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## Mesolithic-Neolithic transition in the northeast of Iberia: Chronology and socioeconomic dynamics

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### ABSTRACT

The northeast of the Iberian Peninsula is a region that so far has contributed little information on the transition between the last hunter-gatherer groups and the first farming communities. Although data about the Late Mesolithic is still scanty, in recent years more information has been obtained about the Early Neolithic as a consequence of several research projects and excavations. The few known Mesolithic records and more abundant data on the Early Neolithic are studied here, highlighting the transition between the two periods and the problem of the scarcity of information about the last Mesolithic hunter-gatherers. With the available data, we propose a late extension of the 'Notches and Denticulates Mesolithic' phase as the final Mesolithic population in the region. The first evidence of Neolithic communities is then documented after a hiatus of about 500 years (c. 6000–5500 cal BC). These communities initially settled in littoral and pre-littoral zones, although by c. 5300 cal BC they had occupied the rest of northeast Iberia, including high mountain regions. From the start, these groups shared a consolidated agricultural economy despite the fact specific differences are attested depending on their geographic location.

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### 1. Introduction

This update of the phenomena associated with the neolithisation process in the northeast of the Iberian Peninsula aims to characterise changes in the socioeconomic dynamics associated with neolithisation and contextualise them in their environmental and chronological setting. In this specific case, the transition took place in the sixth millennium cal BC. Although this period has been fully studied in surrounding areas (Ebro basin, Spanish Levant and Mediterranean coast of the French Midi), it is poorly known in northeastern Iberia. One reason may be the scarcity of Catalonian records associated with the last Mesolithic hunter-gatherer groups and the first farming communities. As a result, until 2010 only a small number of monographs had been published (Bosch et al., 1998, 2000; Molist et al., 2008) and a few compilation studies (Martín, 1992; Martín et al., 2010).

This trend has changed in recent years, mainly in connection

with evidence of the first Neolithic groups. Several research projects and recent PhD theses have been carried out considering subsistence and certain archaeological items. This change has also included a reappraisal of some stratigraphic sequences, with new radiocarbon dates, and has been reflected in the publication of monographs on several sites and assemblages of biotic and abiotic materials of great importance (Bosch et al., 2011; Edo et al., 2011; Mazzucco, 2014; Oms, 2014; Palomo et al., 2014; Oliva, 2015; Antolín, 2016).

However, as regards the last Mesolithic groups, associated with what has been called the Geometric Mesolithic (Utrilla and Montes, 2009), less research has been carried out. Although there may be several reasons for this lesser interest in studying this period, two factors are fundamental: a research tradition that has focused especially on other periods and, above all, the scarcity of stratigraphic sequences recording occupations and evidence linked to these last Mesolithic groups.

From a historiographic point of view, since the late twentieth century, researchers have noted that some sites in the southern part of northeast Iberia may contain occupations linked to the transition process between the last hunter-gatherers and the first

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farmers (Guilaine et al., 1982). Thus, for example, in Cova de la Font Major (L'Espluga de Francolí, Tarragona), S. Vilaseca published an aceramic Neolithic level (Vilaseca, 1969). In the same line, at one of the characteristic Late Mesolithic sites, Abric del Filador (Margalef del Montsant, Tarragona), Levels 1 and 2 were associated with a transition phase (Cebrià et al., 1981). Another paradigmatic case is Balma de l'Espluga (Sant Quirze Safaja, Barcelona), where M. Llongueras (1981) claimed to have documented Neolithic items in aceramic layers. However, other authors consider that the interpretations made of these sites should be taken with precaution because of serious taphonomic issues (Fortea and Martí, 1984–85).

In the 1990s, a hypothesis was proposed that has enjoyed acceptance since then, according to which the transition between the two ways of life in Mediterranean Spain involved processes of interaction and acculturation. Known as the 'Dual Model', it was proposed by Valencian researchers and later adopted in Catalonia (Pallarès et al., 1997; Bosch et al., 1998).

Recent studies, based on careful and critical interpretation of the information provided by stratigraphic sequences as well as radiocarbon determinations, have suggested a time gap between the last Mesolithic hunter-gatherer occupations and the first Neolithic farming settlements (Barceló, 2008; Vaquero and García-Argüelles, 2009; Morales et al., 2013; Juan Cabanilles and García Puchol, 2013). Despite some new data (Palomo et al., 2017), the number of archaeological sites with stratigraphic sequences without any serious disturbances and attributable to the Late Mesolithic is still very small. Accordingly, we have started a research project to obtain new AMS radiocarbon dates for stratigraphic sequences that might include evidence of Late Mesolithic occupations, paying special attention to sites whose dates might pose doubts, either because of the type of date, the nature of the sample, its

