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Mesolithic and Neolithic material productions in Aveyron (France) during the 6th millennium BC: Originality or adaptability?

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ABSTRACT

During the 6th millennium BC, southern France was affected by deep cultural changes in the form of the western Mediterranean Neolithization process; a turning point in subsistence agriculture and husbandry. In southern France, the department of Aveyron has several archeological sites attributed to a particular Early Neolithic culture, historically named « Roucadourien », which was previously interpreted as the result of an autonomous Neolithization or as the process of indigenous acculturation. Today, the reliability of these archaeological contexts and the definition of this vast and homogenous cultural entity are being questioned. Revisions of this regional data take place within the European Neolithization debate and allowed us to discuss and test the main hypotheses: demic or cultural diffusion. The aim of this research was to consider this Continental entity using new paradigms, and not only in terms of central, peripheral or marginal territory within the Neolithization process. In order to shed new light on this debate, it was important to review all the material data provided by these sites. Recent typotechnological studies on the lithic and ceramic assemblages from some sites of the Aveyron department (Combe-Grèze, Clos de Poujol, Roquemissou and Les Usclades) allowed us to renew our perception of these south-western contexts, and made it possible to assess the analysis of these sites from both a cultural and a functional point of view. Therefore, this study should be considered as a step towards a deeper understanding of cultural relationships and technical know-how transfers between the Second Mesolithic and the Early Neolithic. This revision highlights stratigraphical mixtures, evidence of functional variability and/or cultural recombining derived from the coastline area.

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1. Introduction

Generally, the term Neolithization is used to signify all stages during the transition from a predatory to a production economy: from the last communities of hunter-gatherer-collectors to the first farming societies. In archaeology, it is possible to detect this phenomenon by observing changes in subsistence economy and material productions.

Indeed, the transition between the last hunter-gatherer populations and the first farmers involves several socio-economical

processes: colonization, acculturation or cultural recombining (e.g. Gallay, 1995; Zvelebil, 2000 or Rowley-Conwy, 2011). This study focuses on the modern French department of Aveyron, to highlight a specific part of the global phenomenon of Neolithization in the western Mediterranean. Currently, the Neolithization process of the southern French coastline and the Rhône valley is well-understood (Manen and Guilaine, 2010). Here, three cultural entities characterized by different ceramic styles have been distinguished: Impressa, Cardial and Epicardial. The first stage took place between 5800 and 5600 cal BC, with the arrival of the first Impressa colony on the coastline (Fig. 1-a). The second stage saw the large Franco-Iberian Cardial/Epicardial complex expand between Provence and southern Portugal, between 5400 and 4900 cal BC (Fig. 1-b), and finally the Neolithic's territory extended into the Rhône valley.

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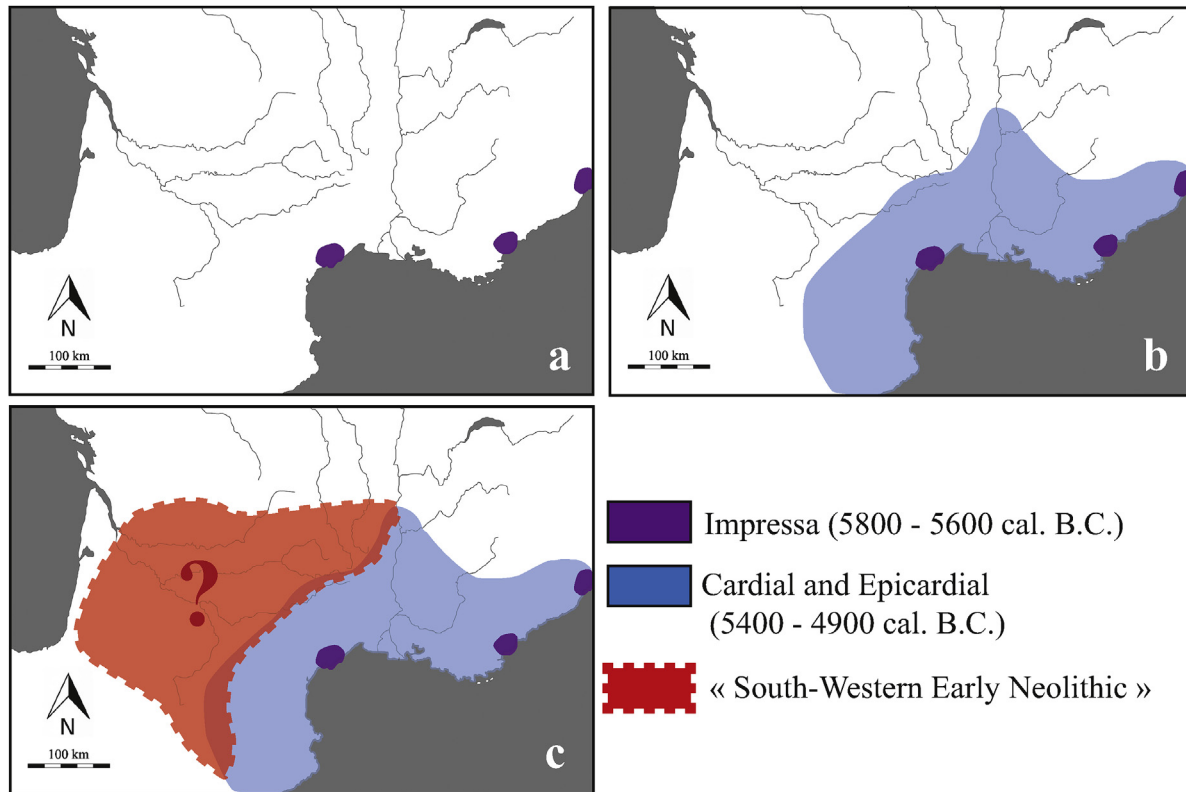


