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MESO2025 - 11th International Conference on the
Mesolithic in Europe

Session 1

Transitions

Coordinated by Elisabetta Starnini, Alexandre Angelin and Nicolas Valdeyron

Transitions? We talk about transitions every time we identify archaeological evidence that seems to interrupt a gradual cultural evolution process. Relevant examples are the transitions between the Upper Palaeolithic and Mesolithic, First (or Early) and Second (or Late) Mesolithic, Mesolithic and Neolithic, and so on. But, are we sure that the term transition is the most appropriate for all of these instances? In fact, a true transition is a long and gradual process, as observed for example in the Near East with the development of the PPN. Many of the changes that occurred in Europe at the beginning of the Holocene happened quite rapidly. Are we sure the word replacement would not be more fitting? Actually, the changes we observe from the perspective of material culture could have occurred with very different modalities and even differ consistently from one territory to another.

This session welcomes contributions focused on relevant changes involving the Mesolithic period. In particular, we invite contributions presenting new data on "transitional periods" involving Mesolithic hunter-gatherer-fisher societies at different territorial scales, from regional trends to specific case studies. At the same time, we welcome synthesis works based on new analytical studies carried out by applying traditional as well as new methodologies, contributing to the current debate on the origin and development of the Mesolithic period by offering new interpretative perspectives.

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ORAL PRESENTATION

Monday 15th September, h.10:15-10:30

S1

The Final Palaeolithic and Early Mesolithic on Flixton Island: what can we learn about the Palaeolithic-Mesolithic transition?

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In this paper we present new research on the Palaeolithic-Mesolithic transition, based on recent excavations at the site of Flixton island in the Vale of Pickering (UK). Flixton Island, previously excavated in the 1940s, was recently re-excavated revealing a large-scale horse butchery site dating to the Final Palaeolithic. This assemblage provides insights into the hunting strategies and subsistence practices of Final Palaeolithic groups in the region. Adjacent we discovered a new Mesolithic site with a large quantity of lithic remains and some faunal material. Together with data recovered from other sites in the Vale of Pickering, including Star Carr, it is possible to consider this landscape at a time of transition with changing climate, changing environment and changing material culture. This research contributes to our understanding of the complex cultural and environmental changes that occurred during the Palaeolithic-Mesolithic transition, highlighting the adaptability and resilience of human populations in response to changing conditions.

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ORAL PRESENTATION

Monday 15th September, h.10:30-10:45

S1

The lithic industry of Remouchamps, the (Epi-) Ahrensburgian of the Meuse valley and the start of the Mesolithic

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Currently, new interdisciplinary research is being undertaken on the collections of the cave site of Remouchamps. The site is well-known for its numerous faunal remains (mainly of reindeer, but also horse, ptarmigan, hare, chamois…etc.), as well as several less mundane finds such as a few decorated bone objects, perforated shells and ochre-painted lithic artefacts. A revision of the chronological framework, based on a series of 33 new radiocarbon dates, demonstrated that the main occupation of the site took place between ca. 12,180/11,990 cal BP and 11,645/11,360 cal BP, in other words at the transition from the Younger Dryas to the Holocene (Crombé et al., 2024). In this presentation, we will discuss the lithic industry of the site based on the results of an attribute analysis and a refit study. Debitage seems to have been completely focused on the production of bladelets instead of blades (> 5cm). The latter are scarce and Gross- or Riesenklinge (sensu Taute, 1968) seem to be lacking entirely. Armatures mainly consist of obliquely truncated points, alongside of very small tanged points and are by consequence also already entirely 'microlithic' in nature. Based on this, we will assess the representativity of the Remouchamps assemblage compared to other (Epi-)Ahrensburgian assemblages and we will explore the similarities and differences between the latter and the regional Initial Mesolithic and Early Mesolithic assemblages. Taken together, the lithic industries seem to evoke a long and gradual transition rather than an abrupt break in traditions.

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ORAL PRESENTATION

Monday 15th September, h.10:45-11:00

S1

The Late Pleistocene-to-Early Holocene transition in the Venetian pre-Alps: new data from the Landro cave in the Cansiglio plateau

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Northeastern Italy is a key region for the study of the Mesolithic in southern Europe. Hundreds of sites and find spots have been identified since the 1960s. The local Early Mesolithic facies is known as Sauveterrian and, since its first discovery in the Adige valley, has been interpreted as a local evolution of the Late Epigravettian. Nonetheless, the centuries in which the transition occurred are still poorly understood. More specifically, sites which yielded stratigraphic sequences covering the end of the Late Pleistocene and the beginning of the Early Holocene are rare, and radiocarbon evidence is particularly scarce. In 2017, a new site was discovered on the Cansiglio plateau, a pre-Alpine massif well known for its Late Epigravettian and Mesolithic open-air sites. The site, known as Landro Cave, yielded a thick stratigraphic sequence spanning the centuries preceding the beginning of the Holocene. This paper will present the data obtained from the study of the lithic and faunal assemblages recovered from the most recent layers dated to the Younger Dryas. Although the material culture has been entirely attributed to the Late Epigravettian, this context sheds light on the appearance of several Sauveterrian traits, also in the frame of the extensively documented Mesolithic evidence of the plateau.

