

# The Aurignacian of the Caucasus

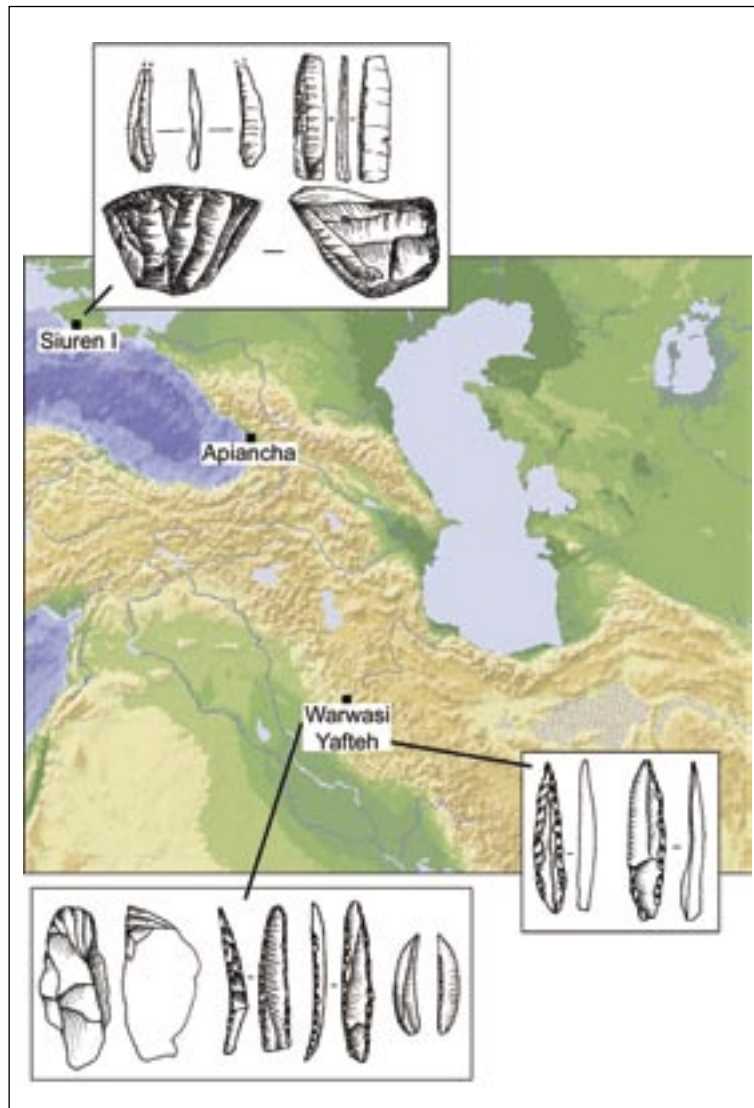
■ MARCEL OTTE

**ABSTRACT** The presence of the Aurignacian in the Caucasus is part of the transition and expansion

from the Zagros Mountains toward the Crimea and Eastern Europe.

## Importance of the region

The occupations at the many archaeological sites found in this mountainous region, intermediate between Asia and Europe, establish cultural relationships with Anatolia, the Zagros and the Crimea (Fig. 1).



In addition to the abundance of sites, the Paleolithic of the Caucasus has been the subject of excavations since the beginning of the 20th century that contributes to the regional history (Nioradzé and Otte, 2000). Still more recently, new fieldwork has been undertaken by an international team directed by Ofer Bar-Yosef (Tushabramishvili et al., 1999). This research will certainly shed light on the characteristics of the Georgian Paleolithic and the different forms of development which occurred. The prehistory of Europe is thus linked to this terrestrial passage joining the Near East to eastern Europe.

FIG. 1 – Map indicating locations of Siuren I (Crimea), Apiancha (Georgia), Warwasi and Yafteh (Iran) (artifacts of Siuren I after Demidenko et al., 1998; artifacts of Warwasi and Yafteh, drawings by M. Otte).

