

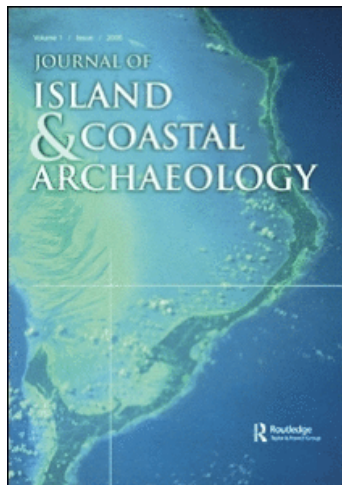
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NEWS AND NOTES

The Earliest Evidence of Human Settlement in the Kurile Islands (Russian Far East): The Yankito Site Cluster, Iturup Island

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The Russian Far East has always been considered one of the possible routes for Upper Paleolithic humans to migrate from North and East Asia to North America (e.g., Erlandson et al. 2007). Although the Kurile Islands (Figure 1) act as a natural ‘bridge’ between the Japanese archipelago and Kamchatka Peninsula, archaeological research has been relatively sparse (see Chubarova 1960; Fitzhugh et al. 2002; Golubev 1972; Vasilevsky and Shubina 2006). In the early 1980s, preliminary data were obtained by Prof. Yuri V. Knorozov (Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology & Ethnography, St. Petersburg) from what appeared to be an early archaeological complex near Yankito Creek on central Iturup Island. Two conventional radiocarbon dates

suggested that the site dated to around 7000 RYBP (ca. 7600–7900 cal BP) (Zaitseva et al. 1993:508; see Table 1), representing an extremely early occupation compared to other sites in the Kuriles (e.g., Fitzhugh et al. 2002; Zaitseva et al. 1993; see review in Kuzmin 2006:34–35). In an effort to improve our understanding of Yankito, we conducted field investigations in summer 2007. Here we provide a brief report on our recent research, including artifacts recovered and additional radiocarbon dates to compare with the earlier findings by Y. V. Knorozov (see also Yanshina et al. 2009).

The Yankito 1 site, discovered by Y. V. Knorozov in 1982, is situated 2–2.5 km north of Kitovy Village on Iturup Island (Figure 1) on a terrace-like surface about 10–12 m above

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Table 1. Radiocarbon dates of the Yankito site cluster, Iturup Island (Kurile Islands).

Site	¹⁴ C date, RYBP	Calendar age, cal BP	Lab Code	Material	Reference
Yankito 1*	7030 ± 130	7610–8160	I–?	charcoal	Yanshina et al. (2009)
Yankito 1*	6980 ± 50	7700–7930	LE-3230	charcoal	Zaitseva et al. (1993)
Yankito 2	7055 ± 45	7790–7970	AA–78928**	charcoal	Yanshina et al. (2009)
Yankito 2	6895 ± 55	7620–7850	AA-78927**	charcoal	Yanshina et al. (2009)

*Samples collected by Y. V. Knorozov, one of which was actually taken from the Yankito 2 site as it known today.

