
Eurasia's most ancient promontory fort? The 8000 year old hunter-gatherer settlement complex of Amnya in the Western Siberian taiga

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Abstract

When and why do hunter-gatherers build fortifications? Which social constellations and societal processes can lead to defensive terraforming and enclosed settlements in mobile foraging groups? The emergence of fortified sites among Stone Age hunter-gatherers in the Western Siberian taiga in the 7th-6th millennium BC represents one of the earliest instances of communities enclosing and fortifying their settlements worldwide. These early enclosed sites coincide with a range of other innovations that bear witness to substantial sociocultural and economic changes in the forager lifeways, among them the appearance of pottery vessels, the foundation of sacrificial mounds, and a decrease in residential mobility. Thus, the Stone Age fortified hunter-gatherer settlements of Western Siberia are part of a set of socio-economic and technological innovations demarcating a phase of accelerated cultural change that at the moment is only partially understood. In this talk, we present new research on these questions based on the investigation of Amnya 1, one of the oldest and most prominent of these Early Holocene hunter-gatherer complex sites. The settlement is located on a promontory above the River Amnya and has three lines of defense consisting of palisades, banks and ditches, and ten pit house depressions. Ca. 50m beyond the fort a contemporary unenclosed bailey with further pit house structures bears witness to potential complex social constellations. Previous excavations in the 1990s confirmed the chronological setting within the earliest pottery phase in this region around 6,000 cal BC. New multidisciplinary research at this exceptional complex started in 2019 within the frames of a Russian-German project. The generation of 3D surface models, stratigraphic investigations, sedimentological and archaeobotanical studies, the elaboration of the site chronology by AMS dating, as well as analyses of previous and new finds are conducted in order to generate new topographical, environmental and chrono-typological and data. Based on this fresh information, we evaluate the significance of Amnya and further similar sites within a emerging system of Early Holocene hunter-gatherer complexity in the taiga zone. Taking into account archaeological and ethnohistoric information from various parts of the Northern hemisphere, the study of this phenomenon contributes to a new framework of emerging hunter-gatherer social diversity.

Keywords: Western Siberia, fortified settlement, pit houses, early pottery, 7th/6th mill cal BC

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