



The first farmers in Cantabrian Spain: Contribution of numerical chronology to understand an historical process



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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to review the current state of research for the Early Neolithic (c.5000–c.4300 cal BC) in Cantabrian Spain. Bayesian chronological models have been constructed to examine the neolithisation process and assess the role radiocarbon dates may play in understanding this period. The models suggest that the disappearance of hunter-gatherer societies took place after the first Neolithic groups were active in the region. These results agree with the archaeological record for the Early Neolithic and are compatible with a “mosaic” neolithisation process in which local Mesolithic groups clearly participated.

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1. Introduction

Until the early 1980s, little research into the Neolithic of northern Spain had been undertaken. However, since then a large quantity of archaeological, archaeobotanical, archaeozoological, archaeometric and chronological research has been completed. This paper aims to summarise the current state of research of the Early Neolithic in Cantabrian Spain. After describing the history of research, we present a statistical treatment of the chronological dataset, and assess its contribution to our understanding of historical change during this period. The results of the statistical analysis of the dates are assessed alongside other kinds of data (subsistence, technology, etc.) to obtain an up-to-date view of the Mesolithic to Neolithic process of historical change.

1.1. History of research

In contrast to the preceding Mesolithic, very little specific research into the Neolithic was undertaken until the 1980s (Cubas and Fano, 2011). The spectacular and numerous cultural manifestations of the Upper Palaeolithic attracted the interest of the first

archaeologists to work in the region. Moreover, the hiatus theory, which proposed discontinuity in European populations between the Palaeolithic and Neolithic, was influential and did not encourage research into the process of neolithisation. As a result early research only aimed to establish the stratigraphic-cultural sequence in the regional Prehistory, and study of the Neolithic did not progress beyond typological and technological aspects. Research on Megalithism was of different character, and often undertaken separately to study of the Early Neolithic. The marginalisation of the period did not change when research restarted after the Spanish Civil War. Prehistorians investigating the Mesolithic (Jordá, 1959; Clark, 1976) rarely addressed the Neolithic, despite scholars such as Clark being heavily influenced by Processual Archaeology and its interest in economic aspects.

Apart from a few exceptions, for example: Apellániz, 1975, it was not until the early 1980s when the situation began to change with, for example, J. Altuna's summary (1980) of the history of animal domestication in the Basque Country from a biological perspective, and González Morales' (1982) proposal of a model for the introduction of the new “way of life”, although the latter was only presented briefly within a study of the Mesolithic. The turning point in research came with the publication of P. Arias' study (1991) which, for the first time, specifically addressed the neolithisation process in northern Spain as a whole. Not only did it summarise the data available, but it fostered the start of a series of fieldwork campaigns that have continued unabated until the present time.

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Research undertaken during the last two decades has provided various types of data. Some of the most important are:

1 – new archaeological records spanning the earliest stages of the Neolithic in the region; of special interest are the sites of Herriko

Barra (Gipuzkoa), Kobaederra (Bizkaia), Los Gitanos and El Mirón (eastern Cantabria) (Fig. 1).

2 – well-established data about farming and stockbreeding. In the case of agrarian practices, the introduction of methodologies allowing the recovery of macro-botanical remains and/or pollen

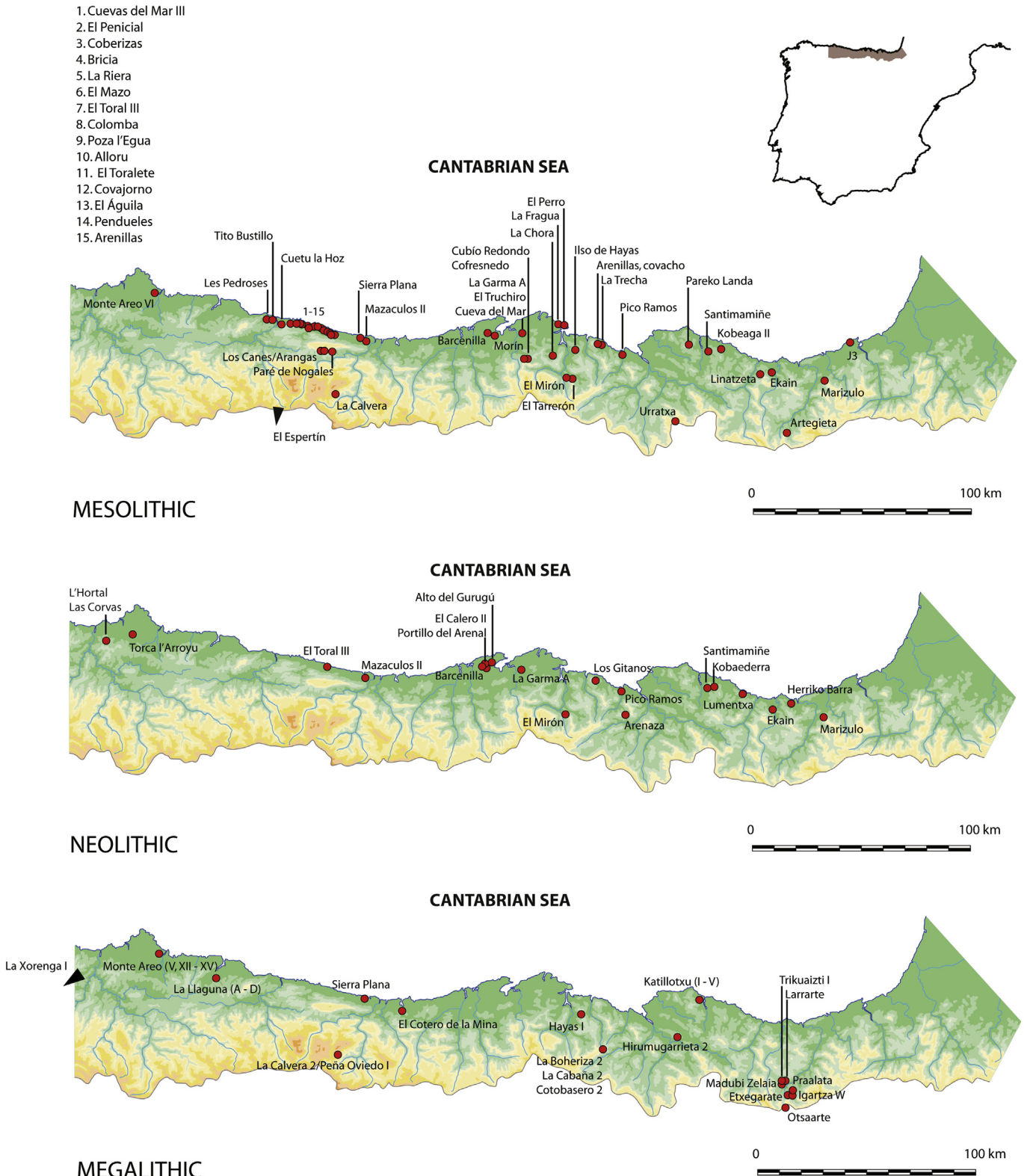


Fig. 1. Location of the sites considered in this study.

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