it a world-famous prehistoric archaeological site. These new research results provided the impetus for the organisation of two international conferences and a temporary exhibition.

Keywords: UISPP, Commission 8, Palaeo-week, Bulgaria, conference

Fig. 1. Entrance to Bacho Kiro Cave (photo by the author)

Within the world organisation of prehistoric and protohistoric sciences (Union Internationale des Sciences Préhistoriques et Protohistoriques, UISPP), commissions bring together researchers working on individual periods, geographical regions or specialised topics. These commissions help organise sessions for congresses and hold conferences in the years between congresses. As the discipline develops, commissions may cease to exist or new ones may be founded. The commission dealing with the Upper Palaeolithic of Eurasia (Commission 8) was established in 1976 at the 9th Congress in Nice, making it one of the oldest commissions that is still active today. Naturally, its themes have changed considerably over the course of its existence, as new methods, new results, and new discoveries have shifted the focus of research. At first, the main questions concerned the development, spread, and relationships of archaeological cultures. Later, attention turned to the processes of the Middle–Upper Palaeolithic transition, linked to the appearance of modern humans (*Homo sapiens sapiens*) and the disappearance of Neanderthals. With the spread of various isotope analyses, questions concerning the diet, way of life, and mobility of hunter-gatherer communities came to the fore. With the rapid advance of palaeogenetics and the discovery of Denisovans, greater emphasis was placed on populations and their genetic relationships.

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This commission regularly organises conferences whose aim is to review the current state of research on the Eurasian Upper Palaeolithic. In 2025, this was combined with the fiftieth anniversary of the commission's foundation. The secretary of the commission is the Bulgarian researcher Tsenka Tsanova, who was one of the key members of the latest Bacho Kiro research team and whose narrower field of expertise is the lithic industries of the earliest Upper Palaeolithic cultures. Her initiative, and the impeccable organisation of the Bacho Kiro 'Palaeo-Team' called to life the Dryanovo Palaeo-week and made the realisation of its rich programme possible. The programme and the abstracts of the papers are available online (accessed 11 May 2026).

Fig. 2. The Monastery of St Michael the Archangel (photo by the author)

The week began with the conference of UISPP Commission 8, entitled *Recent Updates on Eurasian Upper Palaeolithic*. On the occasion of the anniversary, Vice-President Ludmila Iakovleva gave a historical overview of the first fifty years of Commission 8, including its most important events, conferences, and publications. She highlighted the thematic diversity of its work, from the excavation of archaeological sites to environmental and chronological questions, lithic and bone industries, population history and art. One of the defining figures in this history from the foundation onwards was Prof. Janusz K. Kozłowski, who passed away in January 2025. He was commemorated by his former Bulgarian student Ivan Gatsov. Damian Flas's lecture on sixty years of research into the Lincombian–Ranisian–Jerzmanowician complex was also a tribute, as Kozłowski was the first to define this cultural unit on the basis of leaf points. The remaining thirteen lectures offered a broad panorama of new research being carried out in individual countries and regions, from the Iberian Peninsula to Japan. Hungary was represented by two papers. Zsolt Mester and Agnès Lamotte reassessed the appearance of a distinctive raw material, Świeciechów 'spotted' flint, in the Carpathian Basin in the light of new finds, while Csaba Bálint presented his research on identifying the geological sources of fossil snail shells recovered from Epigravettian sites in the Danube Bend. Berkay Dinçer's lecture on why Upper Palaeolithic sites are absent from western Anatolia was particularly interesting. Scholars have tried to explain this phenomenon by the short duration of the period, the depopulation of the area or the later destruction of sites. The assemblages found during recent field surveys, however, raise the possibility that cultures lived in Anatolia during this period whose technology differed radically from those known in Europe, creating the apparent absence.

Fig. 3. Waterfall of the Dryanovska River in the immediate vicinity of the cave (photo by the author)

The organisers devoted the whole of the second day to Bacho Kiro Cave. Even the six-kilometre

road leading there was impressive, running through the dramatic valley of the Dryanovska River to the Orthodox monastery dedicated to St Michael the Archangel (*Fig. 2*). Built in the twelfth century, the monastery was regarded as one of the centres of Bulgarian culture. For this reason, although the Ottoman Turks burned it down and destroyed it three times, the Bulgarians rebuilt it each time. During the 1876 uprising against Ottoman rule, the rebels led by Bacho Kiro fought a heroic battle at the monastery, commemorated by a monumental memorial. Near the cave named after the rebel leader, the river plunges spectacularly over the rocks in a waterfall (*Fig. 3*).