Fig. 1. Map of the Neolithization process in southern France (according to Manen and Guilaine, 2010).

In contrast, the Continental extension of the Neolithic economy is still badly defined (Fig. 1-c). It is based on a number of sites which spread out from Aquitaine to the Pyrenean and the Massif Central piedmont, whose various Mesolithic and Neolithic economic and material components have been studied as a combined entity under the various terms: Roucadourien, Pericardial, Early Neolithic para-Mediterranean or Continental Early Neolithic.

Historically, south-western France has been less explored than southern France. The first chronological model was established on the basis of Sauveterre-la-Lemance's stratigraphy (Lot-et-Garonne) which followed several consecutive phases: Tardenoisien I, II and III (Coulange, 1935). This chrono-cultural entity covered the beginning of the Mesolithic to the Chalcolithic (Valdeyron, 2000). In 1966, layer C from Roucadour (Thémine, Lot), defined as Tardenoisien III, provided a ceramic count of naïve coarse ware and lithic elements characteristic of the Mesolithic and Neolithic. This assemblage was termed "Roucadourian" in order to distinguish it from the Cardial/Epicardial Early Neolithic, which was characteristic of the Mediterranean coastline (Niederlander et al., 1966). Moreover, this complex was also described as a "Mesolithic group, neolithized on the spot, without any population displacement" (Bailloud, 1970, p.25, translated from the French). For these reasons, emphasis has been placed on the indigenesness and marginality of this Continental complex.

At the end of 1970's, Julia Roussot-Larroque, using data from Le Martinet (Sauveterre-la-Lemance, Lot-et-Garonne), la Borie del Rey (Blanquefort-sur-Briolance, Lot-et-Garonne) and layer C from Roucadour (Thémine, Lot), proposed an internal evolution of this complex, called the "Roucadourian cycle" (Roussot-Larroque, 1977). She also brought together the Aquitaine settlements and the Pyrenean sites, such as Jean Cros – which Jean Guilaine interpreted as a phase of transition from a predatory to a production economy (Guilaine, 1979a) – and then extended the geographical area to

south-western France.

In the 1980's two hypothesis were opposed. For J. Guilaine the Continental complex was directly linked to the Cardial/Epicardial entity (Guilaine, 1982). He considered it to be due to "depleted lateral facies" (Guilaine, 1986, p.73, translated from the French) that had caused the acculturation of Mesolithic people with the Cardial/Epicardial culture; he termed this cultural complex "Pericardial". In direct opposition, G.-B. Arnal distinguished two Neolithization currents: a "Cardial Mediterranean process" and a "para-Mediterranean complex" exclusively linked to indigenous populations (Arnal, 1987). Early dates from La Poujade (Aveyron) – around 6000 cal BC (MC 1239, 8010 ± 145 BP) – gave momentum to the antiquity and the independence of this phenomenon (Arnal et al., 1991).

However, since then these patterns have been questioned; the polymorphism of Cardial/Epicardial groups has been highlighted (Manen, 2003); domestic vegetable and animal species (in particular corn, barley and sheep) have been demonstrated to have an Asiatic origin (e.g. Popelin et al., 1986; Uerpmann, 1987; Marinval, 1987; Zohary, 1992); Gregor Marchand has evidenced the stratigraphy of the reference deposits to be mixed (Marchand, 1999); a critique of carbon dating has been proposed (Manen, 2000); and even the absence of systematic sieving (Valdeyron et al., 2011) can be used to question the homogeneity of this cultural complex. These elements do not necessarily deny the existence of a south-western Early Neolithic (SWEN) but they do invite us to more clearly define it.

Consequently, because of its geographic location on the margin of the Cardial/Epicardial culture emergence and their early carbon dates (up to 7th millennium BC), the settlements analyzed in this study play a crucial role in the current debate of the Neolithization process.

The aim of our research is threefold: to shed new light on the

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