WILD FOODS AT MESOLITHIC AND EARLY NEOLITHIC ATLANTIC IBERIA


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Introduction

Plant use is an understudied topic in the archaeology of the Iberian Peninsula, with scarce archaeological evidence. Several sites in the Atlantic coast of the Iberian Peninsula have been excavated and sampled for plant macroremains in the last 20 years. About a third of these sites have provided charred plant assemblages that are being studied as a doctoral thesis.

Objectives

One of the purposes of the thesis, and the purpose of this paper, is to compare Late Mesolithic with Early Neolithic plant exploitation strategies through the charred macroremains assemblages. This will allow us to understand how the introduction of domestic plant species changes. If it does, plant exploitation in this way, the processes of Neolithization will be better comprehended, particularly in that aspect, often forgotten, of plant exploitation.

Materials and methods

In our analysed contexts, sampling strategies have been diverse, ranging from 3% to 100% of the sediment. Retrieval techniques have also been varied, consisting of wet sieving or flotation. Sorting of the samples and identification of the remains has always been done with optical magnification instruments (from 10x to 40x). The precise nature of the methodology is not always made explicit in the publications of the previously studied contexts.

Here are presented the results (preliminary and provisional for the ongoing studies) of all contexts, between 5000 and 4000 cal BC. That have been or seem to have been, appropriately sampled with small meshes for the retrieval of plant remains. A few other sites in the Cantabrian region are known to have provided plant macroremains (e.g., El Carbón, Lomazas II), but a small bias in the recovery techniques limit their interest.

Discussion

Several topics of discussion can be raised by these provisional results:

- Species richness is diverse, varying according to environmental diversity (all contexts belong to 2 temperate environmental subtypes: atlantic and atlantic-mediterranean) nor chronology (there are rich assemblages in both old and more recent periods), but there is not a general trend. Further work needs to be done to understand the exploitation strategies and to compare them with other western European sites. There is not yet a general consensus about the presence of a Neolithization process in the western Mediterranean.

- The types of site affect the representation of species in the assemblages. It is difficult to guess the methodological differences.

- Most Mesolithic contexts are shell-middens, but the Portuguese ones, open-air, are generally much richer than the Cantabrian ones, in caves or rock-shelters. Is it an actual difference in plant exploitation strategies or a result of site-type, asapper vs. covered permanents, vs. occasionally used? The site-type bias is more clearly in action in the case of the necrolithic contexts; the Cantabrian contexts were mostly sheltered sites in which hearths are the only structures identified, while the Portuguese Neolithic contexts are mainly defined domestic refuse discard areas.

- In Early Neolithic sites in Portugal, the exploitation of an endemic species, Corema album, has been attested. Several possibilities, or a combination of them, can explain this phenomenon relevant for the study of Neolithization processes: local human groups introduced foreign domesticates from neighbouring farmers within their repertoire of exploited local resources; foreign farmers, recently arrived with domesticates, complemented their subsistence strategy with the gathering of local wild resources (new to them).

References

[Provide references in the appropriate format, typically including the authors, year, title of the paper, journal, volume, page numbers, and DOI or URL if available.]

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