
Mesolithic-Neolithic transition in Southern France: can archaeological evidences attest a possibility of interaction between different human groups?

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Abstract

The neolithisation process is a historical moment in the evolution of societies that results from multiple phenomena: displacement of pioneer groups, territorial expansions, cultural recompositions, but also interactions between local hunter-gatherer groups and incoming farmer populations. Following A. Gally's work, at this pivotal moment it is possible to identify several types of human groups: hunter-gatherer groups in the strict sense; hunter-gatherer groups with Neolithic features showing transfer of know-how; conversely, agro-pastoral groups with Mesolithic reminiscences; agro-pastoral groups that at certain times and in certain places do not present characteristics usually encountered in Neolithic contexts (agricultural practices and animal husbandry); or groups whose activity is exclusively oriented towards agricultural practices. Archaeologically, it remains very difficult to perceive the multiple scenarios of interactions that may have occurred between Mesolithic and Neolithic societies. However, the study of some technical innovations and the transfer of know-how that may have taken place between several human groups is an effective tool for shedding light on the modalities of these interactions. To clarify these scenarios in the south of France, two study areas have been selected: the lower Rhône valley, notably with the Montclus rock shelter, and the southern margins of the Massif Central, notably with Combe-Grèze and Roquemissou. These two areas, on the periphery of the Mediterranean coastline which records the first Neolithic impacts corresponding to pioneer colonisations, seem to be privileged places where it is possible to highlight the existence of contacts during the middle of the 6th millennium BCE. The analysis of the lithic industries, of both the last hunter-gatherers and the first farmers, will constitute the privileged observation prism of this possible transfer of know-how. Thus, on the basis of these scarce data, we can formulate different hypotheses: technical innovations of the hunter-gatherers have been reemployed by Neolithic hunters ; they could also have been Neolithic sites used for specific functions, there also could have been cultural recompositions. These different local scenarios may be enriching ways of understanding globally the neolithisation process.

Keywords: Neolithisation process, lithic industries, transfert of know, how, cultural interactions, southern France

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