



Original article

The Iron Gates Mesolithic – a brief review of recent developments

La région des Portes de Fer au Mésolithique : une brève revue des dernières études

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Abstract

The Iron Gates section of the Lower Danube valley along the border between Romania and Serbia has an unparalleled record of Mesolithic and Early Neolithic settlement spanning the period from ca. 12,700 to 5600 cal BC. Over 50 cave and open-air sites were identified during archaeological surveys in advance of dam construction in the 1960s and 1980s, and follow-up rescue excavations revealed numerous burials and architectural remains and produced rich inventories of faunal material and portable artifacts including artworks and ornaments of bone, shell and stone. Most sites are no longer accessible, submerged beneath the reservoirs created by the Iron Gates I and II dams. Since 1990, new excavations have been conducted at Aria Babi and Vlasac in Serbia, and Schela Cladovei in Romania, while detailed studies of the finds from both new and old excavations have been undertaken by researchers based in Romania, Serbia and the UK fueled by developments in archaeological science. In this paper, we review the main advances in knowledge of the Mesolithic and the transition to farming in the Iron Gates over the past 25 years, and especially the period since 2005. The paper is divided into sections dealing with chronology, mortuary practices, isotopic studies of subsistence and mobility patterns, and the nature and timing of the transition from Mesolithic to Neolithic in the Iron Gates region. The review concludes with a forward look at research in progress.

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Keywords: Iron Gates; Mesolithic; Neolithic transition; Archaeological advances

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Résumé

La région des Portes de Fer dans la basse vallée du Danube, le long de la frontière entre la Roumanie et la Serbie, présente une concentration unique de sites mésolithiques et néolithiques anciens couvrant la période allant d'environ 12 700 à 5600 cal BC. Plus de 50 grottes et sites de plein air ont été identifiés lors de prospections-inventaires archéologiques réalisés avant la construction du barrage dans les années 1960 et 1980, et les fouilles de sauvetage qui ont suivi ont révélé de nombreuses sépultures et vestiges architecturaux, d'importantes quantités de restes fauniques et des objets mobiliers, y compris des œuvres d'art et ornements sur os, coquille et pierre. La plupart des sites ne sont plus accessibles, submergés sous les réservoirs créés par les barrages Portes de Fer I et II. Depuis 1990, de nouvelles fouilles ont été menées à Aria Babi et Vlasac en Serbie, et Schela Cladovei en Roumanie, alors que l'étude détaillée des fouilles et découvertes anciennes et nouvelles a été entreprise par des chercheurs en Roumanie, en Serbie et au Royaume-Uni, alimentée par les progrès de la science archéologique. Dans cet article, nous passons en revue les principales avancées de la connaissance du Mésolithique et de la transition vers l'agriculture dans les Portes de Fer faites au cours des 25 dernières années, et surtout depuis 2005. L'article est divisé en plusieurs sections portant sur la chronologie, les pratiques mortuaires, les analyses isotopiques sur la subsistance et la mobilité, ainsi que la nature et le moment de la transition entre le Mésolithique et le Néolithique dans la région des Portes de Fer. L'article se termine sur les perspectives des recherches en cours.

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Mots clés : Portes de Fer ; Mésolithique ; Transition néolithique ; Progrès archéologiques

1. Introduction

The Iron Gates region has an unparalleled record of Mesolithic and Early Neolithic settlement spanning the period from the beginning of the Bølling–Allerød Interstadial to the Middle Holocene, ca. 12,700–5600 cal BC. The discovery and investigation of the Iron Gates sites was the outcome of a decision by the Yugoslav and Romanian governments to construct two hydroelectric dams on the Lower Danube – Iron Gates I (1964–1971) and Iron Gates II (1977–1984) – that would create a reservoir system over 230 km long, flooding areas on both banks of the river. Over 50 caves/rockshelter and open-air sites are known from this period (Fig. 1), which together have produced large numbers of burials and architectural remains, and rich inventories of faunal material and portable artifacts, including personal ornaments and other works of art. Most sites are no longer accessible, but new excavations have been possible at Schela Cladovei (Boroneanț et al., 1999; Bonsall, 2008) and Vlasac (Borić et al., 2014), and one new Early Neolithic site, Aria Babi has been identified and investigated (Borić and Starović, 2008).

Developments in archaeological science since the 1980s have given new impetus to research in the Iron Gates. Scientific analysis of existing and new collections, combined with new anthropological and zoo-archaeological studies, have allowed us to revise our ideas about chronology, burial practices, mobility, diet and ancestry. In 2005, the senior author wrote a review of the Iron Gates Mesolithic, which attempted to summarize the state of research at that time (Bonsall, 2008). In the years since that paper was written, there have been some significant developments. In this paper, we review some of those developments and look forward to the results from new avenues of research.

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