



Early use of marine resources by Middle/Upper Pleistocene human societies: The case of Benzú rockshelter (northern Africa)



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ABSTRACT

This article examines the role played by marine resources for hunter-gatherer groups of the Middle/Upper Pleistocene in the geohistorical region around the Straits of Gibraltar, on the basis of new evidence collected at the rock shelter of Benzú (North Africa). The stratigraphic sequence at Benzú has been dated to between 254 and 70 ka. The excavations have revealed the exploitation of marine gastropods and bivalves, alongside fish. The most common taxon in the sequence is the genus *Patella*. The analysis of the molluscs and their spatial distribution shows that these animals were purposely collected by humans, probably as a food source. In order to contribute to the debate about the origins and scale of the exploitation of marine resources during the Middle and Upper Pleistocene, the evidence collected at Benzú is interpreted within the broader context of North Africa and southern Europe. The similarity of groups of *Homo sapiens sapiens* in North Africa and *Homo sapiens neanderthalensis* in southern Europe in terms of lifestyle and subsistence strategies is interpreted as reflecting equally similar social and economic practices, in spite of the diversity of anthropological perspectives on the relationship between humans and the environment currently in vogue.

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1. Hunter-gatherer societies and the exploitation of marine resources

Recent interdisciplinary research carried out in various parts of the world, for example southern Africa (Marean et al., 2007) and the Mediterranean basin (Vanhaeren et al., 2006; Colonese et al., 2011), is changing our perspective on hunter-gatherer societies in the Middle and Late Pleistocene, by demonstrating the important role played by shellfishing and the exploitation of other marine resources (Flemming et al., 2003). These practices have been attested on both shores of the Strait of Gibraltar (Finlayson, 2008,

2009; Stringer et al., 2008; Brown et al., 2011; Cortés et al., 2011; Ramos et al., 2011a,b; 2014b).

Recent advances in the field of anthropology and archaeology have posed a solid challenge to models primarily based on hunting – the ‘Man the Hunter’ hypothesis (Lee and De Vore, 1968). According to this hypothesis, hunting was the main economic practice in high latitudes, whereas fishing was predominant in mild latitudes (Lee, 1968: 42).

Nonetheless, a large proportion of anthropological and archaeological theories have insisted on regarding Middle and Upper Pleistocene human groups simply as hunter-gatherer societies. This idea is now being challenged by the recent stress on multidisciplinary studies that go beyond regional modelling, including, among others, kinship analysis, social studies, taphonomic analysis, resource analysis, gender studies, labour-division studies, the introduction of new perspectives to the analysis of artistic

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manifestations, territorial analysis and mobility analysis (Bate, 1982; Dennell, 1987: 30–31; Ingold et al., 1988; Otte, 1996; Gamble, 1999; Ramos, 1999).

In this regard, getting over the evolutionist perspective of 'needs' and 'limits' (Shalins, 1977) has been an important step for the recognition of the importance of vegetable and marine resources in the subsistence of human groups in the Middle and Upper Pleistocene. From our point of view, the role played by these resources goes even beyond the limited perspective offered by the 'broad spectrum economy' model (Stiner et al., 1999, 2000; Stiner, 2001). A varied diet is consubstantial to our species, "the evidence seems to suggest that a swing between economies based on one animal species and economies based on a wide range of resources took place in Europe in the Late Pleistocene" (Estévez et al., 1998: 17). Based on this idea, is therefore important to define which groups made marine resources a key factor in their subsistence in mild latitudes. Our analysis will not go into biotechnological questions regarding the relationship between technology and culture, but this is a recurrent issue in discussions concerned with the connection between biological change, essentially, the transition between Neanderthals and modern humans (Mellars, 1999; Zilhao, 2008), and the geographical expansion of economic practices (Martin and Klein, 1984; Klein, 2008).

In recent years, considerable progress has been made with regard to the association of several human groups and marine-resource exploitation practices. Specifically, in Atlantic and Mediterranean southern Europe, these economic strategies are being linked with groups of Neanderthals (Finlayson et al., 2006; Finlayson, 2008, 2009; Stringer et al., 2008; Zilhao et al., 2010; Colonese et al., 2011; Cortés et al., 2011), whereas in Africa these practices seem to be associated with *Homo sapiens sapiens* (Marean et al., 2007; McBrearty and Stringer, 2007; Jacobs et al., 2008; Collina-Girard and Bouzouggar, 2013). The evidence, therefore, suggests that marine resources played an important role in the subsistence of these groups, which may rightly be defined as hunter-gatherer-fishers.

The extraction of marine resources is also linked to the emergence of elements of personal adornment, ochre and 'artistic' behaviour; this is a widely debated issue in relation to the earliest

instances of symbolic thought (D'Errico et al., 2005), a field where recent research has also made considerable progress. It is now thought that African artistic manifestations are at least 35,000 years earlier (D'Errico et al., 2005, 2009) than those in Grotte Chauvet (Clottes, 2001; Geneste, 2005), one of the most outstanding examples of Palaeolithic art in southern Europe.

2. A global perspective on the evidence: the contrast between the European Mediterranean and the near eastern, North African and South African records

Growing interest in the reconstruction of prehistoric coastlines and the impact of glacioeustatic factors has allowed a more realistic perspective on coastal Pleistocene environments in different parts of the world. For example, multidisciplinary studies are currently evaluating the plausibility of land-bridges in connection with human dispersion (Otte, 2013). These new perspectives are opening avenues for the analysis of the relationship between human expansion and mobility and coastal environments during the Pleistocene (Flemming et al., 2003). For instance, the scientific interest of submerged coastal platforms has now been recognised. During cold periods in the Pleistocene, these platforms offered wide territories and ample resources to the inhabitants of caves and other sites located near the modern shoreline (Flemming et al., 2003; Rodríguez Vidal et al., 2004; Rodríguez Vidal and Cáceres, 2005; Chamorro et al., 2011).

In connection with this, the important role played by molluscs, and the marine resources in general, in the survival of hunter-gatherer groups, is being increasingly acknowledged (Erlandson, 2001; Finlayson et al., 2006; Marean et al., 2007; Bailey and Flemming, 2008; Fa, 2008; Colonese et al., 2011). We shall present evidence (Fig. 1) in support of the association of pre-Neanderthal and Neanderthal groups and these resources in southern Europe, and we shall then compare this data with that pertaining to groups of modern humans in Africa and the Middle East.

The earliest evidence in this regard, which was dated to c. 300 ka (Mode II- Acheulian), was found in the cave of Terra Amata (Nice, France) (De Lumley, 1966). This evidence relates to pre-Neanderthal



Fig. 1. Location map with the sites mentioned in the text (southern Europe, Middle East and North Africa): 1. Cueva de Figueira Brava; 2. Cueva de Ibn Amar; 3. Cueva del Higueral de Valleja; 4. Gibraltar; 5. Cueva Bajondillo; 6. Cueva Perneras; 7. Cueva de los Aviones; 8. Terra Amata; 9. Cueva de Lazaret; 10. Grutta dei Moscerini; 11. Uçagizli; 12. Skhul; 13. Qafzeh; 14. Haua Fteah; 15. Oued Djebbana; 16. Rhafas; 17. Taforalt; 18. Ifri n'Amar; 19. Benzú.

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