RECENT ARCHAEOLOGICAL DISCOVERIES IN ALBANIA

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Recent archaeological discoveries in Albania

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Cover illustration: Handle in the form of forearm and hand, ivory, l. 11.9 cm, w. 2.3 cm, th. 1.6 cm, late 4th-early 5th century AD, Triconch Palace, Butrint, BM

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Recent investigations on the Palaeolithic and Mesolithic periods have furthered the research of past survey projects in several areas in southern Albania (the South-West Albania Project and the Mallakastër Regional Archaeological Project – MRAP), which have discovered a large number of sites dating to these periods. The assembled data instigated the excavation of several Palaeolithic and Mesolithic sites, thus marking the start of systematic investigations in the early prehistory of Albania. The Department of Prehistory of the Albanian Institute of Archaeology is currently collaborating with research institutions that offer extensive experience in this field: a long term collaborative project on the Palaeolithic and Mesolithic periods in Albania has been established with the University of Köln, Germany, under the joint leadership of I. Gjipali and J. Richter, and within the same framework, partnerships have been established with the University of Ferrara, Italy, and the University of Southampton, UK.

In the years 2012-2013 the Palaeolithic and Mesolithic project carried out excavations in several regions in Albania, namely at Shën Mitër (St. Dimiter) located near Butrint in the district of Saranda, at the cave of Blaz, district of Mat, which archaeological potential had been previously recognised by Albanian archaeologist, and at the cave of Rërza e Kanalit, in the Vlora bay. In collaboration with the University of Southampton, trial excavations were carried out at the cave of Pëlumbave (the doves’ cave) and the cave of Hile at lekël, district of Tepelenë, while survey investigations in the valley of Largarica, district of Permet, in partnership with specialists of the University of Ferrara, Italy, evidenced several sites pertaining to periods from Palaeolithic to Iron Age.

Besides the discoveries at Shën Mitër, important Palaeolithic and Mesolithic data were recovered at Rërza e Kanalit situated between Okrikum and the village of Dukat, in the Vlora bay, which stretches in a northwest-southeast direction. The cave was first investigated as part a collaborative project with the Butrint Foundation in 2004, when Late Mesolithic flint tools were recovered. In proximity to the location of Rërza e Kanalit, a collapsed karstic system was discovered at mid height of the limestone massif of Cretak, in Karaburun. Trial excavation at the collapsed entrance of the cave revealed Epigravettian remains. Given the isolation of the deposits underneath the collapse, and the previously discovered Mousterian and Upper Palaeolithic surface finds, the find spot at Rërza e Kanalit represents a site of potential interest for future research into the Palaeolithic period. In addition to this site, that of Trepart further north has been identified.
A rich assemblage of flint tools that pertain to all lithic periods (Palaeolithic, Mesolithic and Neolithic) has been assembled at the latter site.

The collaborative project on the study of Palaeolithic and Mesolithic periods in Albania will continue its research in the coming years with investigations at various sites that have already been identified as sites of particular interest, such as the complex of caves in the area of Blaz, district of Mat. The use of up-to-date methodology in these study projects has been possible thanks to the collaboration with the above mentioned European universities that are highly reputed for their research in this field. Besides the intensification of research in the above mentioned field, student training will also be an integral part of the project, while contribution will be made to the creation of permanent and temporary exhibitions which will aim at making the project results accessible to the wider public.