

Super-long distance movement of obsidian in prehistory: why, how, and what for?

Obsidian was often brought by ancient people far away from the primary sources, with distance exceeding 500–800 km; these cases are numerous in the Mediterranean, the Near East, and North America. Some of the longest distances between obsidian sources and utilisation sites are known from Northeast Asia (Kamchatka and Chukotka regions, Kurile Islands, and Sakhalin Island), Oceania, and North America. In the NE Asia, there are several cases of obsidian movement on 1000–1500 km in the Mesolithic (ca. 8500 BP), and up to 2000 km in the Neolithic (ca. 7000–3000 BP). In Oceania, these distances are up to 3500 km, and in the North America – up to 4000 km. The main issues to discuss at this Session are: 1) Why did people move obsidian extremely long distances, even though other kinds of raw material were easily available? 2) What was the mechanism of obsidian acquisition (direct, via chain of middlemen, slow movement as “exotic” good, etc.)? and 3) What was the function of obsidian tools made of raw material the source of which is located far away?