
The Time of the Last Hunters: Chronocultural Aspects of Early Holocene Societies in the Western Mediterranean

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Abstract

In the Western Mediterranean Basin, the last hunter-gatherer societies fall within a chronological range between the 9th and 5th millennia BCE, that is, between the climatic oscillation of the recent Dryas and the expansion of the first Neolithic societies. The variability of cultural expressions is very high, as shown by the variability of the lithic industries, a technical field which, from a historiographical point of view, is the preferred approach of archaeologists to address these issues. However, convergences in technical choices or typological features show the existence of major currents of diffusion and exchange between many of these Mesolithic groups, which are still too often imagined as small family units shut away in their clearings. The appearance of pressure flaking, for example, is a symptomatic feature. This technical innovation appeared somewhere in the eastern part of the western Mediterranean basin in the middle of the 7th millennium BCE and then spread very rapidly. Combined with other elements of the technical system, this diffusion suggests a possible displacement of populations from North Africa to Europe, independently of the climate changes at work during this period. This model implies mastery of navigation, rapid long-distance travel, numerous interactions between distant human groups, knowledge of common languages, etc. The discussion of such hypotheses implies to know precisely which human groups are present at the time of this diffusion and what are the detailed characteristics of their material productions. The precise chronological positioning of the sites and cultural groups involved in all the evolutionary dynamics and cultural exchanges of the early Holocene in the western Mediterranean and the very definition of these cultural groups are then indispensable preambles to any discourse or modelling. However, these two questions, chronological and cultural, are too often treated in a not very rigorous way or are the subject of too many neglect and accommodations with the reality of the data, especially chronological ones, all the more for this period of the Early Holocene when the absolute dating methods used are not very precise. This paper reports on work aimed at improving our knowledge of these issues, to better identify the time of the last hunters in the western Mediterranean, and to discuss the nature of the variability of lithic production.

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