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## The introduction of Neolithic resources to North Africa: A discussion in light of the Holocene research between Egypt and Libya



Barbara E. Barich\*

International Association for the Study of the Mediterranean and the East (ISMEO), Rome, Italy

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### ABSTRACT

The dynamics affecting coastal areas of North Africa, especially the rise of Neolithic economies, remained largely unexplored until a few years ago. There are no definitive answers for questions about how groups belonging to a very well-documented late Palaeolithic tradition developed locally, and if and how these changes resulted from outside influences that may have affected the region during the middle and late Holocene. This is especially true of the provenance and success of the main domesticates, in other words the plant (wheat, barley, pulses) and animal species (sheep/goat, cattle, pigs) which constitute the North African Neolithic complex. The obvious intrusion of the domesticates from outside has prompted various authors to seek their exotic locations, but reasons and circumstances that led to the displacement of groups were rarely discussed in trying to reconstruct modalities and routes of diffusion. To understand and study these problems, a trans-regional perspective including North Africa and the Levant seems necessary, but is very rarely adopted. This paper tries to answer these questions, starting from the data on the central-eastern portion of Mediterranean North Africa—Egypt and Libya – which are closer to the Levantine territories. In particular, it focuses on what has recently emerged from important investigations in Egypt (Western Desert) and northwest Libya (Jebel Gharbi and Jefara plain). Through a comparative approach combining chronology, the characteristics of plant and animal resources used, and technology, both of these areas may help to understand the ways and paths followed in the introduction and propagation of food production towards northeastern Africa. In an attempt to trace the routes followed in the transfer from the Levantine towards the western regions, the paper deals also with the main theoretical and problematic issues related to the domestication of plants and animals in the Near East. It shows that, contrary to past claims, the domestication of plants and animals does not seem to have taken a short time and that instead a protracted process of domestication seems to be the more realistic model. Therefore, the search for a core area where everything must have begun seems really complicated. Finally it reconsiders some specific comparisons between Levant and North Africa, chronologically and geographically plausible, that have been suggested for some time. They concern the material culture repertoires, within which the importance of the main component, lithic production, is obvious.

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### 1. Introduction

Speaking of the Neolithic immediately leads us to speak of the discovery and use of new dietary practices although the novelties introduced by the Neolithic go well beyond a purely economic level. Though the role of the allochthonous component in the North African Neolithic has now been scaled down (see [Linstädter et al.,](#)

2012), it remains an indisputable fact that the main botanical and faunal domesticates (with many questions and controversies regarding cattle) entered peripheral African territories from outside. It is also highly likely that coastal North Africa functioned as a corridor for their penetration and dissemination. Until recently, the eastern mirage prevailed and was implicit in the “Neolithic package” formula ([Whitehouse, 1986](#); [Zvelebil, 1989](#)) referring to wheat, barley, pulses, sheep/goat, cattle and pig thought to have spread together from their original near Eastern locations. Is this model still valid?

\* Via Panaro 17, 00199 Rome, Italy.

E-mail address: [barbara.barich@mclinknet.it](mailto:barbara.barich@mclinknet.it).

It must immediately be said that two principal facts have considerably weakened this model. First, there is now an awareness that both the cultivation of plants and animal breeding went through a long process that gradually changed hunting/gathering practices, moving towards the preliminary management of botanical and animal resources. This process must be studied in itself as an innovative and important cultural act, and must be distinguished from the phenomenon of domestication that, by contrast, is a biological fact that was recognized much later (Zeder, 2011). The second fact, also supporting this new awareness, is the acquisition of a solid numerical chronology. On this basis we can demonstrate that domestic resources did not spread all together, as the “Neolithic package” myth would suggest: rather, we see a succession in the arrival of the various resources.

While these issues have been recognized (Smith, 2013), their meaning and consequences do not seem to have been shown correctly. It should be acknowledged that it is very difficult to talk about the Neolithic as a rapid transfer of resources, and that the original area of movements cannot be pinpointed easily. Furthermore, the study of the Neolithic, or rather of the Neolithization process, requires reconstructing a long history, observing first the adaptations taking place *in situ* and subsequently the way and extent to which external contributions interacted and were integrated into the local legacy of knowledge developed independently. We cannot even argue that the spread of domestic prototypes followed a one-way path, proceeding from east to west. These routes are much more complex and the territories of North Africa also saw separate events. The more complete sequences that alone reveal the presence of the entire Neolithic “package” are documented only at the two extreme western and eastern points of the north African coast. However, the respective spheres of influence seem to be different, with domestic resources being received through different routes (Ballouche and Marinval, 2003; Linstädter et al., 2012).

