

## KHATAK – THE MIDDLE PALEOLITHIC CAMPSITE IN THE SOUTH OF UZBEKISTAN<sup>1</sup>

Since its discovery, Teshik-Tash has been recognized as the key Paleolithic monument or asset of Central Asia, which has since gained worldwide fame. Although as a result of the research carried out on the area, many Stone Age monuments were found, such as Obi-Rahmat and Kulbulak, still Teshik-Tash remained the only stratified site in the south of Uzbekistan for more than fifty years. Long-term exploration in the area of Teshik-Tash itself, carried out by both domestic and foreign specialists, did not bring the expected results. The Khatak cave, discovered in the fall of 2021, made it possible to establish that Teshik-Tash was not the only multi-layered monument in this area. Located in the Sherabad district of the Surkhandarya region of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Khatak Cave is located near the Teshik-Tash Cave, some 50 km south-west from the latter. The Bagly-Dara Gorge, in which this cave is located, is part of the protection zone of the Surkhan Natural Reserve and has a peculiar natural and ecological environment. Because of its remoteness, the cultural layer of the cave remained practically intact. As a result of short-term visits to the cave, many arti-facts related to the Middle Paleolithic were collected from the daylight surface. The 2022 preliminary studies showed that the site was intensively used by settlers in the Mousterian era. It becomes obvious that groups of Neanderthals occupied and settled in certain ecological niches that met the vital needs of the people of the Middle Paleolithic. It is possible that the Khatak Cave, not unlike Teshik-Tash Cave, served as a long-term refuge for the Neanderthal man. The article presents re-sults of the preliminary research made in this cave, provides the description of the cave and talks of its significance for the study of the Stone Age in Central Asia.

**Key words:** Southern Uzbekistan, Sherabad-Darya, Middle Paleolithic, Teshik-Tash, Obi-Rahmat, Khatak, stone implements.

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**T**HE KHATAK CAVE is located on the right bank of the river of the same name, near the modern-day settlement of Khatak in the Sherabad district of the Surkhandarya region of Uzbekistan. It was discovered by a doctoral student of the National Center for Archeology of the Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Uzbekistan Kholiyor Oinazarov in 2021 while he was searching for petroglyphs. The cave was examined in the same year by staff of the Department of Landscape Archeology of the National Archaeological Center. On a site inhabited in the Stone Age under the cave shelter, archaeological material was collected, a preliminary site plan was taken, and preliminary clearing of the layer of cultural deposits to a depth of 10 cm was completed.

The Khatak Cave had been formed in the vertical rock of the right hand cliff-side of the Khatak river at an elevation of approximately 50 m, and therefore the access into the cave is arduous. This feature of the location of the cave along with its limited accessibility for people and animals ensured the unique preservation of the traces of Stone Age human activity. This is very rare in archeology. In fact, the cultural layer of the cave in the form of gray, humus-rich, dry, silty loam, together with the archaeological finds buried in it, is a complete and undisturbed picture of the lifestyle of the Neanderthal man, who lived here possibly within the interval of 100-60 thousand years ago. Over the past tens of thousands of years, the organic remains of the cultural layer (leather, wood, etc.) have decayed and turned into humus, in which only stone implements and crushed wild animal bones have been preserved. Right on the contemporary daylight surface of the cultural deposits of the cave, during

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the first clearing, the remains of a small round hearth with ash and charcoal pieces were found.

It should be assumed that during the next tectonic uplifts of the active orogeny process taking place in Central Asia throughout the Quaternary period, the banks of the Khatak River continued to rise, and the river itself deepened its bed, which made the cave inaccessible to animals and people alike.

The entrance to the cave on the south. The cavity itself of the cave is 25 m deep, approximately 15 m wide at the entrance. The extensive entrance platform outside the cave shelter has a minor slope towards the collar or exit and then vertically plunges down. The rocky surface of the left side of the sai below is first sloping, and then it plunges down steeply to the level of gravel at the bottom of the gorge, the floodplain of which is covered with dense shrubs and trees. The central, deep part of the cave under the shelter cover expanding towards the exit is flat and has a slight drop into the depth of the cave, to the bedrock of the cave. A spring would once flow from here, forming the cave itself over hundreds of thousands of years. The depth of the cave ceiling reaches 14 to 15 m.

