Revealing the hidden" Central Balkan and Pannonian Mesolithic: new radiocarbon evidence from Serbia

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Abstract

With the exception of well known Mesolithic sites in the Danube Gorges, which provide ample evidence of (more or less) continuous human occupation between 9500 and 5500 cal BC, the wider areas of the Central Balkans and southern fringes of the Great Pannonian Plain still represent a *terra incognita* when it comes to the presence and settlement patterns of Mesolithic communities. In the archaeological literature, the absence of Mesolithic sites in the region was associated with environmental changes in the Early Holocene, presumed low human population densities, the visibility and state of preservation of organic material (often the only indicator of human activity), or the lack of adequate research. However, valuable insights into the obscure regional Mesolithic can be gained not only by new archaeological excavations, but also by revisiting and reanalysis of existing archaeological collections. Particularly informative in this respect are the Early Neolithic sites, which are indicative of the extensive spread of farming communities starting from 6200 cal BC, and/or their greater visibility in the archaeological record. Within the ongoing ERC BIRTH project (*Births, mothers and babies: prehistoric fertility in the Balkans between 10000 and 5000 cal BC*), a large sample of human, animal and plant remains from these sites was AMS dated. Unsurprisingly, the majority of obtained dates corresponded to the expected (Early Neolithic) range between 6200-5500 cal BC. However, several animal bone samples and one human bone sample from the sites of Magareći mlin, Grabovac-urića vinogradi and Gospoinci-Nove zemlje produced Mesolithic dates, i.e. were dated to the 8th millennium cal BC. In this paper, we present new AMS radiocarbon dates, discuss the contextual provenance of dated bones, and explore the implications of these results for a better understanding of the problem of the "missing" and "invisible" Mesolithic in the Central Balkans and Southern Pannonia.

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