**AMS ¹⁴C dates (AMS Laboratory, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ, USA).

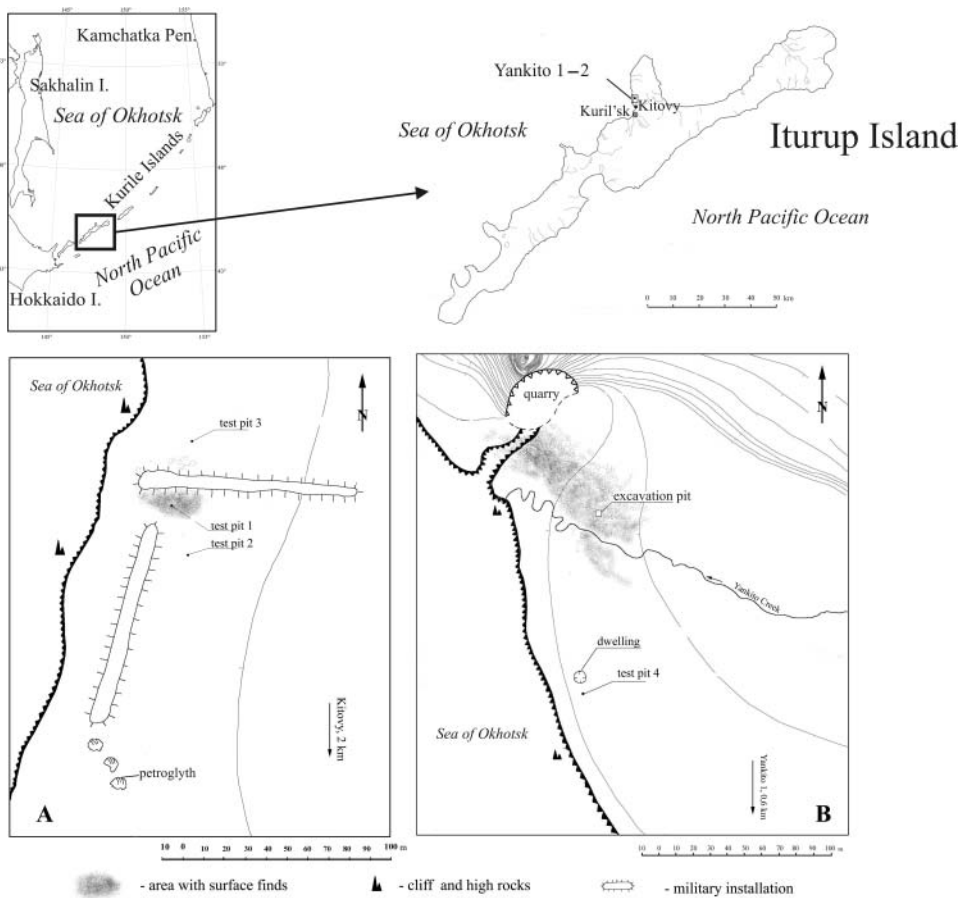


Figure 1. Position of the Yankito site cluster on Iturup Island (Kurile Islands) and schematic plans of the Yankito 1 (A) and Yankito 2 (B) sites. Isolines each represent 1 m in elevation.



Figure 2. Petroglyph found at the Yankito 1 site (see Figure 1A).

sea level (Figure 1B). The original size of this site was estimated to be about 300 m², although it has been almost completely destroyed by military installations built after WWII (Figure 1A). The site's stratigraphy consists of the following deposits: 1) turf: 0.0–0.15 m; 2) dark compact loam (cultural layer): 0.15–0.65 m; and 3) brown compact loam, with boulders near the edge of terrace (bedrock): below 0.65 m. Artifacts are concentrated in the lower part of Layer 2 according to test pits excavated in 2007. In total, 549 artifacts were collected from the surface and 30 pieces of chipped stone and potsherds were found in Test Pit 1 (Figure 1A). The total collection from the Yankito 1 site, including finds made by Y. V. Knorozov, is now about 600 artifacts, including over 200 potsherds, 44 stone tools and numerous flakes, spalls, and nodules. Another interesting find in the Yankito 1 area is a boulder with a petroglyph depicting a human figure with outstretched hands (length 13 cm; see Figure 2) and an unclear image adjacent to the left. This is particularly noteworthy given that rock art is extremely rare in this part of Northeast Asia.

The Yankito 2 site, also discovered in the 1980s by Y. V. Knorozov, is located 600 m north of Yankito 1 and covers an area of about 1000 m² according to the 2007 survey (Figure 1B). The site's stratigraphy is similar to Yankito 1. A 10.5 m² excavation pit was placed near Yankito Creek about 50 m from the edge of terrace (Figure 1B). Two small samples of charcoal were collected from the cultural layer in direct association with stone artifacts and pottery. From excavation we recovered 160 artifacts (100 made from stone and 60 potsherds); in addition, 72

artifacts (29 sherds and 43 stone pieces) were collected near the main excavation unit.

The amount of stone items from both sites now totals about 480, including tool blanks, worked spalls and flakes, and 52 formal tools (Figure 3). The raw material is mainly flint of various colors (grey, yellow, pinkish-white, and motley); basalt, quartzite, and some rarer obsidian are also present. Among formal tools, adzes are the most numerous (n = 24); there are also bifacially worked arrowheads (n = 11), tanged tools which may have been used as planes and cutting tools (n = 7), bifaces and associated fragments (n = 6), knives (n = 2), one scraper, and one abrading tool.