The only ones to disturb the surface of the cultural deposits of the cave were the permanent inhabitants of this area themselves - ibexes. Manure pellets cover the cultural layer in some places, and in other places, as shown by the clearing of 2022, they might also have compacted the upper cultural deposits to a depth of 10-15 cm, which was noted in squares И-6, and K-6.

The surface of the cultural layer of the cave was previously divided along and across into squares 1 x 1 m. From north to south they were marked with numbers, from west to east - with Cyrillic alphabet letters.

In the depths of the cave and closer to the exit near the eastern wall of the cave, on the floor in the form of an evenly lying surface of cultural deposits, two blocks of tufaceous deposits are towering - formed during wet seasons by the moisture dripping from the ceiling. Similar conditions were once noted by our team in the famous Obi-Rahmat cave.

In November 2021, during the first visit to the cave, archaeological remains lying on the undisturbed surface of a gray humus cultural layer were collected. Individual objects also lay on the surface of tufaceous deposits. Then, in three squares, where there was the greatest accumulation of archaeological remains, cultural deposits were cleared in squares K-5, K-6, И-5. As a result of this, the western half of the mentioned round hearth, up to 10 cm deep in the center, was discovered in square K-5. It was actually located directly on the modern daylight surface of the cultural layer and served the residents of the cave prior to their departure from this place. Around the hearth, the cultural layer was the loose humus soil, 10-12 cm thick. A flat rock surface was discovered below. It seemed

to us that this was the original bedrock of the cave. The excavations were stopped and the exposed area (3 sq.m) was covered with the same extracted cultural layer. At the same time, an ensemble of stone items was collected from the cleared squares - they had been made from the same materials as those extracted from the Teshik-Tash Cave (*Okladnikov* 1949: 7-87), located 50 km northeast. A few fragments of animal bones of a condition traditional for campsites were also obtained.

In June 2022, apart from the K-5, И-5, and K-6 squares exposed during the first visit, cultural deposits of the upper level of three more squares И-6, И-7, and K-7 were also uncovered. Thus, our Pit-1 (P-1) at Khatak Cave came to the dimensions of 3 x 2 m. It turned out that the rock surface that we came across in 2021 turned out to be a large slab lying in the cultural deposits of the part of the cave platform that we uncovered. The cultural deposits of the cave went deeper to under this slab. It became clear that the Khatak Cave is a multi-layer campsite, possibly with multi-meter cultural layers.

Below, we shall give a general description of a small collection of the Khatak Cave stone industry, obtained during the preliminary clearing at P-1 together with the finds simultaneous with it on the surface of the area of loose cultural deposits. The materials used at the Khatak Cave is represented by weakly rounded pieces of more or less isotropic rocks, which prevailed in the channel of the Khatak-Darya river, which flowed into the gorge where the cave itself is located. Most often, weakly silicified limestone was used, from which the mountain range was made.

During the analysis of loose cultural deposits of the mentioned P-1 along the upper level, the 6 sq.m cleared by us, along with the worked stones, 5 items of similar poorly rounded samples of materials were collected, which remained unused. The edge of one of them had been fired, and the other edge had a chipped cavity, which means it may have been used as a hammer stone.

11 similar small-sized stones, having 1-2 cavities each, signify that fine raw materials 3-4 cm in diameter might also have served to obtain small flakes. But 6 of them, judging by their sharp edges, have 1-2 "negatives" from the removed chips, which have a slight dint and cavities, which indicates the likelihood of using them for the working of solid organic matter, most likely, for scraping of wood, removing fresh bark, or scraping off of meat on the bone.