## Situation

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The privileged location of this region was further accentuated during glacial periods and the global decrease in sea levels. The Caspian Sea was smaller and the Azov Sea was dry, permitting easy passage from the Caucasus chain to the hills of southern Crimea where Paleolithic sites are also abundant (Demidenko et al., 1998).

From the eastern side, the Caucasian chain follows the large hilly region of eastern Anatolia, then the long Zagros chain, to the confines of Afghanistan. This “nuclear region” has not yet been studied in detail, but pioneer research has demonstrated its inestimable importance for understanding the Eurasian Paleolithic as a whole (Hole and Flannery, 1967; Olzsewski and Dibble, 1994).

Research is aimed at understanding the “marginal” effects at the eastern edge of Europe and the subsequent changes which occurred, for which research in the Caucasian regions gains a crucial importance.

## Style

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Regardless of the origin of the modern human population in Europe, this population appears to be clearly associated with a group of technological processes corresponding to cultural traditions of the human groups who transported them. It should thus be possible to use stylistic arguments to trace the migration routes back to a region of origin: this is the only method available to the archaeologist and art historian. Not a single lithic artifact in Africa can be attributed to the Aurignacian, which is associated with modern humans in Europe.

Quite logically, therefore, the tool styles should serve to guide us across space in order to reconstruct migration routes, much as one can trace the advance of Roman armies or Germanic peoples by the material evidence.

Certain Paleolithic assemblages in Georgia have obvious associations with the European notion of the Aurignacian, associated at three sites with remains of modern humans (Cro-Magnon, Vogelherd and Mladeč).

## Sites

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Among the collections that we had the privilege to study, due to the generosity of Medea Nioradzé and David Lordkipanidze, diagnostic characteristics of the Aurignacian can be found.

For example, Samerzchle Klde contains an industry produced on thick blades and flakes with retouch evoking Aurignacian techniques: semi-abrupt retouch on the lateral edges of blades and bladelet retouch on burins and endscrapers (Fig. 2). Further, the bone industry, beginning in Europe with the Aurignacian, is also represented in abundance (Fig. 3). This new relationship between humans and nature breaks radically with Mousterian traditions and is integrated within a new and irreversible behavior. Tools used for hunting are made on the materials that were originally the defenses of the animals themselves, such as cervid antlers. Form, spirit, technique: all invoke the Aurignacian traditions that would eventually extend across all of Europe.

