

The Oldest Settlement in the Odra Valley (SW Poland)

Andrzej WIŚNIEWSKI

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The Odra Valley constitutes the axis of the Silesian Lowland cutting through its plains in the SE-NW direction. It belongs to the system of the central-European valleys considered the corridor for the Palaeolithic settlement expanding from the south. The research carried out so far shows that in terms of the period of the settlement and the manner of exploitation of the natural environment the area does not differ from the neighbouring, central-European regions, such as the zone of the Elbe, the Saale and the Elster situated in the west.

The work aims at presenting the latest results of the research allowing for the chronological, technological and palaeoecological aspects of the oldest evidence of human presence in the Odra Valley and its edges. The first two issues were the subject of other projects carried out in 2000-2003 financed by the Polish Committee of Scientific Research.

The oldest traces of the exploitation of the Odra Valley are dated to 8 - 7 OIS and in terms of taxonomy they are related to unidentified flake industries from the Lower Palaeolithic (Wrocław, Skarbowców street). The older Middle Palaeolithic complexes or individual finds are related to 7 and 6 OIS (Poland: Bieńkowice A, Owsiszcze, Racibórz Studzienna 2, Racibórz-Ocice—lower horizon; Wrocław, Hallera street, site 1—lower horizon; Czech Republic: Bohuslavice, Polanka). The younger phase of the Middle Palaeolithic is represented by, among others, complexes from Wrocław: Hallera street, site 1—upper horizon, Oporów, site A1 and A2—lower and upper horizons, as well as by more numerous but poorer sites situated in the upper section of the Odra Valley (e.g. Kornice 11, Racibórz Ocice—upper horizon). The chronology of the finds is based on the results of the chronometric examination carried out with the use of EPR, TL and OSL methods as well as on the stratigraphic correlation with, among others, loess deposits typical for this region, which carry with traces of pedogenesis and horizons of boulder clay from Scandinavian glaciations.

The discovered evidence represents various types of human activity: 1. workshops situated on the deposits of flint raw material; 2. camps within higher elements of the relief; 3. locality related to hunting practices carried out lower in the valleys (lower terraces with limnic reservoirs). In term of palaeoecology the finds are related to human exploitation of the open landscape with steppe or tundra fauna. At present no "certain sites" occurring in the context of "warm bioms" are known (the Great Interglacial, Eem).

Production was based almost solely on the Baltic erratic flint of mediocre quality. The raw material was acquired in the local deposits from the Middle- or South-Polish glaciations. Reconstruction of operation chain and the palaeoeconomic behaviour is possible for selected assemblages recently acquired in Wrocław - more numerous and better preserved than those from the upper section of the Odra Valley (Wrocław, site 1 in Hallera street, Wrocław Oporów, site A1 and A2). However, the approximations can not be presented diachronically as the sources in question are too far apart in time. The selected sites representing the three basic functional categories display certain differences in terms of manner and intensity of lithic raw material exploitation.

1. Wrocław, Hallera street, site 1-lower horizon. The complex of the workshop character displays the evidence of the use of short-lived "testing" reduction and of the extreme "consumption" of raw material blocks of better quality following the principle of technological opportunism. The refitting blocks testify to the existence of the pragmatic attitude manifested by the adaptation of the manner of flaking to the shape of a flint block.

2. Wrocław, Hallera street, site 1-upper horizon. The complex interpreted as a camp displayed the evidence of the application of the project of flake tool production based on the blanks acquired with the method of limited predetermination and the production of tools with the shaping method. There is no evidence of testing the raw material to the same extent as in the lower horizon of the discussed site.

3. Wrocław Oporów, site A1 and A2 (lower horizon). The sites identified with the hunting activities are to a great extent damaged by taphonomic processes due to their location in the bottom of the valley, where the river channels frequently re-emerged. The research carried out so far proves that humans imported the flint raw material to the valley and worked it intensively. Retouched tools, including the forms with traces of rejuvenation or reworking, occur individually, while the elements of "simple" debitage predominate.

Increasingly more numerous finds from the Odra Valley, and especially from its middle section, fill in the gap existing not so long ago in the cartography of the Middle- and Upper-Pleistocene settlement in central Europe. The discoveries prove that colonisation of the northern areas in the oldest stages of the Pleistocene happened, with a few exceptions, evenly within the corridors constituted by the valleys of great rivers. So far no absolute evidence has been found that the area was, according to certain theories from the past, solely a transit zone at the oldest stage of settlement. This concept was based on the scarce material from the upper section of the Odra Valley. The research carried out now provides the complexes of diversified numbers and structure, which bear evidence of the connection with the complex spatial and functional organisation, similarly as in other central-European regions. The specific character of the complexes constituting the oldest stages in the colonisation of the Odra Valley should be looked for at the technological level considering the relations between the characteristics of the raw material and the manner of carrying out the production tasks.