Six items represent full-fledged cores of the medium stage of the use. One of them is a massive single platform one made of ductile dark-gray rock (Fig. 1.1). Typologically, it can be qualified as a massive wedge-shaped core, from which three plates with pointed ends had been removed. The second core is

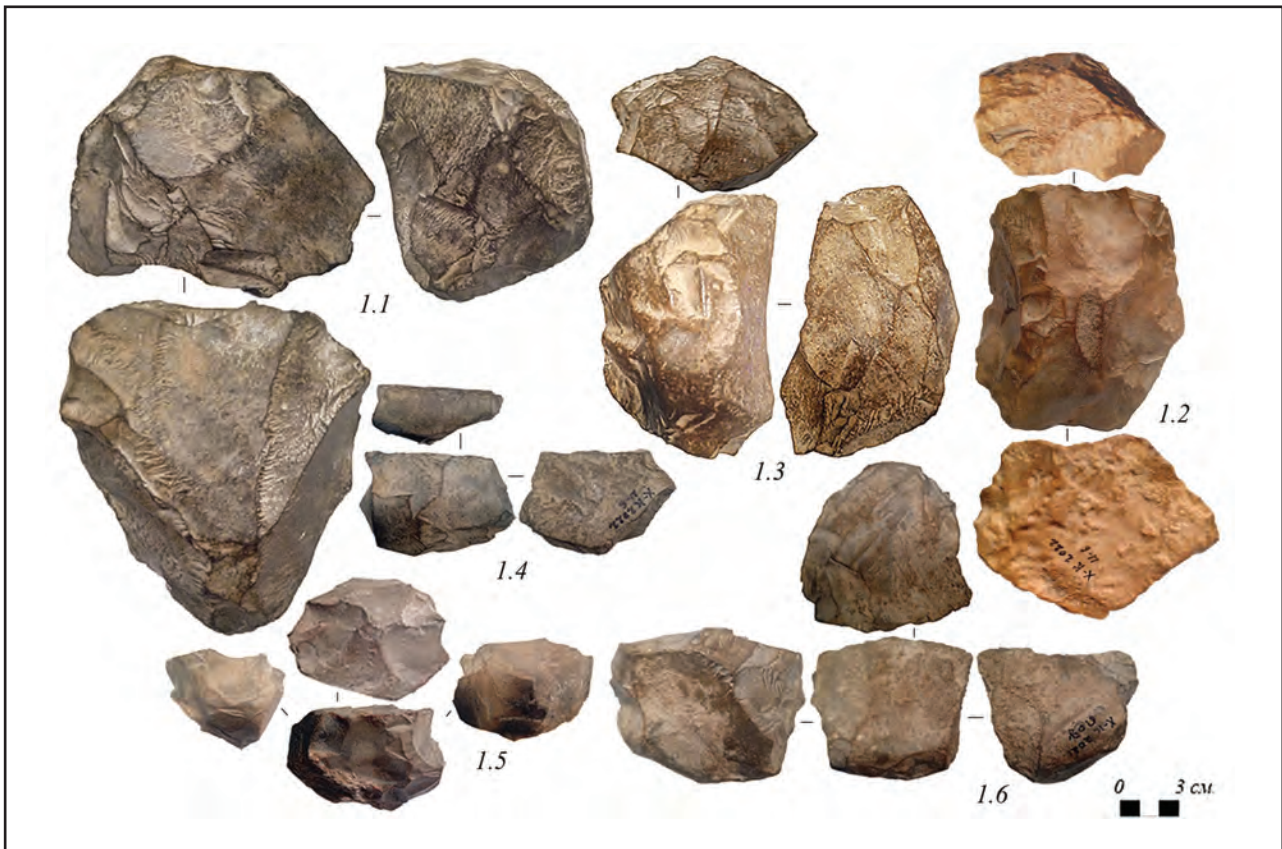


Fig. 1. The Cores

stepped two-level one; by means of transverse trim on both sides of the working plane, the core was endowed with a classical Levallois shape. The raw material is light brown silicified limestone (Fig. 1.2). Although, again, its massiveness indicates that a number of parallel-cut flakes had been removed from it. The third core had been made on a rectangular block of gray silicified limestone. The core is bipolar, it had been ditched due to the fact that the last chips from both the sides defected, not reaching the end - over the transverse crack in the rock itself (Fig. 1.3).