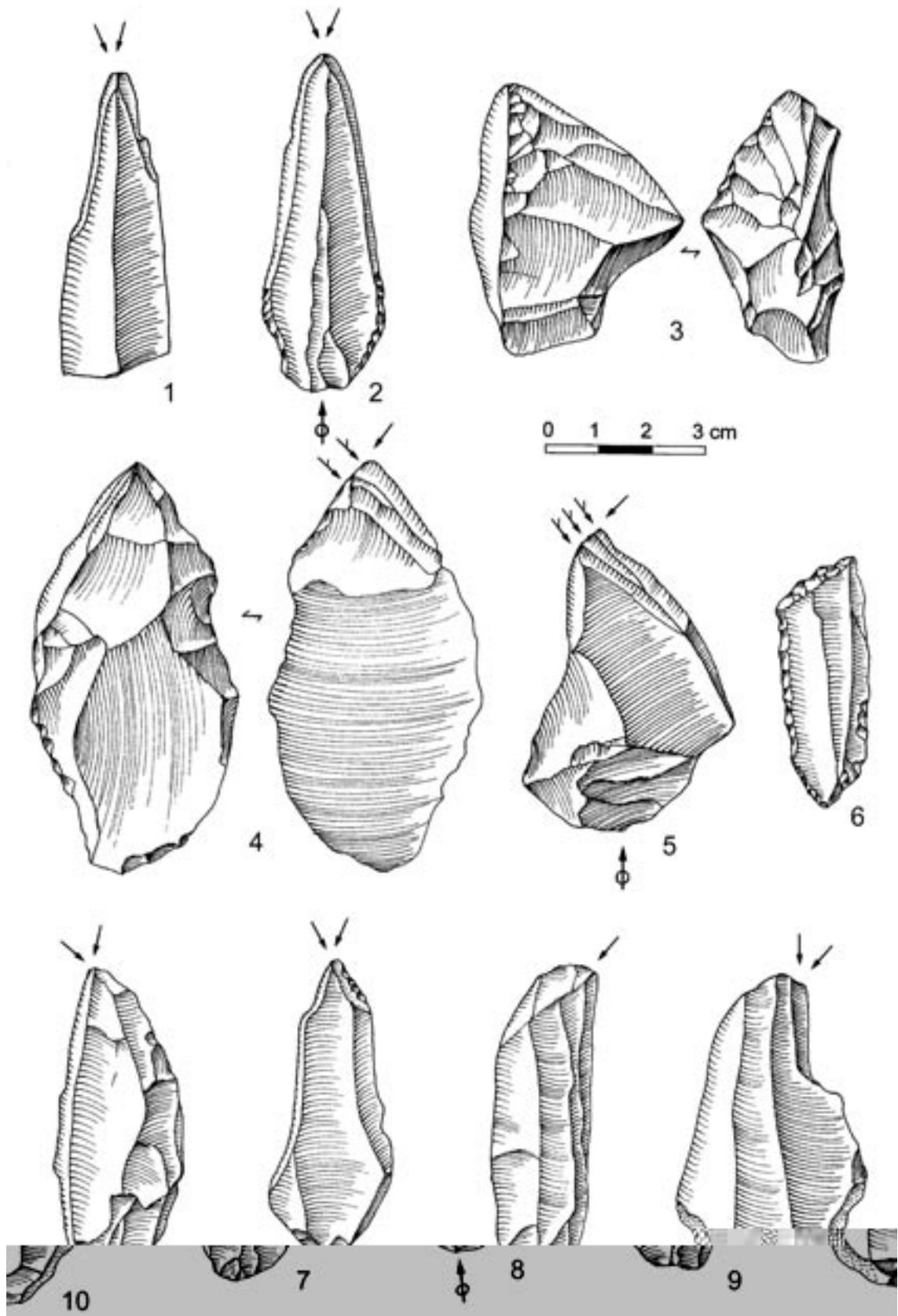


FIG. 2 – Samerzchle Klde. 1-2, 7-10. dihedral burins; 3-5. carinated burins; 6. truncated blade (after Nioradzé and Otte, 2000).