The pottery assemblage from the Yankito 1–2 sites is quite rich, with about 260 sherds, including one almost complete vessel from Yankito 1. The ceramic paste is made from a mixture of finely chopped pieces of grass and clay, and the shape is truncated conoidal with a flat base (Figure 4). The wall's thickness averages around 0.8–1.0 cm and the bottom between 1.0 and 1.3 cm. Decoration consists of a comb trail on both sides and a narrow strip of cord-mark impressions in the mouth area, restricted from below and above by short, horizontal zigzag lines (Figure 4).

Prokofiev (2003:93) associated this pottery type with the Urahoro ceramics from neighboring Hokkaido Island based on a single potsherd from the Yankito 1 site which our data seem to confirm. The Urahoro Complex of late Initial/Early Jomon at Hokkaido is represented by several well-excavated sites, including Shin-Yoshinodai, Shitacorobe, Higashi-Kushiro 2, Kyoei B, and Taisho 3 and 7, which have ¹⁴C dates ranges between 7420 ± 40 RYBP (Beta-194633) and 7300 ± 40 RYBP (Beta-205852) (Yamahara 2007:11), correlating to a calendar time range of ca. 8020–8340 cal BP.

One of the key issues is the age of the Yankito cluster. The two AMS ¹⁴C dates we obtained from charcoal in an undisturbed context at Yankito 2 (Table 1) has allowed us to place the Early Neolithic cultural component at ca. 7050–6900 RYBP, with a calibrated age of ca. 8000–7600 cal BP (ca. 6000–5700 cal BC) (Table 1). These ¹⁴C dates are very close to the ages of the Yankito locality

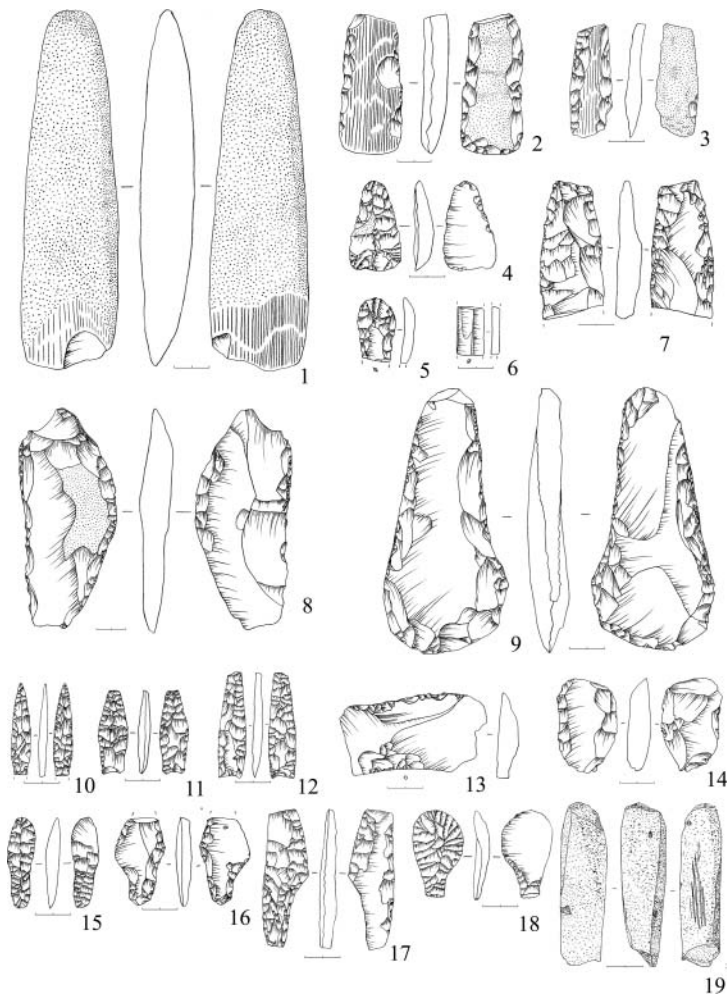


Figure 3. Stone artifacts from the Yankito site cluster, Yankito 1 (Nos. 1-6, 8, and 17-18) and Yankito 2 (Nos. 7, 9-16, and 19) sites. 1-3—adzes; 4 and 9—adze-skreblo tool; 5—scraper; 6—blade; 7 and 14—bifacial blanks; 8—knife on biface; 10-12—arrowheads; 13—knife on flake; 15-18—stemmed tools; and 19—abrader. No. 11 is surface find; No. 15 is from Test Pit 4; the rest are from main excavation pit. Scale bars equal 2 cm.

reported by Y. V. Knorozov (Table 1), lending support to the proposed early age of the site.

