

Archaeological Introduction

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The NWBS region (Fig. 1b) is rich in archaeological resources (Tsetskhladze, 2001). It holds some of the most significant evidence of human prehistory and history in the region, much of which was closely associated with the "cradle of civilization" in the Near East. The NWBS region can be counted among the world's very best outdoor laboratories for studying the adaptation of Anatomically Modern Humans [AMH], who occupied and used the land for more than 40,000 years. Long-abandoned archaeological sites and historic landscapes of the NWBS region give us important insights into the ways human activities and the environment have been linked together through time, and how cultural practices (e.g., overkill of bison by the Late Paleolithic/Early Mesolithic hunters: Stanko, 2006) contributed to substantial environmental change, leading to subsequent changes in human economy.

The earliest traces of human presence have been found in the Lower Dniester region (site of Jolubets next to the village of Labushna, Kodyma district, Odessa region, ca. 600 ky BP) and are referred to the latest phases of the Acheulian industry. Since that time, occupation in this region shows no breaks, with a continuous sequence of sites and settlements attributable to all subsequent archaeological periods.

Evidence for the Early and Middle Paleolithic inhabitants of the region is rather scarce and mostly represented by sites left by Mousterian hunters and cave bears (the cave Il'inka, Karantinnaya Balka near Odessa) and a poorly studied site in the city of Belgorod-Dnestrovsky.

The origins of contemporary modern humans and the transition to the Late Paleolithic in the NWBS region can be traced archaeologically. The earliest known site of this period is Belyaevka (in the center of Belyaevka district, Odessa region), dated to 30 ky BP. The most illustrative Late Paleolithic sites are attributed to the LGM bison hunters. Among these sites are Anetovka 2 (Domanevsky district, Nikolayev region) reflecting peculiarities of cult practice among the local population, Bol'shaya Akkarzha (Ovidiopol district, Odessa region) illustrating the spatial organization of their life, and others resulting mostly from population migration out of Central and Eastern Europe.

The period of glacial retreat and the transition to the Holocene (17-10 kyr BP) is marked by a general redistribution of population and fundamental changes in the environment. Local bison hunters faced a subsistence crisis caused by a significant reduction in bison herds due to repeated overkills during the previous period. This forced them to move northward into familiar ecological zones in an effort to preserve their traditional mode of life. The interaction between new inhabitants penetrating into the NBSW region from the Balkans, Crimean Mountains, and the Caucasus with the few remaining bison hunters of the Anetovka Culture adapting to their new climatic, geomorphological, and ecological situation became the setting for the transition to the Mesolithic phase of NWBS occupation (10-6 ky BP). Early Mesolithic hunters seeking non-gregarious game (mainly aurochs) are represented by the cultures of Beloles'e (Lower Danube region), Tsarinka-Rogalik (Dniester-Pivdenny, Bug, and Dnieper basins), and Anetovka (Pivdennyi Bug basin). They formed the basis for the transition to the Late Mesolithic phase, marked by interaction between the Kukrek (or Late Anetovka) and Grebeniki cultural groups. The first attempts at cattle domestication (capture and feeding of juvenile aurochs) have been traced at the base camp of Mirnoe (Kilia district, Odessa region, Lower Danube basin), showing archaeological signs of simultaneous occupation by Grebeniki and Kukrek populations.

Neolithic sites are very scarce in the NWBS region and are localized mostly near the steppe/ forest-steppe boundary. Subsequently, the Eneolithic became the new cultural phase, which was characterized most prominently by barrows. The most striking

archaeological presence in this period was the Usatovo Culture, representing the latest phase of the Tripolye Culture development, which was connected with the formation and dissemination of new lifeways based on cultivation and cattle breeding (4-3 ky BCE).

The Bronze Age of the NWBS region reveals cultures widely distributed over Eastern and Central Europe, among which were the nomadic population of the Pit-Grave Culture (3 ky BCE, Budjak group), and, migrating from territories located to the east, transmitters of the Catacomb Culture (beginning of 2nd millennium BCE, Ingul group). This process resulted in the start of mixed farming, pottery cultures (16th-14th century BCE, southwestern group), and upon this foundation, the formation of the Sabatinovka Culture, of which the economy was already based on the conjunction of cultivation and cattle breeding (14th-12th century BCE, western or Bug-Dniester variant), and further development of this tradition in the framework of the Belozerskaya Culture (12th-9th century BCE).

The beginning of the 1st millennium BCE was marked by the transition to the Iron Age, the earliest representatives of which in the region under study were nomadic Cimmerians, known mostly by their burials in the Dniester-Danube interfluvium. The most striking transformation of the NWBS population came with the penetration of nomadic Scythians from the eastern part of Eurasian steppes (7th century BCE). Scythian culture imposed a substantial imprint on the further history of the local population. Nearly simultaneously, the NWBS region became subject to ancient Greek colonization. The population of numerous poleis founded along the Black Sea shore, adjacent limans, and mouths of major tributary rivers was engaged in active trading and, in the process, making social and political contact with nomadic Scythians. Hellenization of the latter was accompanied by the wide diffusion of Scythian armament, which is reflected in most archaeological complexes of this period.

A new crisis arose in the local population history between the 3rd and 1st century BCE when nomadic Sarmatians moved into the NWBS region. Due to their active outside contacts (often in the form of armed conflicts), they became the main driving force for cultural and economic development in the region up to the 5th century CE. Late phases of this period were marked by the distribution of Chernyakhiv monuments connected with the penetration of Germanic tribes (Goths affiliated with Germanarich's state) into the Lower Danube region and adjacent steppe territories (3-4 centuries CE).

After that time, the NWBS region became a corridor through which nomads of different origins and ethnic affiliation (Huns, Slavs, Avars, Ost-Goths, Kutrigurs, Bulgarians, and others) moved in different directions. These transigrations are poorly represented archaeologically. Most illustrative in this context are materials of the Balkan-Danubian Culture (9-11 centuries CE), in which artifacts of the local Slavonic population (connected with the famous Prague Early Medieval Slavonic culture) often reveal clear Turkic traits. Since the 10th century, Pechenegs and, soon after them, Polovtsy penetrated into the region, defining its historical development up to the 13 century, when the Golden Horde took the territory under its protection.

One of the most striking features in the cultural development of the NWBS region since the earliest times is the unique openness of the area for intercultural contacts, including interaction of different kinds at different scales. The far-reaching historical consequences of such interaction were caused fundamentally by the environmental character of the region, and by the history of the Black Sea itself.