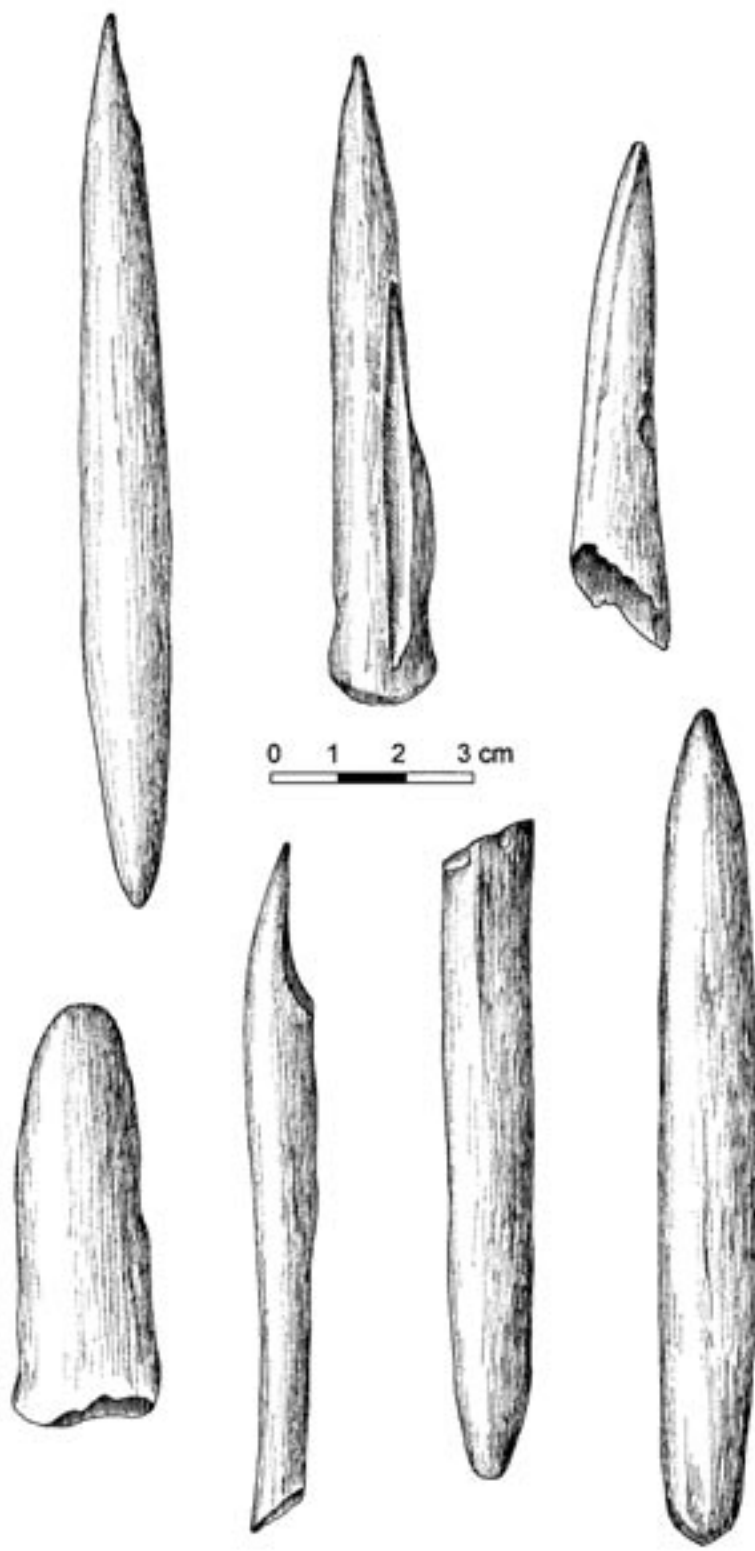


FIG. 3 – Samerzchle Klde. Awls and sagaie points with massive bases (after Nioradzé and Otte, 2000).

Among other evidence (Nioradzé and Otte, 2000), the assemblage of stratum III at Ortvala Klde (Fig. 4) also demonstrates technological and stylistic criteria of the Aurignacian, including carinated burins and a shaped bone point, found in early excavations. Recent excavations have yielded a transitional level, from the Mousterian to the Upper Paleolithic, which could correspond to this facies of the Aurignacian in the Caucasus (Tushabramishvili et al., 1999). It appears that the oldest typical Aurignacian characteristics are found in this mountainous region, from Iran to Georgia. Here also, more fieldwork should be done in order to understand the mechanisms of this transformation.