The remaining three cores were brought by the users to the ultimate stage of their use. Typologically, two of them are two-level ones, and one is a single-level one. But judging by the thin dints on the edges between the impact pads and the concave negatives, shaped by several small chips, at this stage they could have been used as keel-shaped scrapers for rough scraping (Fig. 1.4-6).

To the same category of cores we could attribute a group of finds of 8 pieces, represented by small fragments of ductile rocks, covered with negatives of chips over their entire surface. At the same time, they do not have a lateral face, nor abdominal surface. These fragments may be the product of the last stage of the splitting of the cores, when a small core not

more than 4 cm in diameter gets crushed into small fragments using the *block on block* technique, individual fragments of which could be used for some relevant purposes. Although in this group of fragments we have identified, there are no traces of disposal or retouching. We may also note a piece of fissured limestone that split during the processing with traces of having been subjected to firing.

The next category of stone splitting products are flakes and plates. The latter, just like in the Teshik-Tash collection, are surprisingly few, and oftentimes they have a non-typical appearance. The flakes (23 specimens) are of various sizes and proportions, a preponderant part thereof are non-typical, the longitudinal axis does not correspond to the impact axis on the lateral part (i.e. on the abdomen). The minimum size is 3 cm in length. One of them on the dorsal part has preserved the smoothed surface of rounded pebbles. Five specimens of small flakes are less than 3 cm long. Fragmented flakes are 36 specimens. Some of them are massive fragmented flakes. They differ from the fragments mentioned in the section on cores by the presence of a clearly defined lateral face (the abdomen). In the majority of cases, their impact platform has also been preserved. There are 8 such specimens. Flakes with an impact platform destroyed at impact