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ORAL PRESENTATION

Monday 15th September, h.11:30-11:45

S1

Absolute population and Mesolithic traditions in Early Neolithic northern Europe

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Agent-based models (ABMs) can provide a framework to understand the palaeodemographic dynamics of the Neolithic transition in northern Europe. In case studies from Ireland, Britain and Southern Scandanavia, the model simulates interactions between Mesolithic hunter-fisher-gatherer communities and incoming Neolithic farmers, integrating evidence from archaeology, biomolecular data, and isotopic analysis. The model reconciles apparent contradictions between genetic evidence indicating population replacement and archaeological findings showing continued marine exploitation, and the sporadic use of domesticates by Mesolithic communities, centuries before the transition. By simulating demographic growth, cultural exchange, and dietary shifts, the ABM demonstrates how a small but rapidly expanding Neolithic population could account for the observed changes in the archaeological record without necessitating abrupt environmental collapses or economic failures.The simulations highlight the role of differential fertility and cultural assimilation in driving demographic transitions, illustrating Mesolithic transitions could persist alongside the growth of farming economies.

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ORAL PRESENTATION

Monday 15th September, h.11:45-12:00

S1

Fishing identities in southern Scandinavia: new data on the Mesolithic-Neolithic transition from Syltholm Fjord, southeast Denmark

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Archaeological excavations in and around the prehistoric Syltholm Fjord on southern Lolland have provided important insights into fishing technologies and the use of aquatic resources in Stone Age southern Scandinavia. The waterlogged area with its rare preservation of organic materials has yielded abundant evidence of passive fishing practices and their long-term adaptation in a coastal lagoonal landscape over millennia. Our in-depth analysis of these materials, together with direct 14C dating and contextualisation with comparable archaeological and ethnographic data, indicates a continuity of similar techniques from the Mesolithic and throughout the Neolithic (and later), highlighting a more complex interplay of subsistence strategies and cultural changes in the aquatic resource-rich coastal areas of southern Scandinavia.
The continued use of millennia-old fishing techniques - and some of the prime fishing locations - during this transition sheds new light and adds nuances to our current understanding of the Neolithisation process in the region, suggesting a continued reliance on the aquatic economy alongside emerging agricultural practices. Based on our long-term dataset from what is today Denmark, we conclude that the transition phase between the 5th and 4th millennia BCE must be seen as a prolonged period of interaction, adaptation and subsistence diversity, rather than an abrupt economic and dietary change amidst the recently proposed population turnover.

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ORAL PRESENTATION

Monday 15th September, h.12:00-12:15

S1

CROSS-CHANNEL FLINT KNAPPING CONNECTIONS DURING MESOLITHIC-NEOLITHIC TRANSITION OF BRITAIN FROM 5000-3700 BC

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The narrative of the Mesolithic–Neolithic transition in Britain has often been polarized between colonization and indigenism. Many processes have been oversimplified either due to a lack of well-dated late Mesolithic evidence or unwillingness to fully engage with hunter-gatherer research. These approaches have resulting in a stilted, one sided story of the transition, comparing well-dated Neolithic evidence with a generic Mesolithic spanning evidence across millennia. However, in recent years, a plethora of well-dated fifth-millennium sites has emerged, offering an opportunity to reinvigorate and reimagine centennial-scale processes and varied connections. In this paper, we step away from the generalized narrative and immerse ourselves in the small-scale processes that may have occurred during the transition, using the medium of knapping practices. We explore the technological connections between Mesolithic and Neolithic groups, between Britain and the continent, using these as proxies of interaction, creating a more vibrant and nuanced picture of the transition than previously proposed.

