ARTICLE IN PRESS

Quaternary International xxx (2017) 1–15

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Quaternary International

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/quaint

The beginning of the Neolithic era in Central Italy

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 30 January 2017
Received in revised form
3 June 2017
Accepted 29 June 2017
Available online xxx

Keywords:
Mesolithic
Early Neolithic
Central Italy
Neolithisation
Ceramics
Obsidian trade

ABSTRACT

This paper presents the general profile of the first farming communities of Central Italy in the Early Neolithic Era. Data shows the spread of early Neolithic cultures in the Italian peninsula at the beginning of the VI millennium B.C. The first Neolithic groups appeared in the southern regions of the peninsula and moved northwards following two trajectories along the Tyrrhenian and Adriatic coasts. The process of Neolithisation was initiated by peoples who probably came from different areas and traditions creating, over time, two distinct areas within the Italian peninsula, each with its own specific cultural features. Finally the article looks at how intensive exchanges both of complex knowledge and raw materials occurred between these two distinct cultural worlds.

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1. Foreword

From the beginning of the VI millennium B.C. Cal., the Neolithisation of the Italian peninsula is the outcome of the maritime diffusion of human groups producing impressed ware over the North-western Mediterranean.

The Po Valley and the Alps are excluded from this process given that the Neolithic era only started in these areas several centuries later. Radiometric dating indicates that the earliest evidence of the Neolithisation process is found along the Italian coast of Apulia, between the Tremiti islands and the gulf of Taranto, as well as along the Northern Ionic coast of Calabria. The maritime diffusion of Neolithic culture along the Tyrrhenian coast occurred very rapidly, as suggested by the impressed-ceramic levels discovered in the Arene Candide cave which, when dated, indicated a small gap in time with respect to the slower chronologies of the south east of the Peninsula (Radi, 2010).

The penetration into the hinterland was fast, following rivers or skirting the borders of marshy areas. The coastal villages of the Ionic bow, such as Favella della Corte (Cosenza) in North-eastern Calabria and Torre Sabea (Lecce) on the western coast of Salento (Tiné V., 2009; Guilaine and Cremonesi, 2003), have been dated to the first centuries of the VI millennium B.C. Cal. In Apulia, several settlements have also been dated to this period, from the Gulf of Manfredonia (Foggia) and the Tavoliere, down to the province of Brindisi (Radina, 2002), and probably also other sites further inland, such as Trasano, in the Matera territory, or Rendina, on the middle course of the Ofanto river (Potenza). It is worth noting that the datings of these last two sites have to be carefully re-evaluated, due to their high approximation. (Tiné V., 2002; Guilaine and Cremonesi, 1987; Cipolloni Sampò, 1977-82).

In this first phase of settlement, while most of the datings indicate that several villages had been established by about 5900 B.C. Cal., the arrival of the first foreign settlers in this part of the peninsula might rather have happened towards the end of the VII millennium, as attested by the few datings available (Pulo di Molfetta: Fiorentino et al., 2013). Having said that, the mine in Defensola in Gargano (Foggia: Galiberti, 2005) should also be considered. Given that the extensive exploitation of the area has been dated to the beginning of the VI millennium, it is almost certain that the search for a site where the flint could be mined, and the opening of the mine itself, must have happened during an earlier period.

Of the various sites, the open air villages played a special role in the cultural definition of the first Neolithic phase. Nevertheless, some cave stratigraphies undoubtedly contributed to the recognition of successive use and to sketch a general cultural picture, providing different views from that of villages being seen as generally related to temporary occupations and/or ideological practices. At present, it is possible to delineate a general picture of Early Neolithic thanks to the recent research carried out on several

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.quaint.2017.06.063
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Please cite this article in press as: Radi, G., Petrinelli Pannocchia, C., The beginning of the Neolithic era in Central Italy, Quaternary International (2017), http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.quaint.2017.06.063

sites. The analysed villages reveal all the typical Neolithic features: organized settlements with specialized structures for different functions; ceramic production and smoothed-stone artefacts; and tools and remnants of productive activity such as agriculture and animal husbandry.

2. First farmers and late mesolithhic groups

Some elements of the Neolithic chipped stone industries could also be attributable to Late Mesolithic tradition: such as laminar *débitage* (in general, as well as that obtained by pressure), microburin technique, geometric instruments, particular denticulates together with the choice of the *Columbella rustica* for ornamental objects. However, in most of the territories of dense Neolithic settlement, there is no evidence of Castelnovian groups (Grifoni Cremonesi and Radi, 2014). Indeed, the only evidence available is at the southern Italian site of Latronico 3 and that of Tuppo dei Sassi, in central-western Basilicata (Potenza) (Dini et al., 2008; Borzatti, 1971). The notion that Stratigraphic Unit 5 in the Terragne site or the artefacts collected on surface at Laghi Alimini (Gorgoglione et al., 1995; Milliken and Skeates, 1990) are of Castelnovian origin should not be taken into account.

It is reasonable to assume that the new Neolithic settlers landed in regions that were not entirely unpopulated. Furthermore, the scarcity of evidence of Castelnovian activity can be explained by the thinness of the original deposits, in addition to the depletion by later occupations or erosion (Berger and Guilaine, 2009).

