Stránská Skála: Origins of the Upper Paleolithic in the Brno Basin, Moravia, Czech Republic

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Review by LEONID VISHNYATSKY
Institute for the History of Material Culture, Dvortsovaya nab. 18, St. Petersburg, 191186, RUSSIA

This volume consists of 12 chapters and 6 appendixes, written by Czech and American archaeologists and natural scientists. Each paper acquaints the reader with a specific aspect of the research carried out at the famous Early Upper Paleolithic site of Stránská skála. During at least the last 20 years this site has played a very important and ever-increasing role in the discussion of various problems associated with the Middle to Upper Paleolithic transition in Europe. Most of the reported research was done in the course of the joint Czech-American project from 1997-1999.

The first two articles give general information on the history of research (Chapter 1 by J.A. Svoboda and K. Valoch), and chronostratigraphy of the site (J.A. Svoboda's Chapter 2). Figure 1.8, showing the plan of the site together with the stratigraphic correlation scheme of the main trenches, and Table 2.1, containing all 14C dates available for the Paleolithic layers Stránská skála, are particularly useful. Chapter 3 (K. Valoch) briefly recapitulates the results of 1982 excavation of Stránská skála III-1, published in detail elsewhere (Valoch et al. 2000). Although not lengthy, but informative and rich in good illustrations, are Chapters 4 (L. Jarošová) and 5 (G. Monnier), which are devoted, respectively, to the horizontal and vertical distribution of finds in different trenches, and Chapter 6 (A. Přichystal, J.A. Svoboda, P. Škrdla), which describes the stone raw materials used by the Paleolithic inhabitants of the Stránská skála area.

Chapter 7 (P. Škrdla, "Bohunician and Aurignacian Technologies. Morphological Description") is interesting for its numerous and well made stone tool drawings. Unfortunately, some references to illustrations either lead the reader to no illustration or in a wrong direction. For instance, there is no Figure 7.6s drawing or Figure 7.8n drawing. There is also no Figure 7.7t drawing, and, what is more, there are no crested blades at this figure at all. Some of terminology is also confusing. It would be helpful, for example, if when using the terms "cores of Upper Paleolithic type" and "prismatic cores" to designate different groups of nuclei, the author explained what he meant by the first category ("cores of Upper Paleolithic type"). While it is true that he does this in Chapter 9, the use of this terminology in Chapter 7, without explanation at that point, may puzzle readers who are not familiar with previous publications on the subject. In addition, I think the term "cores of Upper Paleolithic type" should not be used to designate just one of the many types of cores characteristic of the Upper Paleolithic (This would be analogous to using the term "cores of Middle Paleolithic type" to name some specific type of Middle Paleolithic cores). This is highlighted by the fact that all the cores in question, that is, those reduced by means of the *lame à crete* technique, are often also found in Middle Paleolithic contexts (as Škrdla himself notes in his chapter 9, p. 144, and as was also stressed by others (e.g. Nehoroshev 1999: 34-35).

Chapter 8 (G.B. Tostevin, "Attribute Analysis of the Lithic Technologies of Stránská skála IIIc and IIId in Regional and Interregional Context") includes a description of Tostevin's original method of attribute analysis of technology designed for inter-assemblage comparison. I note that the first detailed description of this method was published in Russian (Tostevin 2000). The application of this methodology to the study of two of Stránská skála collections with subsequent comparisons between them and other Central European and Near Eastern materials is the second contribution of this chapter. The chapter contains much useful information on technological characteristics of the assemblages under study. However, it seems somewhat strange that the collection of Stránská skála IIIc is analyzed as if its homogeneity was beyond any doubt, whereas it is quite possible that it has an admixture of Aurignacian materials, as shown by G. Monnier in Chapter 5 (p. 53).

Tostevin's subject is technology, not typology, and it is quite understandable that in noting in passing that "Upper Paleolithic tool types dominate the tool kit of Stránská skála IIIc", he sends the reader for further details to Chapter 2 (p. 95). In fact, Chapter 2 is devoted to chronology and stratigraphy, and says nothing about typology, which is considered rather in Svoboda's Chapter 10 ("Bohunician and Aurignacian Typology at Stránská skála"). Unfortunately Svoboda's chapter gives only a very general description of the Stránská skála tool assemblages. I think the book would have benefited from additional discussion of the typological characteristics of the Bohunician and Aurignacian complexes, including an explanation of exactly why one of the complexes should be considered Aurignacian (By no means do I assert that this complex is not Aurignacian, rather I mean only that, in some cases, the descriptions and drawings are not enough to demonstrate this complex is Aurignacian). In general my feeling is that "good old typology" is treated by the editors as a sort of archaeological Cinderella, which can be neglected after its work is done. As to the tool assemblage of Stránská skála IIIc, according to Table 10.1, it consists of only nine items, while Table 8.1

includes 201 tools, and Table 8.18 gives data on 87 tools. It is difficult to believe that such a large discrepancy results from the exclusion from Table 10.1 of non-retouched items such as Levallois points.

Chapter 9 (P. Škrdla, "Bohunician Technology: A Refitting Approach") is in my view one of the most important and interesting papers in the volume. First, it gives a very detailed, well illustrated, and absolutely convincing reconstruction of the core reduction technologies used by the Bohunician settlers of Stránská skála. Second, it shows, once again, the great potential of refitting for technological studies. Third, it clearly demonstrates what many of us know in theory, but tend to forget in practice, namely how unreliable in some cases our judgements about technology can be, if they are based on simple morphological observations only.

Both Škrdla with Tostevin and the editors of the volume seem to concur that the origin of the Bohunician should be considered a result of a migration from the Near East. This is now a widely held view based on the similarity between Stránská skála and some of the Emiran industries (demonstrated, for example, in Tostevin's chapter). Another possibility is to assume a local Central or East European origin of the Bohunician technology, but no clear Middle Paleolithic predecessors have yet been found in these regions. Even if one accepts the hypothesis of a Near Eastern origin of the Bohunician, however, it does not lead automatically to the acceptance of the idea that this industry was brought to Europe by expanding anatomically modern humans. While Škrdla emphasizes "that the technological transfer from the Levant to Moravia occurred some 45,000 to 40,000 years ago, during a period most probably connected with the first migrations of early anatomically modern humans into Europe" (p. 151), Bar-Yosef and Svoboda (chapter 12, "Discussion") note that "none of the Emiro-Bohunician sites of Eurasia provided human fossils" (p. 175). So, why anatomically modern humans? Might not it have been that the Neanderthals retreated from the Near East to their old motherland (Europe) with the arrival of African populations and brought with them some exotic technologies? After all, we do not know who left the materials of Boker Tachtit and other Emiran sites, and there is no firm evidence that anatomically modern humans were present in Europe prior to 36 kyr bp.

There is also Chapter 11 by A. Šajnerová, introducing the first results of the use-wear analysis of some Stránská skála artifacts, and Appendixes A-F, describing the site geophysics (V. Hašek), geology of its Quaternary deposits (P. Havliček and J.A. Svoboda), soil micromorphology (L. Smoliková), frost features (T. Czudek), palynology (H, Svobodová), and faunal remains (R. Musil).

To conclude, it is to be greatly appreciated that such a large amount of diverse and good quality data about Stránská skála is now presented in one volume. In general, and despite some minor omissions, this is a very informative and well edited volume, which certainly will be widely used and widely cited by students and researchers of the Early Upper Paleolithic of Eurasia.

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