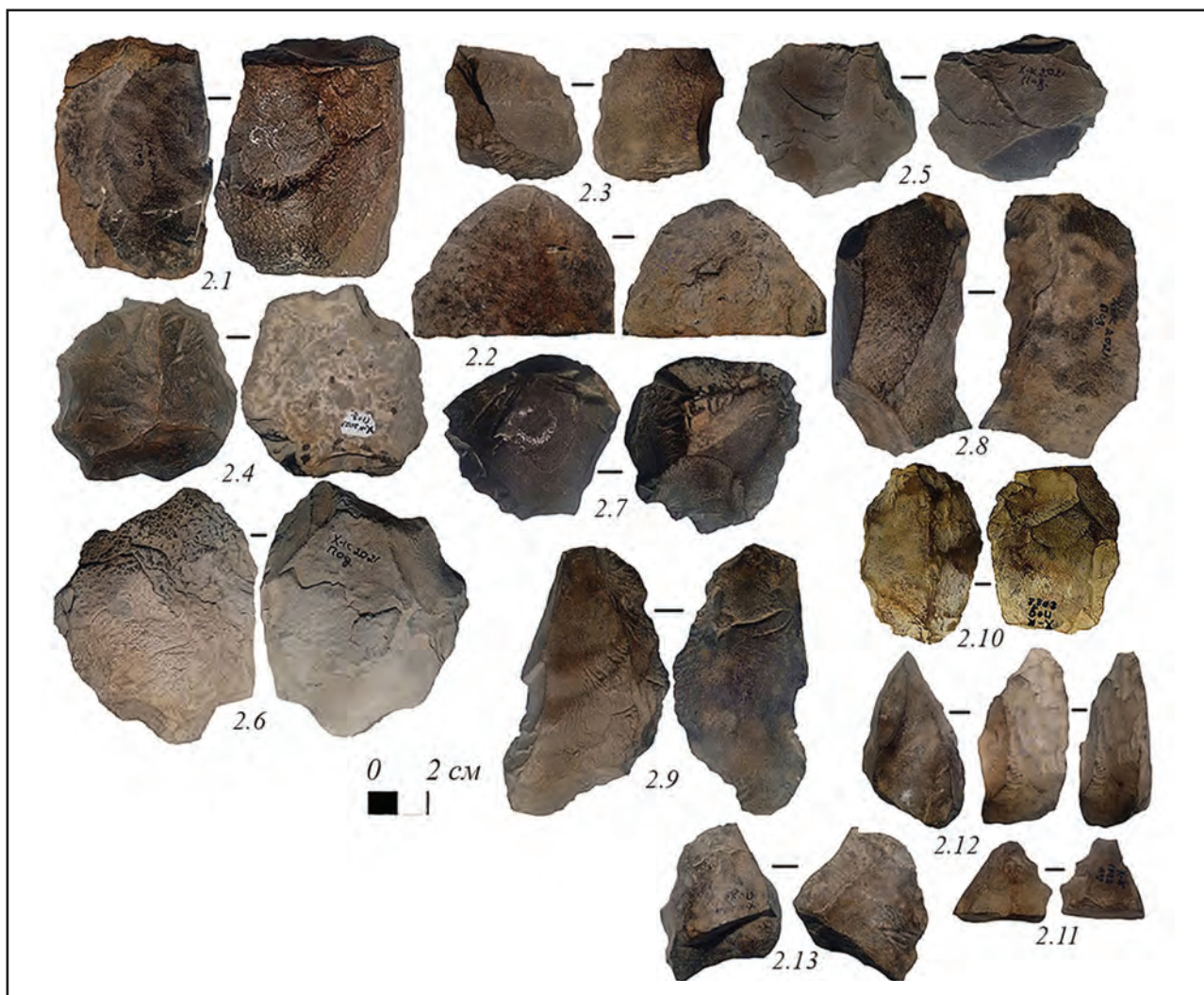


Fig. 2. The Scrapers

are not numerous - a total of only 7 specimens. The plates are few: a total of 12 items. All of them have a non-typical appearance, there are no whole plates of standard appearance.

The number of sections of the base part of the plates with a dihedral impact platform is 3. Among the sections of the plates, specimens with the parallel cut are occasionally to be found. There are 4 specimens of sections of the middle parts of these plates. Sections of the end parts of the plates are 8 specimens. There are 2 specimens of small, less than 3 cm in length, plates. Sections of thin flint microblades are 3 specimens - and these do stand out. It is possible that they were left by people of subsequent eras, who could also visit this abandoned and hard-to-reach cave.

Of the retouched implements, various side-scrapers are ranking number one in terms of quantity - there are a total of 13 of them. Despite their typological and functional similarity, they are morphologically diverse. Previously, when working on materials

from the campsites of the Ob-Rakhmat culture, we called them Teshik-Tash-type side-scrapers, since most of these implements were in the collection of the industry of the Teshik-Tash Cave. 2 specimens of these had been made on massive natural stone plates, then trimmed along their perimeter. One of them is rectangular-shaped with a massive working edge, pointed sharp by slight edging (Fig. 2.1). The second is triangular in shape, with an arcuate working edge corrected with rare retouching (Fig. 2.2). Two specimens of these had been shaped with double-sided sharpening and retouching at the truncated ends of the flakes. Retouching and dressing continued in some places along the acclivous edges of these flakes (Fig. 2.3-4). Later, at the advanced stages of the Obi-Rakhmat culture, similar implements were made at the ends of the plates, which are sometimes called truncated-faceted implements, or flat chisels / cutters. In our publication of Obi-Rahmat materials, we called them shavers and scrapers, meaning that they

