Carpentry dates back to Mesolithic

Malcolm C. Lillie, Mikhail Zhilin, Svetlana Shavchenko & Maisie Taylor

To date, only limited evidence exists for carpentry in hunter-gatherer contexts in Europe (Mellars & Dark 1998). This paper considers that work and highlights the fact that new evidence emerging from the former Soviet Union continues to enhance our understanding of past human society and its complexity (Lillie 1998).

It has recently been suggested that there is evidence for early prehistoric carpentry from the well-known Mesolithic site of Star Carr in England (Mellars & Dark 1998). This evidence took the form of a number of timbers identified and sampled during excavations in 1985 and 1989. The timbers are thought to have formed a platform, which extended for a distance of *c.* 2.5m across the excavated areas (Mellars *et al.* 1998). Two of the timbers studied in 1989 were longer than those in the main platform, being 3.35m and 3.20m in length and 0.34m and 0.15m in width respectively. One of these was clearly split radially from the trunk of an Aspen (Mellars *et al.* 1998).

The evidence from the stratigraphy suggested to the excavators that the timbers of the platform corresponded closely to the earliest phase of human activity at Star Carr, which is placed at c. 8770-8690 cal BC (Mellars & Dark 1998). Maisie Taylor (Taylor 1998) has concluded that ten samples of Aspen and Willow have clear evidence for artificial splitting and a number of these have further evidence for additional trimming and shaping. Both tangential and radial splitting across the grain is in evidence on the pieces studied, and occasional evidence for tool marks occurs, along with splintering on the surfaces, this latter feature is diagnostic of a deliberately split surface (Mellars *et al.* 1998).

The age of the woodworking at Star Carr makes this evidence of considerable significance given the paucity of comparable material. In fact, at the time of writing, Taylor suggested that the sophisticated splitting of large timbers up to 0.35m in diameter and over 3m in length was unparalleled in Europe.

However, it has been noted recently that continuing collaboration with colleagues in Eastern Europe is increasingly providing western scholars with access to literature and archaeological material for use in comparative studies. The remainder of this paper aims to highlight evidence for Mesolithic carpentry that is both more complete and in certain respects, more sophisticated than that in evidence at Star Carr.

The Shigirsky peat bog is located to the immediate south of the river Severnaya Shuraly and the Urals to the west. A number of river channels flow through the bog, which also has three small lakes in its surface. Intermittent surveys and excavations have been undertaken at the bog since 1879. In recent years excavation and survey has been carried out by the Institute of History and Archaeology, Urals branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences and the Scientific and Practical Center for the protection and exploration of cultural and historical monuments, Sverdlovsk region.

https://doi.org/10.15184/S2978855200904682 Published online by Cambridge University Press

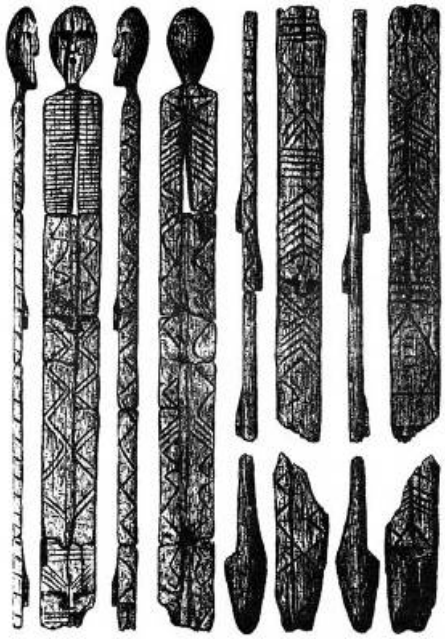


Figure 1. *The Shigirsky Idol (after Chairkina et al. 2001 - supplied by Svetlana Shavchenko).*

In excess of 3000 finds have been recovered from the peat bog, including oars, sculptures of birds and snake figurines, wooden skis, arrow heads and fishing hooks, to name a few examples. Perhaps amongst the most interesting of these finds are the two wooden idols, one of which forms the basis of this paper.

The focus of the current paper, the Shigirsky idol, was found at a depth of 4m during excavations undertaken in 1890. Associated finds include three wooden spoons, two stone tools and an oar. The idol itself was recovered in ten pieces, which when reconstructed formed a substantial anthropomorphic figurine *c.* 5.3m in length (Figure 1).