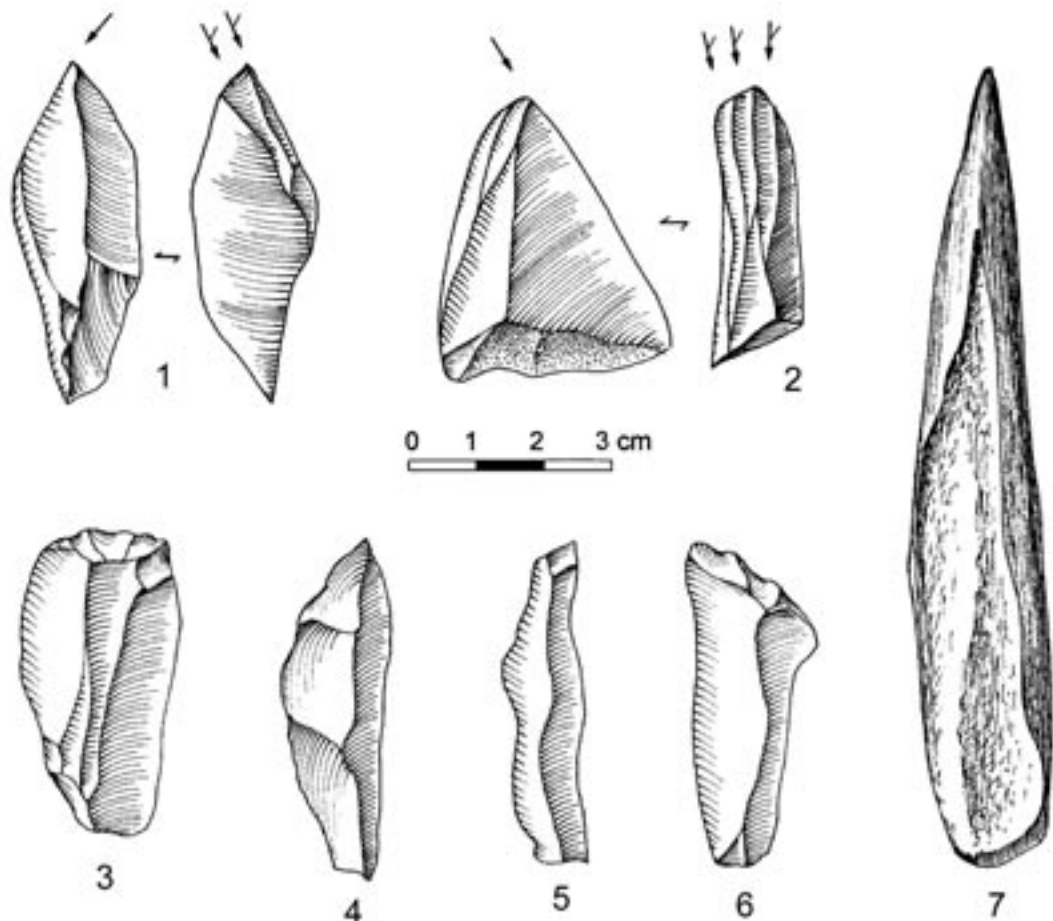


FIG. 4 – Ortvala Klde, stratum III. 1. dihedral burin; 2. carinated burin; 3. endscraper on blade; 4-5. blades; 6. truncated blade; 7. awl (after Nioradzé and Otte, 2000).

The most substantial documentation, but as yet poorly known, comes from the site of Apiancha in Abkhazia (western Georgia), excavated by Madame Tsereteli (1988). This region has yielded other assemblages in the same style, but remains unknown due to difficulty of access to the collections. We are grateful to Madame Tsereteli to have been able to study the Apiancha material and we reproduce here some drawings from her publications (redrawn by Yvette Paquay, Figs. 5-6). The industry is laminar as well as on thick flakes, there are Mousterian elements, curved lamellar retouch is used on burins and endscrapers, and bone tools and pendants (which often serve to convince the most skeptical...; Fig. 6, no. 6) are present. A radiocarbon date places this assemblage at 32 000 BP, corresponding to the expected chronological range. Additional dates would be useful to confirm this interpretation.