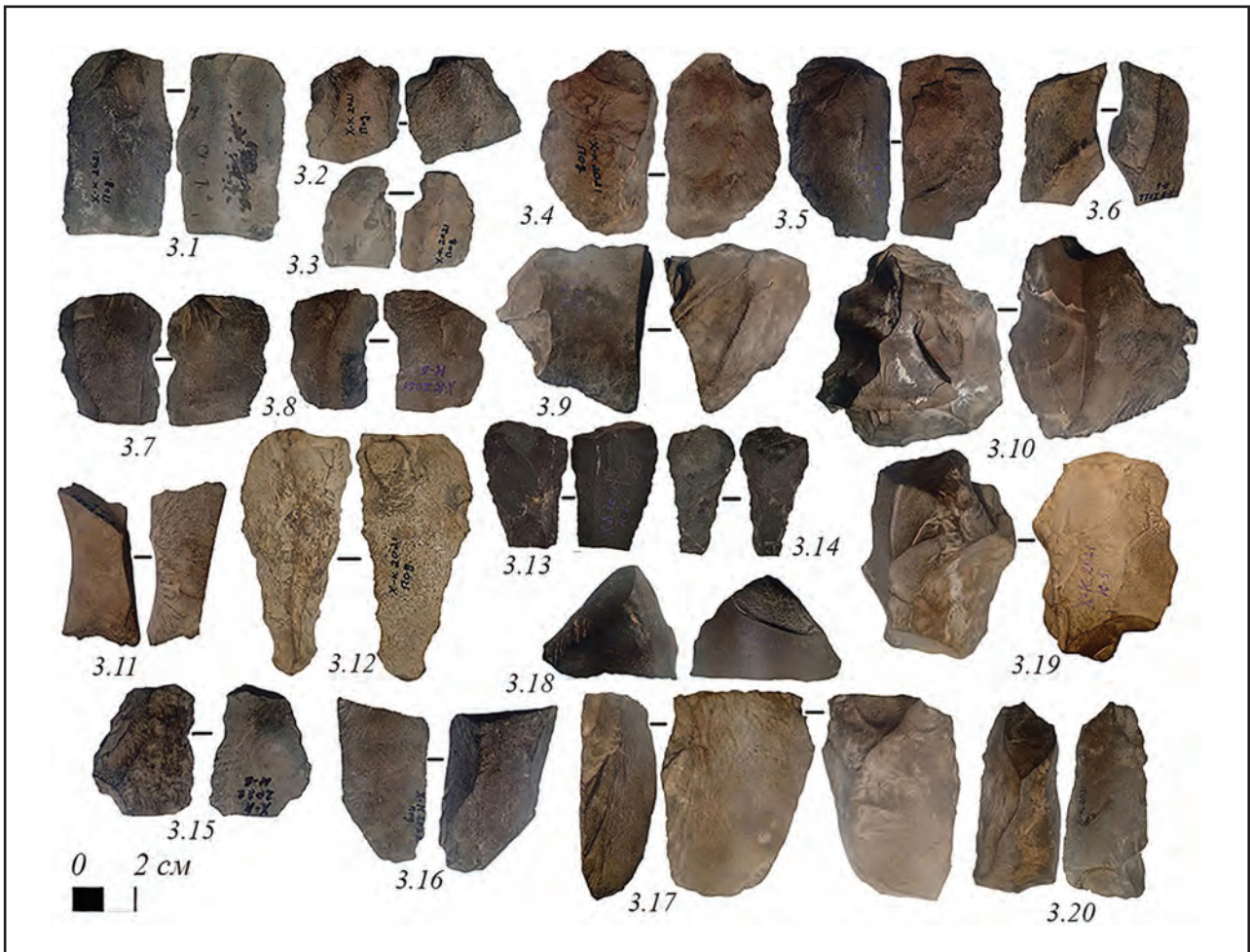


Fig. 3. The Implements

could be used for planing and scraping wood (*Sulejmanov* 1972: 26-28). These are specialized types of implements or tools characteristic of the subsequent Upper Paleolithic era. Another example of such an implement had been made on a heavily worn core and is disc-shaped (Fig. 2.5).