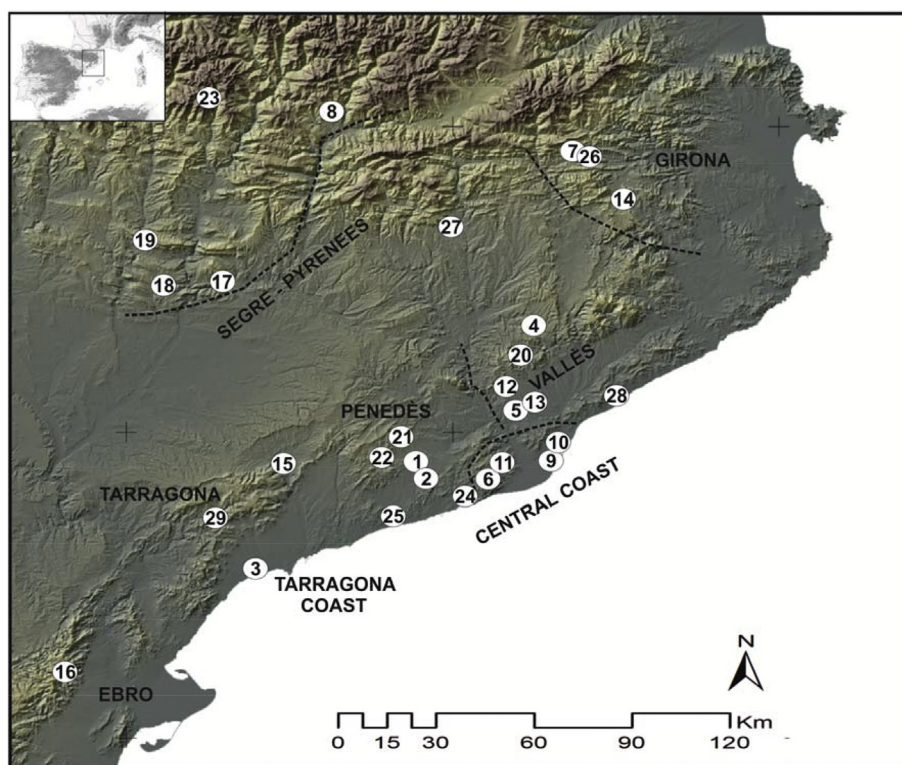
stratigraphic assignation or any other reason.

In northeast Iberia, at the present time only three sites corresponding to the last hunter-gatherers are known, contrasting with nearly 80 Early Neolithic sites. The present study will concentrate only on the sites that have provided recent dates (Fig. 1) and which may be of use for an up-dated discussion within the framework of southwest Europe. The chronological and geographic contextualisation of this transition in northeast Iberia, the socio-economic dynamics that interacted and the different technological solutions adopted by the populations who participated in the neolithisation process are important points that will be addressed here.

## 2. Chronological frame

The chronometric data available for the northeastern Iberian Peninsula at the time of the Mesolithic-Neolithic transition, in a period between the late seventh and mid-fifth millennia cal BC, are quite diverse. Indeed, at the present time, no archaeological records or radiocarbon dates are known for the time between 6000 and 5500 cal BC.

In this way, the most recent dates for Mesolithic hunter-gatherer groups come from Level c20 at Cova de Can Sadurní (Begues, Barcelona: Fullola et al., 2011), Stratum IV.1 at Bauma del Serrat del Pont (Tortellà, Girona: Alcalde and Saña, 2008) and Level n4 central at Cova del Vidre (Roquetes, Tarragona: Bosch, 2015). All of these dates were from charcoal and cover the period between c. 6400 and 6000 cal BC. Only the third of these sites, Cova del Vidre, has yielded typical Late Mesolithic implements, particularly geometric microliths. Due to the preliminary state of the investigation, the recently discovered site of Coves del Fem (Ulldemolins, Tarragona) cannot



**Fig. 1.** Location of the areas and sites mentioned in the text. 1) Les Guixeres de Vilobí; 2) La Serreta and Vinya d'en Pau; 3) Cavet; 4) Cova del Toll; 5) Can Roqueta II; 6) Cova de Can Sadurní; 7) Balma del Serrat del Pont; 8) Balma Margineda; 9) Sant Pau del Camp; 10) Plaça Vila de Madrid; 11) Cova Bonica; 12) Cova del Frare; 13) Pla de la Bruguera; 14) La Draga; 15) Cova de la Font Major; 16) Cova del Vidre; 17) Cova del Parco; 18) Cova Gran de Santa Linya; 19) Cova Colomera; 20) Balma de l'Espluga; 21) Cova de la Guineu; 22) Esquerda de les Roques del Pany; 23) Cova del Sardo; 24) Cova de Sant Llorenç; 25) Cova Foradada; 26) Plansallosa; 27) Font del Ros; 28) Can Xammar; 29) Abric del Filador.

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