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ORAL PRESENTATION

Monday 15th September, h.12:30-12:45

S1

TRANSITIONING TO THE NEOLITHIC THOUGH STONE TOOLS IN BELGIUM

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Neolithisation is a highly-debated topic regarding the spread of adaptative techno-cultural changes from foraging to an agro-pastoral settled life. In the beginning, it was called a revolution. Later studies showed a more gradual process, but still relatively fast across most of Europe. For the sandy lowlands of North-Western Europe, this process was a gradual transition, where a primarily foraging lifestyle persisted much longer (until c. 4300 BC) by "hunter-gatherers in transition" (Swifterbant (SW) Culture), while neighbouring loess areas were already colonised by the farmer-herders of the Linearbandkeramik Culture (starting c. 5300 BC). The contact dynamics between foragers and farmers in the coversand area remain the subject of intense debate, with hypotheses ranging from complete acculturation to demic diffusion or a combination of both. So far, the issue of contact has mainly been addressed through pottery and archaeobotanical analysis, while lithics have generally been neglected. Yet, these also contribute substantially to the debate. We demonstrate this by presenting the results of detailed, multidisciplinary research on a specific tool-type, the faceted tools. Since this tool-type is found on both indigenous SW hunter-gatherer sites and early farming sites, it allows us to investigate similarities and differences in technology, morphology, and use. Our paper mainly focuses on the functional aspect, presenting data from microwear and residue analysis, using the traditional approaches of microwear analysis and physical characterisation and chemical staining of residues. We also explore the potential of proteomic analysis, aided by state-of-the-art taxonomic classification, to identify organic residues relating to lithic use.

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ORAL PRESENTATION

Monday 15th September, h.12:45-13:00

S1

VARIABILITY OF TECHNICAL TRADITIONS, CULTURAL, FUNCTIONAL AND ECONOMIC PRACTICES BETWEEN THE END OF THE MESOLITHIC AND THE BEGININNING OF THE NEOLITHIC: CROSS-REFERENCING LITHIC AND ARCHAEOZOOLOGICAL DATA, THE EXAMPLE OF LA BAUME DE MONTCLUS (GARD, FRANCE 6300 - 5000 BCE)

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For the Late Mesolithic, the Castelnovian techno-complex is often perceived as a monolithic entity, defined solely by lithic technology and the presence of regular blades produced by indirect percussion or pressure, as well as trapezoidal microliths. Similarly, the onset of the Neolithic is often understood only through ceramic data, which limits our ability to examine the transition between these two entities. Consequently, the consideration of a multiplicity of proxies, particularly through the integration of functional and archaeozoological data, allows for a more nuanced approach to these phenomena. The site of La Baume de Montclus in southern France, with its well-developed stratigraphy, serves as an illustrative case in point. Several occupations attributed to the Late Mesolithic and Early Neolithic are distributed between 6300 and 5000 BCE and have yielded abundant lithic and faunal assemblages. A previous study focused on the rich corpus of arrowheads revealed significant changes in the production and hafting modalities of these armatures. These findings suggested that techno-functional discontinuities could serve as markers of economic or socio-cultural transformations. Building on this work, we now propose to expand this preliminary evolutionary framework by incorporating results from the analysis of the entire lithic 'chaîne opératoires', traceological studies of the full range of knapped stone tools, and the variability of faunal spectra. The objective is to investigate changes in hunting practices and environmental exploitation, as well as butchery activities, with particular attention to carcass and hide processing.

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ORAL PRESENTATION

Monday 15th September, h.13:00-13:15

S1

FROM FORAGING TO FARMING IN THE (CIRCUM-)ALPINE REGION: A MOSAIC OF REALITIES

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A recent reappraisal of archaeological sites, features and finds pertaining to the Meso-/ Neolithic Transition in Switzerland and the neighboring regions (Jahrbuch Archäologie Schweiz 107, 2024) revealed for the 6th and 5th millennium BCE a very diverse and complex situation, both in terms of geographical and chronological settings, and with regard to biotic and material cultures. Using a term coined already twenty years ago for a similar situation in Southeastern Europe, we use the label Mosaic to describe a spatial and temporal side by side of social entities that share little or no common traits and might have belonged to different cultural spheres and/or spheres of influence. A classical subdivision would be to look for Mesolithic (foraging) and Neolithic (farming) traditions in the archaeological record, but the evidenced archaeological realities are not so easily brought to these categories – besides the fact that in highly dynamic natural and social environments, realities of life can undergo (rapid) changes. This paper intends to set up a framework of reflection and investigation in order to better assess and understand the cultural circumstances and the transformative mechanisms of the 6th/5th millennium transition, taking into consideration elements of the natural space, vectors of cultural traditions, and environmental proxies.

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ORAL PRESENTATION

Monday 15th September, h.14:30-14:45

Babina Špilja: a new Mesolithic site on the Island of Hvar, Croatia

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Systematic research in Babina Cave on the southwestern part of the island of Hvar began in 2021 through an international collaborative initiative Prehistory of Hvar and the Adriatic Region (PHAR). Babina Cave is a small cave of at least 30 m² surface area, which was covered with rocks and a partially collapsed entrance vault. The cave's entrance faces southeast and is located directly above a deep ravine that ends in a bay near the village of Zaraće, with a clear view of the islands of Korčula and Sušac. Excavations have revealed the presence of prehistoric layers, with possibly more significant sedimentation in the northeastern part of the cave. Within the surface layer, fragments of Late Neolithic Hvar ceramics were found, along with fragments of Impressed Ware, typical for the Early Neolithic of the Adriatic region. Direct AMS dating of a pointed bone tool from this layer indicated an age of around 6000–5900 BCE, corresponding to the earliest Neolithic dates in the region. Just below these layers, a massive Mesolithic layer was found with a large number of remains of hares (Lepus sp.) and various species of limpets (Patella sp.), with frequent occurrences of perforated and non-perforated marine gastropods Columbella rustica. A large concentration of finds was associated with the remains of hearths, and traces of burning were observed on some of these remains. This layer has been dated to the period 6450–6250 BCE, suggesting the use of the cave space during the Late Mesolithic.