The idol has been housed in the Sverdlovsk museum since its discovery, and has been studied both in relation to the carvings and for radiocarbon dating. In terms of the latter, three radiocarbon determinations have been obtained from the idol. The dates obtained are 8680±140 uncal. BP (Moscow - 9467/1), 8750±60 uncal. BP (Moscow - 9467/2), and 8620±70 (Le-5303) (Chairkina *et al.* 2001). These dates are calibrated at 2δ to 7886-7498 BC, securely within the early-middle Mesolithic period.

The entire sculpture from Shigirsky is carved from a single plank of larch, and unlike the examples from Star Carr, England, outlined above, the plank does not exhibit the tapered ends discussed by Taylor (Taylor 1998), and as can be seen in Figure 1, the width of the idol is consistent along its entire length.

The anthropomorphic elements that are carved into the idol comprise images of human faces on both the obverse and reverse surfaces of the plank, with geometric ornament throughout. Only the carved head of the idol has the characteristic oval shape and facial features of human form, the remaining four representations of faces are formed using raised profiles for the nose and relief for the eyebrows; no representation of eyes or mouth occur on these examples. One of us (Shavchenko) considers the geometric ornament to be representative of skeletal elements, and it is perhaps significant that the linear designs are similar to those found on bone harpoons found elsewhere in the Shigirsky peat bog complex, but which remain undated in absolute terms (Chairkina *et al.* 2001).

Taylor (1998), when discussing the woodworking evidence from Star Carr, noted that the evidence for splitting of large timbers provided a new dimension to our understanding of Mesolithic technology. The Shigirsky Idol clearly provides a European parallel that not only reinforces the technological capabilities of the Mesolithic populations of Europe, but one which also highlights the advanced use of anthropomorphic forms and symbolic representation on an object that would potentially have stood to a height of *c.* 5m when

https://doi.org/10.15184/S2978855200904682 Published online by Cambridge University Press

in use.

This object reinforces the suggestion by Lillie (1998), who noted that for various historical, socio-political and linguistic reasons the academic community of western Europe has remained unaware of numerous important scientific discoveries in the former Soviet states. On-going collaboration with colleagues in the former Soviet Union continues to highlight the significance of these discoveries and argues for an intensification of such collaborative endeavours.

References

- CHAIRKINA, H.M. *et al.* 2001. *Archaeological Monuments at the Shigirsky peatbog*. Ekaterinburg: Bank of Cultural Information.
- LILLIE, M.C. 1998. Cranial Surgery dates to Mesolithic. *Nature* 391: 854.
- MELLARS, P. & P. DARK (ed.). 1998. *Star Carr in Context: new archaeological and palaeoecological investigations at the Early Mesolithic site of Star Carr, North Yorkshire* McDonald Institute Monographs. Cambridge: McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research.
- MELLARS, P., T SCHADLA-HALL, P. LANE & M. TAYLOR. 1998. The wooden platform, in P. Mellars & P. Dark (ed.) *Star Carr in Context: new archaeological and palaeoecological investigations at the Early Mesolithic site of Star Carr, North Yorkshire* 47-64. McDonald Institute Monographs. Cambridge: McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research.
- TAYLOR, M. 1998. Identification of the wood and evidence for human working, in P. Mellars & P. Dark (ed.) *Star Carr in Context: new archaeological and palaeoecological investigations at the Early Mesolithic site of Star Carr, North Yorkshire*: 52-63. McDonald Institute Monographs. Cambridge: McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research.

Authors

- **Malcolm C. Lillie:**
  Department of Geography, University of Hull, Hull, HU6 7RX, United Kingdom (Email: m.c.lille@hull.ac.uk).
- **Mikhail Zhilin:**
  Stone Age Department, Institute of Archaeology, Russian Academy of Sciences, Dmitri Ulyanov street 19, Moscow 117036, Russia (Email: mizhilin@yandex.ru).
- **Svetlana Shavchenko:**
  Institute of History and Archaeology, Rosa Luxemburg st., 56, Ekaterinburg, Russia (Email: sv-sav@yandex.ru).
- **Maisie Taylor:**
  Flag Fen Project, Inley Drove Farm, New Fen Dyke, Sutton St James, Spalding, PE12 0LX, UK (Email: fandmpryor@waitrose.com).

https://doi.org/10.15184/S2978855200904682 Published online by Cambridge University Press