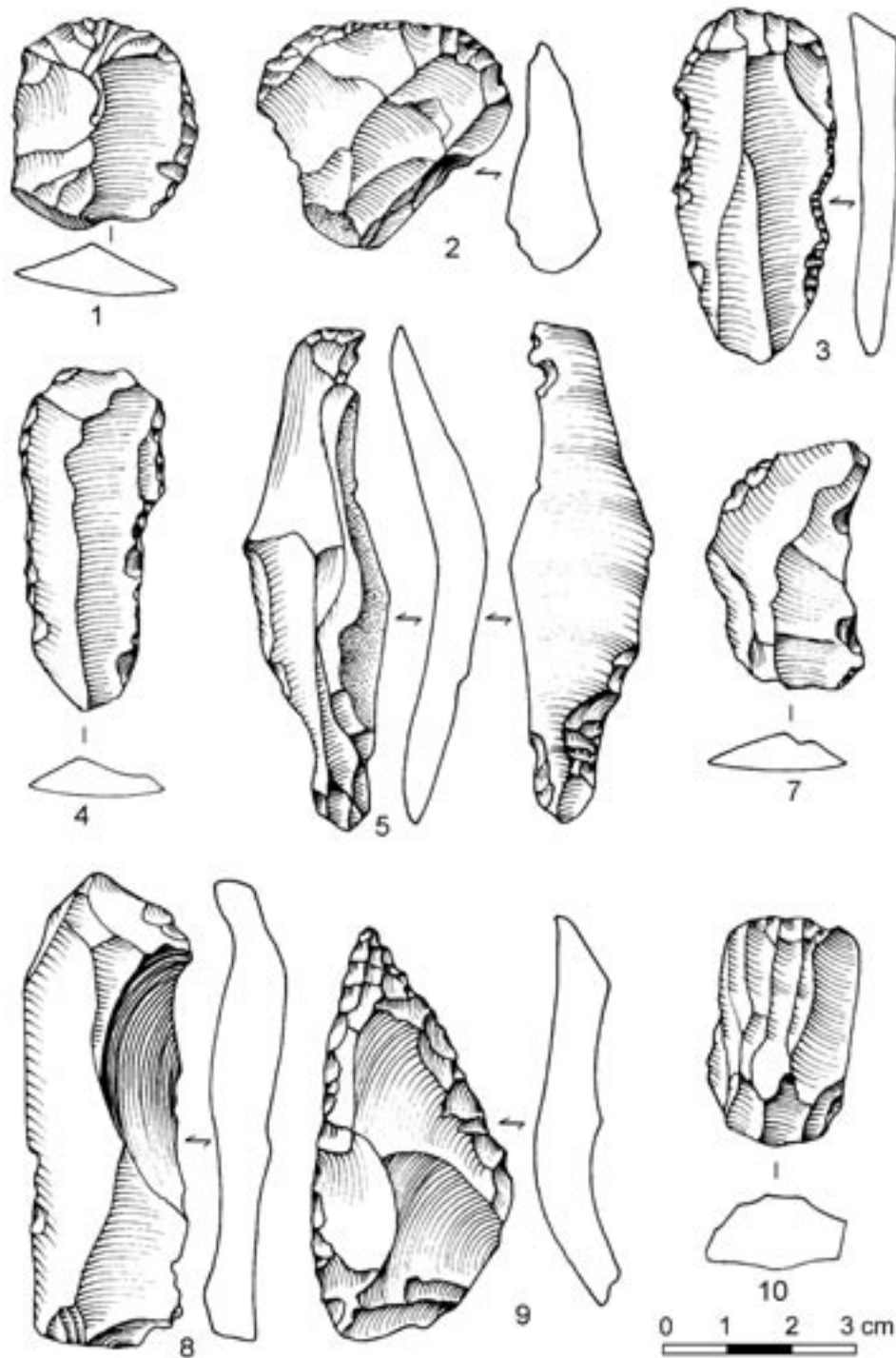


FIG. 5 – Apiancha. Lithic industry (redrawn after Tsereteli, 1988).

## Between West and East

Following the northern coast of the Black Sea, Aurignacian sites are known in the Crimea, often established in similar hilly landscapes (Demidenko et al., 1998). In southern Ukraine and Moldavia, technological and typological elements as well as radiometric dates confirm the Aurignacian attribution.