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ORAL PRESENTATION

Monday 15th September, h.14:45-15:00

S1

MESOLITHIC RESILIENCE IN SOUTHERN PORTUGAL

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The late Mesolithic hunter-gatherer communities of Southern Portugal would have perceived the benefits and disadvantages on the adoption of the Neolithic economic and technological innovations, and on being integrated into the respective socio-cultural system. They adopted selectively Neolithic novelties in accordance with their subsistence needs and cultural believes, probably through cultural osmosis. In the Sado paleo-estuary, plentifully of rich wild resources, semi-sedentary Mesolithic communities (affluent foragers) resisted till the first half of the 5th millennium cal B.C the adoption of agro-pastoral economy, in fact a trap for the hunter-gatherer way of life, reducing mobility and individual freedom, and imposing an economic intensification with greater labour investment. From the Neolithic package, they only adopted few polished stone tools and pottery. Similar behaviour can be observed for the Mesolithic fishing population of the Southwest Coast and might be expected to have occurred in the middle basin of Guadiana River. So far, the dual model of Mesolithic huntergatherers and Neolithic peasants as bounded entities is rejected. On the contrary, we propose the co-existence of several stages and rhythms of neolitization between neighbouring groups.

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ORAL PRESENTATION

Monday 15th September, h.15:00-15:15

S1

USE-WEAR ANALYSIS AS A PROXY TO UNDERSTAND TRANSITIONAL PERIODS, THE CASE OF THE ENSISHEIM SITE (FRANCE)

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Studying transitional phases in archaeology implies approaching past societies' cultural transformations. In France, the arrival of agropastoral societies marked the end of the Late Mesolithic period. It is a significant change, in opposition with the subsistence strategies of Paleolithic and Mesolithic populations, based on hunting, gathering, and fishing.Nevertheless, Late Mesolithic and Neolithic populations shared practices in the manufacture of lithic tools. Both toolkits are made by indirect percussion (or by pression in South of France) combined with trapezes arrowheads. In northern France, few sites have yielded both Late Mesolithic and LBK occupations, such as the open-air site of Ensisheim (Alsace) - an essential settlement for understanding the transformations occurring during this period. Recent excavations revealed three loci with a lithic industry linked to Mesolithic technical traditions but dated between 5200 and 4800 BCE. These loci are contemporary with the Neolithic settlements in the region and raise questions about the region's settlement patterns. This presentation presents the results of the use-wear analysis of the Ensisheim lithic industries. Functional approaches allow us to explore the processes involved in the disappearance or the persistence of technical traditions of the last hunter-gatherer-fisher societies. This paper aims to present the functional analysis results from the Ensisheim lithic industries and provides new insights about the reasons for the last hunter-gatherers' functional and technical traditions' disappearance.

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POSTER

Monday 15th September, h.15:15-15:30

S1

UNPICKING COLONIAL BIASES IN BRITAIN'S MESOLITHIC-NEOLITHIC TRANSITION

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As approaches in archaeology have moved through different theoretical paradigms, such as culture-history, processualism, and post-processualism, and introduced new methodologies such as stable isotope and aDNA analyses, the very terms 'Mesolithic' and 'Neolithic' have picked up new meanings (i.e. chronological periods, cultural packages, or genetic signatures). Despite the introduction of new and exciting analytical perspectives and techniques, I argue that the focus of the Mesolithic-Neolithic transition in Britain continues to be rooted in a colonial ideal that implies the shift from hunting and gathering to farming was an all-important revolution, kick-starting what has sometimes been described as the origin of 'civilised' society. This poster presents the ways in which the differing definitions of 'Mesolithic' and 'Neolithic' have compounded on one another, adding to an entangled messiness of terminologies which hinder our ability to have discussions which are as productive as they can be, unable to move away from labels derived from colonial frameworks. To investigate this in more depth, NVivo has been used to analyse specific language used across relevant texts. This poster proposes the use of a theoretical framework rooted in assemblage theory and animist thought to aid in breaking away from the traditional nature/culture binary and in the unpicking of some of the biases still present in many discussions of the period.