
The Neolithisation of the Northern French Alps : contextualisation of a transition period according to the lithic study of La Grande-Rivoire rock shelter (Vercors, France)

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Abstract

The transition period between the Late Mesolithic and Early Neolithic is a singular phase in the Prehistory of Western Europe. Following a complex and arrhythmic movement marked by several moments of progression and adaptation, the first traces of neolithisation in the north of the French Alps appeared in the second half of the 6th millennium BC, between 5500 and 5350 cal BC. Nevertheless, the mechanisms of its implantation are still difficult to apprehend because of the presence of many inaccuracies in the local chronocultural sequence. The subject is all the more complex in that there seems to be a temporal and geographical promiscuity of the last indigenous hunter-gatherers and the first agropastoralists in the northern Alpine region, which could have led to acculturation phenomena in the technical systems of both groups. Several sites will thus deliver archaeological complexes presenting industries qualified as "mixed", where artifacts characteristic of the 2nd Mesolithic and Early Neolithic are revealed jointly on the same archaeological level. These assemblages are generally considered unreliable and consistent with the mixture of asynchronous occupations, preventing a diachronic reading of neolithisation in the northern alpine foothills.

This communication proposes a new study of some of the mechanisms on neolithisation that can be observed in the northern French Alps. In order to define more clearly the chronocultural framework surrounding the transition from the hunter-gatherer lifestyle of the Late Mesolithic to that of the (hunter-)agropastoralists of the Early Neolithic, this study focuses on an analysis of the specific operating chains of the lithic industries of the different cultural groups involved in order to identify the elements that are common to them, or inversely to the distinctive criteria. To address this issue, a comprehensive study of the lithic furnishings from recent excavations of the rock shelter at La Grande-Rivoire (Vercors, France) provides new data to update our knowledge of the modalities of neolithisation in the northern French Alps. The site, excavated annually between 2000 and 2017 revealed one of the few reliable stratigraphic sequences for the period, with virtually uninterrupted occupation of the site. The consequent lithic corpus is likely to highlight possible features of rupture or continuity between technical systems.

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We will focus here more specifically on the initial results of the study of the archaeological complexes of La Grande-Rivoire, relating to the study of changes in behavior observed in the debitage *chaîne opératoire* and shaping of tools from the final phases of the 2nd Mesolithic to the levels attributable to the Early Neolithic pre-sheepfold. Lithic furniture is one of the few elements common and abundant throughout the Neolithic period, thus promoting a better appreciation of the behavioural changes of prehistoric knappers. This communication will also address in particular the question of the origin of the slicing armatures. The hunting pieces, commonly attributed to the Early Neolithic, appear in some recent excavations, within ensembles of the 2nd Mesolithic. A complete study of the processing methods of these diagnostic pieces could reveal possible interactions between the human groups involved in the neolithisation of the region north of the French Alps.

Keywords: Neolithisation, lithic industry, typo, technological study, Northern French Alps, slicing arrowheads