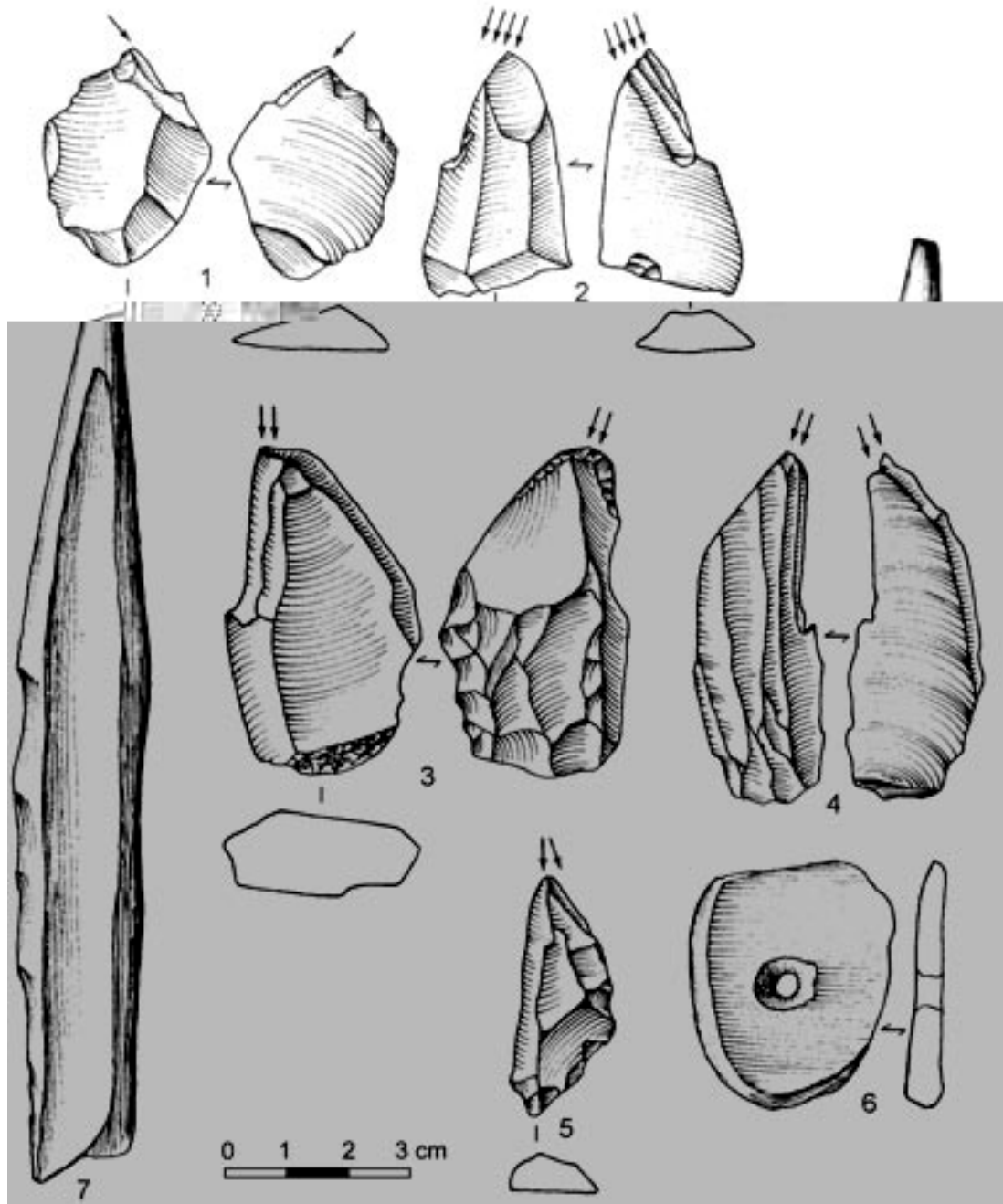


FIG. 6 – Apiancha. Lithic industry (redrawn after Tsereteli, 1988).

The most important center on this axis of diffusion is formed by the Zagros Mountains, the veritable “birthplace” of ethnic and cultural diffusion. A broad concentration of Aurignacian sites can be clearly observed here (Hole and Flannery, 1967; Olszewski and Dibble, 1994) with sometimes quite early radiocarbon dates, such as 40 000 BP at Yafteh. The territory is immense and the sites abundant, but excavations in this region are still limited.

Georgia seems to constitute a natural passage for the Aurignacian, from the Asian center towards eastern Europe (the Crimea, the Ukraine, and Moldavia).

Moreover, due to its favorable geographic position, Anatolia must have also constituted an intermediary territory. Evidence of the Aurignacian is known near Antalya, but the southern coast of the Black Sea would have been a more natural territory for migration. The as yet

unexplored caves of the Trebizonde region could thus be part of a relay towards Balkan Aurignacian sites (Greece and Bulgaria). The passage through the Caucasian region could explain the apparently abrupt appearance in eastern Europe of both modern humans and new behaviors associated with the Aurignacian.

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