The sixth side scraper is made on a slate panel with two-sided planing, forming an arcuate blade of the plain-convex type. There is steep planing on the convex side and thin chipping on the flat side of the plate. Along the even edge of the implement there is a straight buttlet, or a part of perimeter of such, which served as a handle (Fig. 2.6). Another specimen of Teshik-Tash side-scrapers had been made on a massive flake of dense dark gray fine-grained rock. The double-sided edging of the blade on one edge is combined with the rough serrated edging of the other truncated edge. During the operation, this implement was held from the side of the massive large impact platform (Fig. 2.7).

Three side-scrapers are made with elongated lamellar chips. One of them has a large serrated re-

touch applied from the side of the abdomen (a ventral), the edge of the implement is truncated (Fig. 2.8). Serrated implements of this type were also noted in the lower layers of the Obi-Rakhmat Cave (*Sulejmanov* 1972: Pl. 9, Fig. 5). The second scraper is on a thin asymmetrical plate, the arcuate working edge is shaped by slight double-sided rough hewing (Fig. 2.9). The third small longitudinal scraper was shaped with light double-sided retouching. It resembles two-sided hewn knives of the mikok type (Fig. 2.10). There are three specimens of small side-scrapers on massive flake sections. However, they may also turn out to be fragments of scrapers made earlier (Fig. 2.11-13).

We also note eleven specimens of notched implements, three of them each have one shallow notch at the corner between the impact platform and the side edge of the truncated plates (Fig. 3.1-3). On one of these implements, made on an elongated flake, when making a recess (dent), part of the impact tubercle of the flake turned out to be hewn off as well (Fig. 3.4). One notched implement was shaped on the end of a

truncated plate (Fig. 3.5). Three specimens represent implements with lateral notches on the sections of the plates (Fig. 3.6-8). Three specimens of scraping implements were made on fragments of massive flakes (Fig. 3.9-11).

All these implements, made on a variety of chips and fragments, are united by one characteristic feature: they have a small notched working edge up to 2 cm wide. They were suitable for peeling and planing of ordinary sticks made from cut tree branches or large shrubs. Such a stick, it is also a digger, and it is also an implement for hunting or for the protection from predators or enemies, served as the most important element of the material culture of the Paleolithic era.

Lamellar implements are not numerous, they are represented by three specimens of elongated points. All of them are retouched around the edges. The largest one is made of dense gray sandstone (Fig. 3.12). Smaller ones have ends broken off (Fig. 3.13-14). The smallest one has a hewn impact platform and impact tubercle, which indicates that this implement could have been used as a dart head or a small spear. Two sections with the retouching on one of the edges were also found (Fig. 3.15-16). Chisels are represented by two specimens. One of them is double sided made on a section of a massive plate (Fig. 3.17). The second one had been made at the corner of a fragment of a massive flake of dense dark gray rock (Fig. 3.18).

The collection of finds from the early stages of use of the Khatak Cave, described by us, concludes with two combined implements. One of them had been made on a massive non-typical plate with a truncated end. This implement has a serrated retouch along one of the edges on the side of the abdomen. On the second edge, a chisel was shaped on the section of the plate; below the chisel, the edge is straightened with two-sided rough hewing. Typologically, this implement is a double lateral straight scraper on a section of a plate with a chisel chip at the thick truncated end (Fig. 3.19). The second implement is a massive plate, retouched on one edge, with a two-sided rough hewn end, which created a sharp and strong blade in place of the removed impact platform, that is, it is a truncated plate, retouched at its edge. It can be classified as a retouched blade with a plow at its end. This implement could be used for planing of wood, as well as scraping off of meat on the bone (Fig. 3.20).

The technique of splitting of stone, the morphology and shapes of the cores and flakes and the blades chipped from them, as well as the typology of implements, entirely fit into the system of technology and typology of the sites of the Obi-Rakhmat culture, which we identified earlier (*Suleomanov* 1972). The notion of the importance of the industry in this cultural community of the Upper Paleolithic of the primitive-time Turkestan will further be clarified as the research continues on the Khatak campsite.

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