It should be noted that the 2007 survey revealed that, in comparison to other areas nearby, the cultural layers at the Yankito 2 site were still intact and well preserved. Our recovery of 45 stone and ceramic artifacts along with two burnt animal bones in a 1 × 1 m unit (Test Pit 4 just south of the main

excavation area; see Figure 1B) testify to the integrity of the site.

The data presented here make the Yankito cluster *the oldest* unequivocal evidence of human presence in the Kuriles. Due to scarce data available on the archaeology of this region, there are no sites known between ca. 7000 RYBP and ca. 4200 RYBP (Zaitseva et al. 1993; see also Kuzmin 2006). Only two

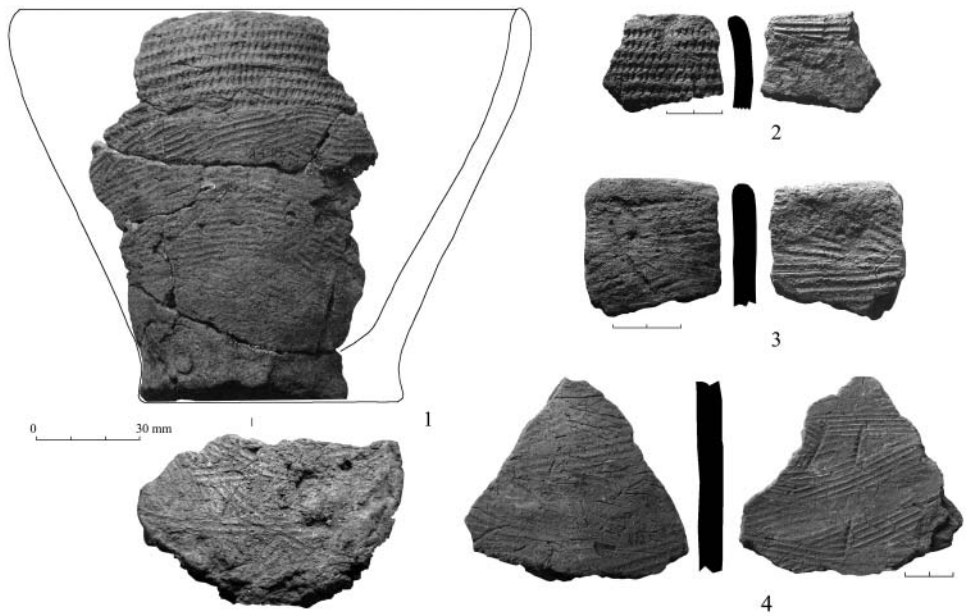


Figure 4. Pottery from the Yankito cluster; Yankito 1 (No. 1) and Yankito 2 (Nos. 2–4) sites. Scale bars are 2 cm long, unless otherwise indicated.

other sites, Kuibyshevo on Iturup Island and Sernovodskoe on the neighboring island of Kunashir, might be contemporaneous and have a similar cultural assemblage (Vasilevsky and Shubina 2006:166) as Yankito, but they have not been fully investigated. Later Neolithic sites on the southern Kuriles are dated to ca. 4200–2000 RYBP (Kuzmin 2006; Zaitseva et al. 1993) and contain very different archaeological remains, resembling more the Middle and Late Jomon complexes of Hokkaido (Vasilevsky and Shubina 2006).

It is clear from our initial work that the Yankito 2 site deserves further attention and has great potential for revealing important new data on the earliest settlement of the Kurile Islands. Another promising avenue of research is the identification of obsidian source(s) used by the earliest inhabitants of Iturup Island, some progress of which was recently made to determine source localities (see Phillips and Speakman 2009). This will allow us to better test models regarding the earliest migrations and exchange routes in the Kuriles and neighboring Northeast Asia.

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