The first Palaeolithic finds in the cave were discovered by a local caver. This led to the first excavation in 1938, directed by the American archaeologist Dorothy Garrod, who extended her Near Eastern research to the Balkans (Garrod *et al.* 1939). In the rich sequence, which yielded lithic and bone tools, animal bones and hearths, she identified Middle Palaeolithic Mousterian layers below and Upper Palaeolithic Aurignacian layers above. This showed that the territory of Bulgaria formed a corridor between the Near East and Central Europe. Bacho Kiro Cave thus became internationally known as a key site for this connection. The next excavation took place between 1971 and 1975 under the direction of the Polish archaeologists Janusz K. Kozłowski and Bolesław Ginter and the Bulgarian archaeologist Nikolay Sirakov (Kozłowski 1982). This time the main question was the origin of the Aurignacian culture, whose arrival in Europe was thought to have taken place through the Danube Valley. This idea seemed to be supported by the 43,000-year-old dates from the lower layer of Istállós-kő Cave (Geyh *et al*. 1969, 10; Vogel & Waterbolk 1972, 63). In Layer 11 of the sequence unearthed by the Polish–Bulgarian excavation, stone tools were found that appeared to be a predecessor of the European Aurignacian lithic industry. By the 2000s, it had become clear that many more cultural units could be identified at the beginning of the Upper Palaeolithic. It also became clear that modern human populations arrived in Europe in several waves and at several chronological horizons, carrying different cultures. This renewed the interest in the excavation of Bacho Kiro Cave, carried out jointly by the Max Planck Institute in Leipzig and the Institute of Archaeology of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences between 2015 and 2021.

The stratigraphic sequence excavated with the most modern methods, together with the associated laboratory analyses, produced sensational results. During the excavation it became clear that a small rock shelter lies to the left of the cave entrance, where the lowest layers were well preserved (*Fig. 4*). These correspond to Layer 11 of the Polish–Bulgarian excavations. Further human remains were discovered among the bones (Hublin *et al.* 2020). Genetic analysis of the teeth identified at least six individuals who belonged to the same population but were not related to one another. This population, estimated at around 400 people, had mixed with Neanderthals twice. Most surprisingly, the Upper Palaeolithic population of Europe

Fig. 4. Profile of the new excavations conducted between 2015 and 2021 in the side rock shelter. The dark layer visible at the bottom yielded the rich assemblage (photo by the author)

Fig. 5. Exhibition on the new research results from Bacho Kiro Cave in the local history museum at the opening ceremony (photo by the author)

Fig. 6. Paleo Wine collection prepared by Lafchiyski Winery for the event (photo by the author)

did not descend from this population that lived in the Balkans 46,000–43,000 years ago, but from later arrivals. The later genetic relatives of the modern humans from Bacho Kiro are instead found in East Asia and the Americas. On the basis of the rich lithic assemblage from the rock shelter, it was shown that their stone-tool technology belonged to the tradition characteristic of the Initial Upper Palaeolithic (IUP) in Eurasia. It has close connections with IUP industries in the Near East (Tsanova *et al.* 2024).

To present the new research results, a temporary exhibition entitled *Legacy in Stone and Bone: Homo sapiens at 45,000 Years in Bacho Kiro Cave* was organised in the History Museum in Dryanovo (*Fig. 5*). Posters on the walls presented the research history of the site and the new excavations, as well as the results of the analyses, and, as a thoughtful gesture, photographs also introduced the teams that took part in the excavations. Since the entire research project was carried out with the most modern, multidisciplinary approach, separate posters dealt with the individual fields and also explained the methods used: stratigraphy, sediments, dating, anthropology and palaeogenetics, fauna, flora, the types and origins of lithic raw materials, the typology and technology of knapped stone tools and bone tools, use-wear analysis, and the spread of modern humans. In the display cases, visitors could study selected groups of finds from the excavations. The opening ceremony of the exhibition was one of the highlights of the Palaeo-week, and for this occasion the local Lafchiyski Winery prepared a special Paleo Wine collection (*Fig. 6*).

The new research results have placed the significance and role of the site at the beginning of the European Upper Palaeolithic in a new light. This provided the impetus for a large international conference, which offered a very rich scientific programme over the following two days. The conference entitled *Origins and Development of the Eurasian Initial Upper Palaeolithic* set out to examine the emergence of the Upper Palaeolithic from many different perspectives, from the Iberian Peninsula through the Near East to Japan. Specialists from thirteen countries presented and discussed the current state of knowledge on IUP industries in thirty papers, together with the problems that have arisen and the theoretical and methodological questions involved. Nicholas Zwyns opened the conference with a kind of discussion paper, in which he reviewed developments in IUP research over the past decade. In their 2014 article, co-authored with Steven Kuhn, they proposed that the technological characteristics of the earliest blade industries known from sites in Israel, Jordan and Lebanon formed a global phenomenon, as they could be identified in Central and South-Eastern Europe, western Siberia, and as far as Mongolia (Kuhn & Zwyns 2014). He concluded that new discoveries, thorough dating programmes, and a series of palaeogenetic analyses had greatly advanced our knowledge of IUP communities. These new results did not simply confirm the suggestion made ten years earlier, but showed the phenomenon to be much more widespread, complex, and varied. The subsequent papers discussed IUP sites and industries from many points of view. Hungary was represented by a new interpretation of the lithic assemblages from the Andornaktálya sites. On the basis of her own analyses, Tsenka Tsanova introduced into international research the idea that the macroblade industry previously recognised by Kozłowski (Mester *et al.* 2021) also bears the characteristics of the IUP tradition. In addition to chronology, subsistence, raw-material management and the use of ornaments, the papers also addressed regional characteristics and new discoveries. At times lively debates developed, which always have a beneficial effect on the progress of scholarship, especially on occasions such as this, where the researchers concerned can meet in person.

The Bulgarian organisers deserve every praise for the scientific meeting and the excellent experience.

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