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# Late Mesolithic or Early Neolithic: was there the "Neolithic hiatus" in the North Caucasus?

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## Résumé

The excavations of two sites the Chygai Rockshelter and the Dvoynaya Cave produced the long Late Pleistocene and Early Holocene archaeological sequence allowing us to follow the cultural and environmental changes that took place in the North-Western Caucasus. (Leonova, 2014). The sequence of the Chygai Rockshelter consists of 14 layers: 10-14 were attributed to Late Palaeolithic, 9-3 - to Mesolithic, and the uppermost (1-2) – to Chalcolithic. The upper Mesolithic layers (3-5) yielded fireplace, Helix middens, animal bones and lithic artefacts. The lithic assemblage is very poor and consists of a few cores, microblades and blades, one burin, two trapezoids (transverse arrowheads) and two parallelograms (bladelet truncated obliquely at both ends). The sequence of the Dvoynaya Cave was subdivided into three cultural layers: Upper Palaeolithic (layer 7); Early Mesolithic (layer 6) and Late Mesolithic (layer 4/5). The last ones yielded Helix middens, animal bones and chipped flint. The stone artifacts represent cores, microblades and blades, end-scrapers, burins, oblique truncated points and series of the high (narrow) trapezes (transverse arrowhead), including the "horned" ones. Underlying Layer 6 yielded several fireplaces, the *Helix* spp. mollusk shells and lithic artefacts, among which are mainly lunates and notched bladelets. Several radiocarbon dates allow to estimate the age of the layers with Helix middens, geometric microliths and evidence of pressure flaking technic. We have no radiocarbon date for the layer 3 of the Chygai Rockshelter. Four dates of the underlying levels 4-5 are between 9,5 – 10,5 k.y.a. (8,6-8,9 ; 9,5-10,1; 10,5 and 11 k. y. cal BC). Three dates of the layer 6 of the Dvoynaya Cave are between to 11,8-8,9 k.y.a. (11,7; 10,2-9,7; 8,3-8,1k.y. cal BC). Three more radiocarbon dates were obtained from the test pit of central part of Dvoynaya Cave: 8,3; 8,8; 10,2 k.y.a. (accordingly 7,3; 7,8-8,0; 9,9 k.y. cal BC). The first two dates are from the upper layer 3 and the last one can probably be associated with the layer 4/5. Similar sequences were followed in Central and South Caucasus and Crimea sites (Biadgi, 2016; Chataigner, et al., 2014; Zamyatnin, Akritas, 1957).

The phenomenon of "Neolithic hiatus" in the North Caucasus stays unsolved until now (Trifonov, 2009). There are only four Neolithic sites separated from each other at a great distance: Kamennomostskaya and Mezmayaskaya Caves (North-West Caucasus), Cmi (Central Caucasus) and Chokh (East Caucasus) (Amirkhanov, 1987; Formozov, 1971; Rostunov et al., 2009). The main Neolithic feature of these materials is the presence of pottery fragments. Domesticated species were identified in the fauna material from Neolithic layers of Kamennomostskaya Cave and Chokh, and the last one providing evidence for cereals cultivation. But both Neolithic layers of these sites are overlain the Chalcolithic or Bronze Age occupations. Only Mezmayaskaya Cave and Cmi have radiocarbon dates: three dates

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between 8,7-6,5 k.y.a. (8000-4200 cal BC) for Mezmay and six dates between 7,0-6,9 k.y.a. (6000-5700 cal BC) for Cmi. But on the one hand, the presence or the absence of pottery can't be essential condition because we know aceramic Neolithic. The domestication is not necessary as an economic, not archaeological, feature on the other hand. The same group of populations can have a different lifestyle depending on the environment (plain, foothills, mountains). Only chronology combined with specific lithic assemblage features could serve as universal indicator of the involvement in the Neolithic world. The main common features of lithic industries on wide territories including North and South Caucasus, Crimea, Central Asia is the emergence of pressure technique and high/short trapezoids (transverse arrowheads). The above features appeared at about 8,5-10 k. cal BC in NW Caucasus. We can trace the development and transformation of the trapezoidal transverse arrowhead type in Neolithic industries with complete "package" including pottery and domestication.

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**Mots-Clés:** Late Mesolithic, Early Neolithic, Mesolithic – Neolithic transition, North Caucasus, trapezoid transverse arrowhead, pressure technique, Chygai Rockshelter, Dvoynaya Cave