To understand and study these problems, a transregional perspective including North Africa and the Levant seems necessary but is very rarely adopted. In my opinion, to fully understand the dynamics in play we must ask not only when and how the new resources arrived but also what led to the

displacement of groups and, furthermore, the extent to which we can speak of migrations of peoples or dissemination of ideas. This paper follows this approach, starting from the data on the central-eastern portion of Mediterranean North Africa – Egypt and Libya – which are closer to the Levantine territories. Through a comparative approach combining chronology, the characteristics of the plant and animal resources used, and the level of technology, both of these areas may help to understand the ways and paths followed in the introduction and propagation of food production between the Sahara and eastern North Africa.

## 2. Geographical contexts and methods

Two study cases highlighted by the Sapienza University of Rome research provide the basis for the analysis presented in this paper. Of the two, one was recognized in the Farafra Oasis, in the Egyptian Sahara, the other in the westernmost region of Libya, and more specifically in the Jefara plain that lies at the foot of the Jebel Gharbi Plateau (Fig. 1). The two regions, not far from each other, in the past may have represented a corridor for movements of groups and circulation of techniques from a more internal region of the northeastern Africa to the Mediterranean coast. Apart from the obvious differences, the two contexts can be compared for chronology, similar environments, and topographic conditions.

### 2.1. Farafra Oasis – the Wadi El Obeiyid investigation

The first sequence, entirely in the middle Holocene, is known from the Farafra Oasis where between ca 8600–8300 and 7300–7000 cal BP (Table 1) the inhabitation model is well exemplified by stratified sites unearthed along the course of the large Wadi el Obeiyid. Higher precipitation rates in the earlier part of the middle Holocene favored the development of these sites which have structures built with stone slabs and a high number of hearths. These situations have been investigated through a long cycle of research analytically published in a recent monograph (Barich et al., 2014).

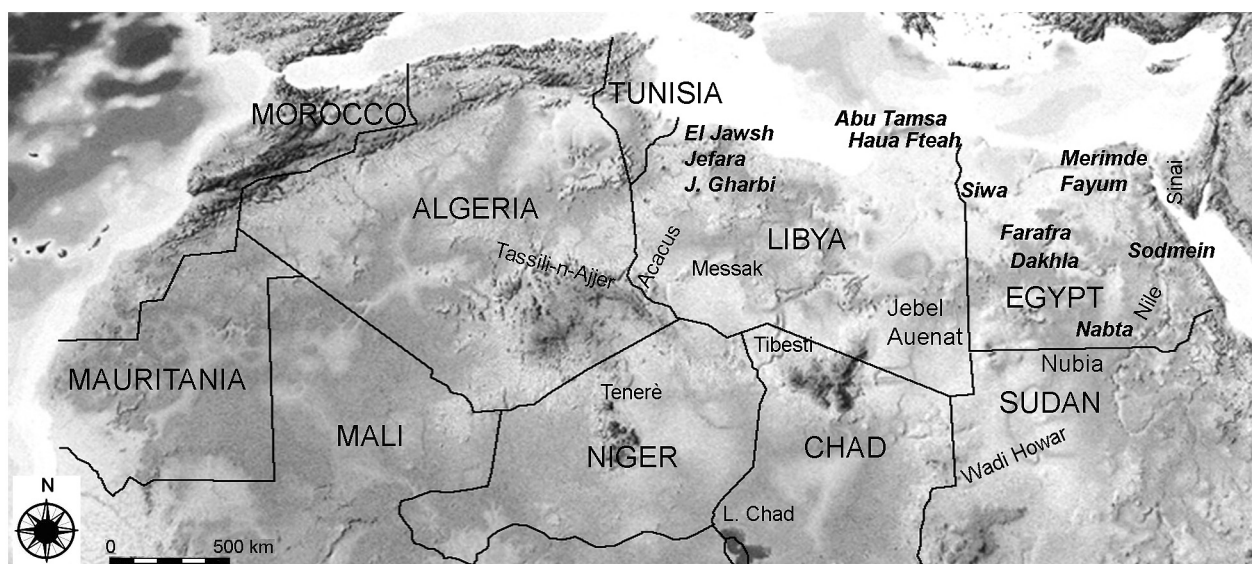


Fig. 1. Map of North Africa with locations of the sites cited in the text (drawing by M.Pennacchioni).

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