Conversely, the Tuscan-Emilian Apennines show a different situation as they do include some Castelnovian sites. In this area the referential stratigraphy for Castelnovian is given principally by the Lama Lite site (6.624 ± 45 BP, R-394: 5.630–5.480 BC Cal.; Fontana et al., 2013; Dini and Fioravanti, 2011; Castelletti et al., 1976) along with as other settlements, though less rich, such as Passo della Comunella (Reggio Emilia: Fontana et al., 2013; Cremaschi and Castelletti, 1975), Corni Piccoli (Reggio Emilia: Biagi et al., 1980), and Piazzana (Lucca: Notini, 1983; Martini and Tozzi, 1996).

The chronology of these last sites is not so very different from those of the oldest Neolithic deposits, like Pian di Cerreto (Lucca, [R-548] 6.680 ± 80 BP and [R-2702] 6.447 ± 56 BP: 5716-5486 BC Cal. and 5492-5315 BC Cal., using OxCal 4.2-IntCal13, Ramsey and Lee, 2013; Moriconi, 2008) and Monte Frignone II (Lucca, [LTL2653A] 6.624 ± 45 BP and [LTL2656A] 6.168 ± 50 BP: 5626-5487 BC Cal. and 5231-4988 BC Cal., using OxCal 4.2-IntCal13, Ramsey and Lee, 2013; Dini and Fioravanti, 2011). Data collected from these sites reveals a mixed area, occupied by different groups with their own economies and cultures, and the datings suggest that these communities may actually have been in contact with one another.

3. The central regions of the peninsula

The occupation of the central regions occurs on both sides of the Italian peninsula (Fig. 1) in different ways, by human groups probably coming from different areas and traditions, yet belonging to the same impressed-ceramic world.

At the dawn of the VI millennium B.C. Cal., pioneers sailed the Adriatic Sea, leaving traces all along the eastern coast, and settled in the southern areas of Italy. Even though we do not have data to prove they might also have landed on the Abruzzo and/or Marche coasts, we cannot exclude the hypothesis that they actually did.

The discovery of obsidian artefacts (from the islands of Palmarola and Lipari) along the Tyrrhenian coast suggests the movement of seagoing pioneers from South to North.

The Apennine range lies along the North/South axis of the peninsula and, in the central regions, separates two zones with different cultural features which are particularly evident with regard to pottery complexes. Even so, the Apennines do not represent an impenetrable barrier between both areas, and the speed of this exchange is evidenced by several findings at various sites that attest to the trade of raw materials as well as the exchange of knowledge.

3.1. The Middle-Adriatic province

It was already well documented in the 1970's that, in these regions, the Early Neolithic was thought to be a relatively homogeneous and late phenomenon (Radmilli, 1974; Bagolini and Von Eles, 1978). Later research has, however, revealed elements of innovation and highlighted a more complex and dynamic situation, and in the process, actually anticipated the beginning of the Neolithic phase (Cremonesi and Tozzi, 1987; Radi, 1995; Pessina, 2002). Indeed, the Middle-Adriatic region is now divided into two differentiated areas with respect to their ceramic productions. In Northern Abruzzo and Marche, up to Romagna, the pottery is poorly decorated, with very simple techniques and motifs. The ceramic complexes found in Southern Abruzzo and Molise, on the other hand, show technical and stylistic features that echo the Early Neolithic period of Apulia and, in particular, the Guadone facies (Tiné S. and Bernabò Brea, 1980). Proceeding northwards from Molise to Abruzzo, these southern features decrease. One of the most typical features of Southern Italian complexes is the abundance of decorated ceramics (accounting for up to 80 or 90%): but while in Monte Maulo (Campobasso, Molise) the amount is still high (about 50% of the whole), in Abruzzo it decreases significantly (Barker, 1995; Fabbri et al., 2011). At present, we can posit that groups of farmers coming from Tavoliere-Gargano, moved northwards in a period corresponding to the Guadone phase of the local impressed ware, dated to 5900-5800 years B.C. Cal.

The location of the sites, on river terraces, a few kilometres from the coast, testify to the farmers' progress along a coastal axis: Monte Maulo, on the lower course of the Biferno river (Barker, 1995), Torre Sinello (Chieti: Ceruleo and Giacci, 1988), Villaggio Rossi, Marcianese (Chieti: Geniola, 1982), Tricalle (Chieti) and Fontanelle (Pescara), south of the Pescara river mouth (Ducci et al., 1986-87).

But the important and widespread archeological evidence found in the inner Abruzzo region (Marsica area: L'Aquila), suggest the hypothesis of a northward transfer along an inner path too. A few traces found in Lago di San Lorenzo (Civitanova del Sannio, Isernia: Fontana, 2010), close to a historical transhumance path from the Abruzzo National park to the Tavoliere, support this hypothesis. These seasonal paths follow trajectories naturally adapted to the passage of men and animals in mountain regions; it is reasonable to think that these same paths might also have been suitable for those prehistoric human groups moving inland from the south east, following the rivers and stopping at springs and natural shelters.

Evidences found in Marsica, particularly in Fucino (L'Aquila) where a large tectonic depression indicates that it was once occupied by a lake, testify to a widespread settlement of Early Neolithic peoples.

Villages were located on terraces overlooking the sides of the lake, on the north-west as at the Paterno site (Pessina, 1991) and on the southeast as at Colle Santo Stefano (Radi and Wilkens, 1989; Radi et al., 2001), Rio Tana (D'Ercole et al., 2001), and Ortucchio-Laghetto (Angeli and Ventura, 2011). Furthermore, the data yielded by the southern mountain caves completes the picture of stable and culturally homogeneous communities.

The results of the Southern Abruzzo study, and in particular that of the Colle Santo Stefano village, allow for the defining of the so-called "southern affinity" facies, as well as additional considerations about the local diffusion of Neolithic culture.

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